

James Van DerZee

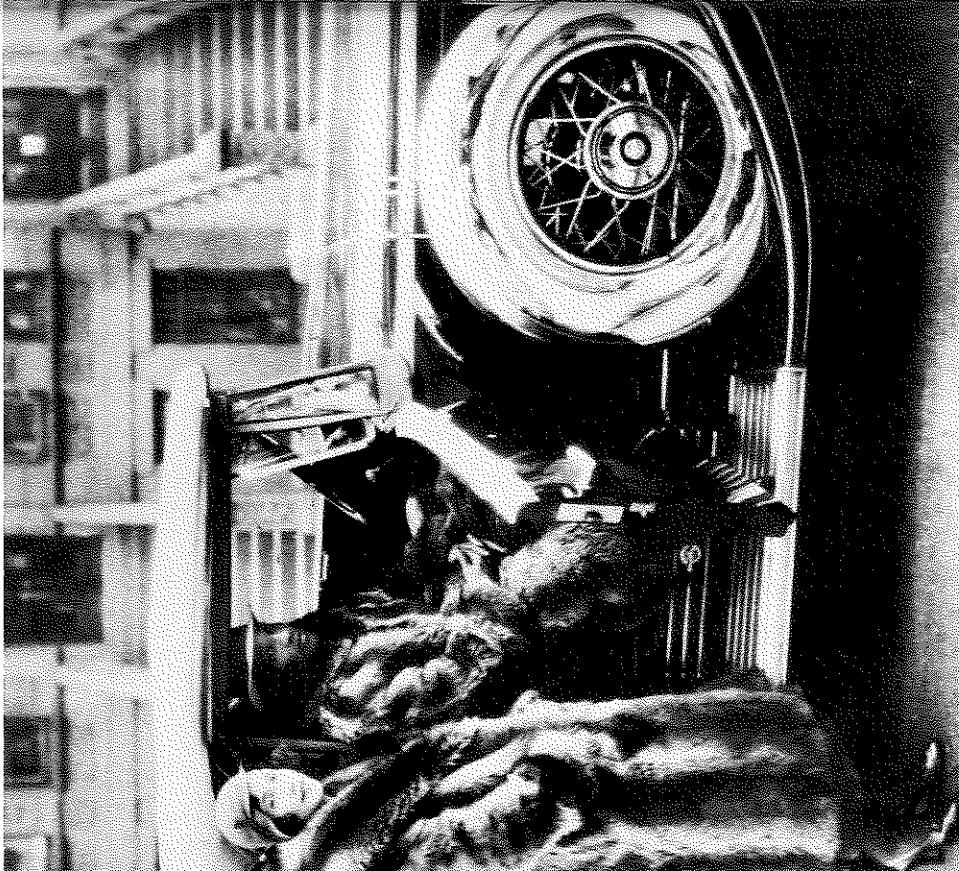
The Picture-Takin' Man

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Africa World Press, Inc.

P.O. Box 1892
Trenton, New Jersey 08607



Harlem couple, 1932.

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How It All Began

In 1968, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City opened a show called "Harlem on My Mind." It was both a chronicle of the history of Harlem and a celebration of the contributions of black people to New York City and the nation at large. A huge exhibit, it would be the subject of much controversy. Some people felt it glossed over the discrimination and segregation the people of Harlem had suffered ever since it had become a predominantly black community. Other people felt it did not give enough coverage to present-day Harlem. It was rare to find two people who agreed on any aspect of the show except for one: for the first time, "Harlem on My Mind" brought to the general public view the photographs of James Van DerZee.

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stores were a new visual experience. To people who had never seen anything but portraits of famous blacks and pictures of poor, downtrodden Harlemites, his photographs of black families in Easter outfits, beautiful children, and handsome men and women were a revelation. James Van DerZee's photographs showed that ever since Harlem had become a black population center, there had existed an "other Harlem," where people worked hard and loved their children and managed to lead lives of comfort and dignity despite the hostility and neglect of the white world outside.

Not only were his photographs important as historical documents, they were also valuable as works of art. Far more than mere snapshots, most of them were clearly products of careful study, painstaking production, and great compassion—the creations of a true artist. What's more, that artist, whom hardly anyone had ever heard of before, was still alive and living in New York City. James Van DerZee was "discovered" when he was eighty-three years old!

He was a remarkable man, and not merely because of his photographs or because he had lived longer than the majority of us will. He had a better memory than most men half his age, and a finer sense of humor. He was also a delightful storyteller, and much of the story that follows is told in his own words.

"At the time I was born, why, Grover Cleveland was President. And that was way back at the time when France sent that Statue of Liberty over to be placed in the New York Harbor, back in 1886," mused James Van DerZee one hot summer day in 1976 as he sat in his small, cramped New York City apartment. He did not actually remember the dedication ceremony over which President Cleveland presided on October 28, 1886, for he was only

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four months old at that time, but he remembers that his family talked about the event for years afterward. It was an important occasion for all Americans, but it was particularly special to James's parents, for they had once been New Yorkers, and members of a former President's household at that.

John and Susan Elizabeth Van DerZee had served as butler and maid in the home of Ulysses S. Grant in New York City. The former President and his wife had moved to New York in 1880 to be near their son, Ulysses, Jr. The younger Grant was a partner in the investment firm of Grant and Ward, and his father put his considerable fortune at the disposal of the firm. The Grants rented the residence of ex-U.S. Senator Jerome B. Chaffee on East Fifty-second Street when they first came to the city, then moved to more permanent quarters at 3 East Sixty-sixth Street in 1882 or 1883. The Van DerZees joined the Grant household at this address and left their posts in late 1884 or early 1885. Apparently, they never said very much about their period of service there, for, according to James Van DerZee, "by the time Grant meant anything to me, I only knew what I learned about him in school; he was one of the Presidents of the United States."

James always figured his parents had left Grant's employ because they were expecting their first child. It is more likely that the Van DerZees left when the Grant fortunes were reversed, and that they were simply discreet about their recollections of the former President's household, in the manner of well-bred servants who respected their employers and did not care to pass on tales of misfortune. In 1884, the firm of Grant and Ward collapsed, swindled by Ulysses, Jr.'s partner, Ferdinand Ward. The Grant fortune went with it. Although the effort by the firm's creditors to hold the former President personally liable was unsuccessful, to

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satisfy them he surrendered all his property. John and Susan Elizabeth were let go, along with other servants. Once out of the Grant household, they could have gossiped about the effects of financial ruin on the proud family. It is to their credit that James would think of U.S. Grant only in the most impersonal way: "A guy came in the other day and paid me for some pictures, and I look at the bills and I say, 'There's my mother's old boss!'"

John and Susan Van DerZee left New York and traveled to Lenox, Massachusetts, a small town nestled in the Berkshires not far from Pittsfield. Relatives had moved there long before.

Settled around 1750 and originally called Yokuntown, Lenox had been set off from the town of Richmond in 1767 and renamed, probably after Charles Lennox, Duke of Richmond and a defender of colonial rights. When the town was incorporated in 1775, it was little more than a group of white clapboard houses surrounded by freshly painted picket fences along the Pittsfield Road. The townfolk were excellent gardeners. They supported themselves primarily by potato farming. While the men put in their long days' work in the potato fields, the women kept neatly tended vegetable and flower gardens in their yards. As the town grew, as streets were laid out from the Pittsfield Road, and as more neat houses were built along these streets, Lenox retained its sense of order and quiet. It had about it a peace and unchangeability that led one writer to note early in this century, "Lenox . . . seems to have the air of having always 'been.'"

This peace and calm, as well as numerous brooks and two nearby lakes, Stockbridge Bowl, or Lake Mackeenac, and Laurel Lake, attracted a number of writers to Lenox in the middle of the nineteenth century. They built their small cottages and visited

back and forth. Fanny Kemble gave Lenox its first social atmosphere. The famous actress, divorcée, and skilled horsewoman enlivened the sleepy town, it is said. But she was only one of several well-known people to spend time in Lenox. Catharine Sedgwick, a novelist, and Henry Ward Beecher, an influential spokesman for the Protestant Church, lived there for a while, as did Nathaniel Hawthorne. He wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* in his cottage there in 1850–1851, as well as *Tanglewood Tales*. Thereafter, Lenox was sometimes called Tanglewood, a name that became an official appellation in the music world after the Boston Symphony Orchestra began to make Lenox its summer home. Later on, in the early twentieth century, the author Edith Wharton would spend June to December in Lenox, recalling in old-timers' minds the years when the town was a writers' colony.

The primary industry in Lenox was mining, and the earth under the town is still a maze of mine shafts. According to a story favored by the local people, a maid once went to draw water from her mistress's well, and when her bucket came up empty, looked into the well to see a miner in a headlight hat walking by. Another local tradition holds that armor and guns for the *Union Monitor*, John Ericsson's famous "cheesebox on a raft" that engaged in battle with the Confederate *Merrimac* in 1862, were made from iron mined and smelted in Lenox and Richmond.

After the Civil War, another industry attempted to establish itself in Lenox. Founded in 1869, the Lenox Glass Company started running into problems as soon as it was in operation. Lenox was too far away from the large cities to enable the company to fill orders quickly, and so distant from major shipping arteries, like the Atlantic Ocean and the Connecticut and Hudson rivers, that shipping costs were prohibitive. Unlike the rocks and

ores from the quarries, the fragile product of the Lenox Glass Company required careful and costly packing in order to be shipped by wagon or rail. The Lenox Glass Company closed in 1872, and its experience caused other industries that had considered locating in Lenox to reconsider.

Less than a decade later, the former farming town, former writers' colony, and failed industrial town became a major resort. Though its lakes and brooks and breathtaking mountain scenery had long had their aficionados, before 1875 Lenox had not been an "in" place for high society. Now, partly because of its scenery unspoiled by industrial progress, perhaps partly because of the influence of Edith Wharton's family, the Newbolds, and partly by chance, some of the wealthiest families of New York and Boston—the Schermerhorns, the Hegemans, the Schieffels—chose Lenox as the site of their fall "season."

These wealthy people never spent the hot months in cities. In that age before air conditioning, even their palatial town houses were unbearably hot, humid places. So, in the summer they went to seaside resort towns like Newport, Rhode Island, where the ocean breezes cooled the air, and in the fall they traveled to inland New England towns, where the multicolored foliage was most beautiful. In Lenox, they built country houses on the lanes branching out from the Pittsfield Road and came in droves to spend September and October in a round of teas, dinners, and dances. It was a short season, so the social activity was quite frenzied; and then, apparently, the society dames and dons decided that Lenox would be a nice town in which to spend the summer as well. After all, Newport was not the only place to go in summer.

They began to build grander houses, ornate monoliths of wood and stone, surrounded by acres of landscaped woods and lawns.

They occupied the land by the country lanes that bisected the Pittsfield Road, and graced the shores of Laurel Lake and Stockbridge Bowl. (Sadly, none of the most pretentious structures has survived.) By 1880, prime country farm land was selling for \$3,000 an acre. A town whose assessed valuation was \$1,599,411 in 1885, was assessed at \$3,750,004 seven years later. The quiet little town was transformed in the warm months when the summer people had their balls, their teas, their charitable events, their "Flower Parade." By the time John and Susan Van DerZee arrived, Lenox in season was wealthy and grand.

James Van DerZee would remember, "All the rich people would come there in the summer, with twenty-five to thirty people to help: butler, coachman, gardener, four or five housemaids, a laundress, a cook . . . and they would need it in those big homes that they had. After Roosevelt took over—I don't know what it was all about—they weren't able to have those big houses."

When they came, the summer people swelled by several hundred the town's population which, in the off-season, numbered only eight or nine hundred people. Unlike the writers who had come before and who respected or even admired the local people for their simple New England integrity, many of the wealthy people tended to look down upon the townspeople as crude rustics. A man who recalled the days when Lenox was a fashionable resort town said in 1965, "I remember it, but I don't resent it. Some did and some still do. It was the way things were here. You were either rich and lived in one of the big houses, or you lived in town and waited on them . . . Some were pleasant. They'd speak and pass the time of day. Others would snub you. But you never forgot that they had the money and that your living depended on them."

Among the Lenox townfolk were about half a dozen black families, including the extended family that James Van DerZee's mother and father joined midway through Lenox's transition.

John and Susan Van DerZee moved into a white frame house on Taconic Street next door on the one side to David and Josephine Osterhout and on the other side to Fanny and Lena Egbert, forming a sort of family compound. "We were all together, three little houses together. There was my aunts' house, our house, and my grandparents' house. We had a stable and my grandparents had a stable, and they had a henhouse and we had a henhouse."

Everyone worked, in one way or another, for the white people. David Osterhout, James's grandfather, was sexton of the Congregational Church, often called "the church on the hill." James's grandmother, Josephine Osterhout, ran a laundry business with her four Osterhout daughters, Estelle and Mattie, and twins Emma and Alice. "They had a very large laundry. A great many of the wealthy people would send their laundry from the Curtis Hotel and even up from the city by horse-drawn carriages. The chauffeurs would bring up trunks and hampers of clothes and they would be hand-washed and starched. We would have to get the water to wash them from the brook. And then we would load the clothes into the wheelbarrow and take them out to be hung up in the meadows. And they would come back smelling very sweet, with odors of the pines. If you went into the house smoking, my aunts would have a fit, afraid that the odor would get into the clothes." Two of the daughters were also dressmakers. The one Osterhout son, David, worked as a chauffeur for wealthy visitors.

James's great-aunts, Fanny and Lena Egbert, were apparently sisters-in-law to Josephine Osterhout, who had first been married to a man named Egbert. James's mother, Susan Egbert, had been

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born of that union. The four Osterhout girls were, in Van DerZee's words, "part-sisters to my mother." Such familial relationships did not concern him at the time and continued not to. "I don't know who it should concern more than me and I don't know quite how it all came about."

The Egbert sisters operated a home bakery, for there were no bake shops in Lenox at the time. "My aunts used to make all the bread used by the Trinity [Episcopal] Church for communion, and they served bread and cakes to the very wealthy people. I remember there were a great many people that we used to deliver cake and bread and pies to. They even made ice cream for various people, and my brother and I were always anxious to get at that dasher when they pulled it out of the freezer. They had to pack the ice cream in ice and salt to keep it cold and hard, and my father would use the horse and wagon to deliver it."

James never knew his paternal grandparents or most of his other relatives on his father's side. He was given pages from a family record wherein were noted Van DerZee births, marriages, and deaths from 1837 to 1867, beginning with the entry: "Thomas Vanderzee was marid To miss Sarahann Tunistan January the 20 in year 1837 In the Viledge of Newbaltimore, Greencounty," and including nine entries of the deaths of persons, most of whom were in their twenties and none of whom was older than forty-nine. Though the family had originated in New Baltimore, New York, some had moved to Topeka, Kansas, and some had even reached California. James was told that his paternal grandparents' names were John and Josephine Van DerZee and that his Uncle William, who became a preacher in Kansas, wrote poetry. He visited a Jennie Van DerZee in New Baltimore once, on a trip to New York, but his memories of her are sketchy. "There are a

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great many questions I would have asked my father if I'd ever thought that things would have turned out as they did."

He would, for example, have asked about the origin of his surname. According to James Van DerZee, there are only a few hundred people in the United States who bear that name, a situation that holds both advantages and disadvantages. "It's a good name to have if you've got good credit. If you haven't got good credit you're pretty easily traced down and located."

In 1977, James Van DerZee received a letter from a woman in Canada who had seen his photograph in an article on Harlem that appeared in the February, 1977, issue of *National Geographic*. Her grandmother's name was Van der Zee, she wrote, and this was the story she had heard about the origin of the name. Many years ago a ship was wrecked off the coast of Holland and the only survivors were a group of children who were too young to know their names. No one could tell where they came from and it was impossible to return them to their families or relatives. So the children remained in Holland, and because of the circumstances of their discovery, they were all given the last name Van der Zee, which is Dutch for "by the sea. Hearing the story, James Van DerZee wondered if one of his ancestors might have been the "black diamond," as he put it, in that group of children.

The slightly different spelling of the name did not bother him. His own name has gone through several changes of spacing and capitalization over the years. His business cards have introduced him as "Van Der Zee" and he often signed his photographs "Vanderzee." He now prefers Van DerZee and signs his name that way, so that is the way the name is used here throughout.

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Growing Up in Lenox

James's older sister, Jennie, was born in Lenox in 1885. The next year, on June 29, 1886, James Augustus Joseph Van DerZee was born. At the time, John Van DerZee was helping his wife's aunts in their bakery business; he is listed as a baker on James's birth certificate. Soon, however, he would be hired as sexton of Trinity Church, the Episcopal Church in Lenox. As early as James can remember, his father was a church sexton, and James would spend much of his time helping his father with his work around that church.

The Episcopal parish in Lenox goes back a long time and may have begun as early as 1763, but over the decades other churches, particularly the Congregational Church, which was built in 1806, were more successful in attracting worshippers. Trinity Church declined. The Board of Missions reported in 1850 that it had become the weakest parish in the town and had been without a formal schedule of services for four years. Parishioners were so

few that they could hardly pay a minister's salary. The Reverend William H. Brooks, who arrived in 1855, was paid a salary of eight hundred dollars a year, five hundred of which was furnished by a wealthy man named Aspinwall.

Trinity parish benefited from Lenox's boom as a summer resort, for many of the summer people were Episcopalians, among them, according to James Van DerZee, the Vanderbilts, the Morgans, and Westinghouses, and Sloanes, the Bishops, and the Danas. They felt that their church should be somewhat grander than the original, unpretentious frame sanctuary, so a new stone church was planned. The new chapel was financed by one of the summer people, a lawyer named John E. Parsons, in memory of his daughter, Helen Reed Parsons, who had taken sick and died while on a visit to the South. The cornerstone was laid September 8, 1885, and the structure was dedicated in July, 1893. It was a grand building, the talk of Lenox and surrounding towns. The *Pittsfield Sun* kept its readers apprised of the final stages of the new Trinity Church. April 27, 1893: "The chapel is built of grey stone . . . the interior walls are buff brick, the woodwork, oak. A five-hundred-pound bell has arrived . . ." June 8, 1893: "The pews of solid oak are in place, and the chapel will seat two hundred people. The handsome Tiffany windows are in. . . . The oak lectern, chancel lamp of solid brass and chancel chairs have arrived . . . Several valuable gifts have been received, a font and solid communion service."

James Van DerZee would remember when "the Sloane people in New York, the rug people, presented the church with a twenty-five thousand dollar rug. It had taken about five or six people to carry it; a very huge rug, brought over here from the other side [Europe]."

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As sexton, John Van DerZee was responsible for maintaining the church and rectory and the grounds, not an inconsiderable task. There was brass to be polished, aisles to be swept, woodwork to be dusted, lawns to be mowed, snow to be shoveled in winter. Some of the work was unpleasant. Periodically, the coal furnaces had to be emptied of ashes. "You'd have to take the ashes out down in a low-ceilinged basement and you'd inhale a lot of dust from the ashes. I used to hear Mother telling him lots of times to put cotton in his nose. But he found it too much bother to do that, so sometimes he'd wet the ashes and make them soggy and heavy."

Still, John Van DerZee's job as a sexton provided a steady income, which he supplemented by odd jobs on the estates of the wealthy. "There were all those big lawns." He needed all the money he could earn to support his growing family.

One year after James was born, Walter arrived, and thereafter Charles, Johnny, and Mary. Johnny died of pneumonia, October 28, 1896, at the age of six, and James would have only the barest recollection of him.

A growing family also required a larger house. "We had four bedrooms upstairs, and a bathroom, and an attic above that. And on the floor below there was a double parlor, and a dining room. And later on, my father built an addition, and we had a big billiard-pool room. He also put in a fireplace. And then he put a porch around the whole place. Made quite a nice place of it."

John Van DerZee was the central figure in the household, and James would always regard his father as a major influence. "It was a very peaceful family. My father was very gentle, but he was at the head, and my mother and all of us kids respected him.

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"I never heard my father speak a cross word but once or twice in my life, and he had occasion for that. I was kind of a mischievous guy. I only remember one time that my father was a little tight on us. He sent my brother Walter and me to put the cow out to pasture, to move her to fresh grass. There was a very fine apple tree up there, and my brother and I were busy gathering these apples—kinda lost track of the amount of time we were spending up there. Father came out to look for us, wanting to know why we were gone so long, and he ran us back home."

James would always associate the aroma of cigars with his father. "On occasion he would smoke a Cuban cigar. You could smell it long, and never see him. You wouldn't even see the smoke, just smell the aroma and know that he'd been there."

A slim man who wore a wide moustache most of his adult life, John Van DerZee posed with James, Walter, and Charles in Lenox around 1909. His face is kind, reflective, and tired. He had worked hard to support his family and was proud of his three sons.

A photograph of the Van DerZee women, also taken in Lenox around 1909, shows a strong-faced woman whose quizzical expression indicates a dry wit and whose ample body testifies to her years in the kitchen. At the time of the photograph, Susan Van DerZee had raised five children and seen two of them married. Her family had remained close despite illness and economic hardship. Her life as a black woman had not been easy, but she had managed well, and she would live to advanced age in relative comfort among those she loved.

Most of James's early memories of his mother place her in the kitchen—"She cooked everything. Everything tasted good to me in those days and I always wanted plenty of it."—or hovering

over the family at Christmastime. "Christmas, we always got something. I don't know how Mother arranged it, to hide so many presents for us all, and we didn't know anything about it until the night before Christmas."

James learned about astronomy and weather from his mother. "She seemed to know all about all the different stars and planets. She knew the evening star from the morning star, Mercury from Venus, the Big Dipper and all that sort of thing. She could always tell by the sunset what the next day was going to be like. Used to have a bottle of alcohol with camphor in it for a barometer. At times it would be clear; other times it would seem to be thick on the bottom.

"She was a very quiet and gentle woman, but she was strong. I was always guided by her influence. A wealthy lady told me one time, 'Jimmy, your mother's a very smart woman.'"

As soon as they were old enough, the children were expected to share in the family work. While the girls helped with the household chores, James and his brothers assisted their father at the church. They swept the aisles, polished the brass, and dusted the pews, mowed the lawns and raked the leaves; and since their father's duties included grave-digging, they also helped him do that. The task often unearthed interesting mementos. "Lots of times, in digging those graves, he would pick up so many of the old Indian arrowheads, stones, and bones. Then I could picture the Indians riding over the same land a hundred years before."

James's imagination was also piqued by some of the more grisly findings in the graves. "Sometimes we'd have to dig up the old bodies and remove them. Some of them . . . why, their hair had grown down over the face and the nails had grown long. Nails and hair continue to grow after death, but some of them had even

changed position in the caskets, indicating that they may have been buried alive."

At home, "we helped our father chop down trees, saw wood for the fireplace. In the fall of the year we watched until the chestnuts were just right, and we'd pick up a big stone and hit the tree, and a rain of chestnuts would come down. I think that is my fondest memory. We'd roast them. In the spring we'd go dig up dandelions and get the dandelion greens. My aunt used to make wine. We never made wine.

"We used to help Father plant things in the garden. We needed a big garden because there were so many of us children. We had cows and horses and chickens. We grew up knowing a little bit about everything, how you put the seeds in the ground, how in a few days you go out there and look and see a little sprout coming up. You nourish it, you rake the dirt up around the roots, and each day you see the corn and beans and all the different things grow a little bit more.

"There was only one job I really didn't like and that was shoveling snow. In those days the snow really came down! My father had a snow plow and he would open up all the paths around, and my brother Walter and I would have to do a lot of shoveling. I figure I did enough shoveling to last the rest of my life."

James does not remember any quarrels, or sibling rivalry, or any economic hardship in those early years. There was always plenty of wood for the fire in winter, plenty of food on the table at mealtimes. The children learned early to be happy with what they had. Presents at birthdays and on Christmas were not lavish, but, as James put it, "I knew what was in the possibilities of getting, and what wasn't." It was a happy household, a simple life that revolved around hard work and the church, good food and

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simple pleasures. The Van DerZees, Osterhouts, and Egberts were a close family, and on days when they were not working, they engaged in religious and social activities together.

“On Sundays, my grandfather would always have what they’d call Prayer Meeting. We’d all get together and have a prayer meeting at our house, or we’d go to their house. I spent so many years in church and at Sunday school and at those prayer meetings . . . I don’t know as I would call myself a religious person, but all that kind of grows on you, becomes part of you.”

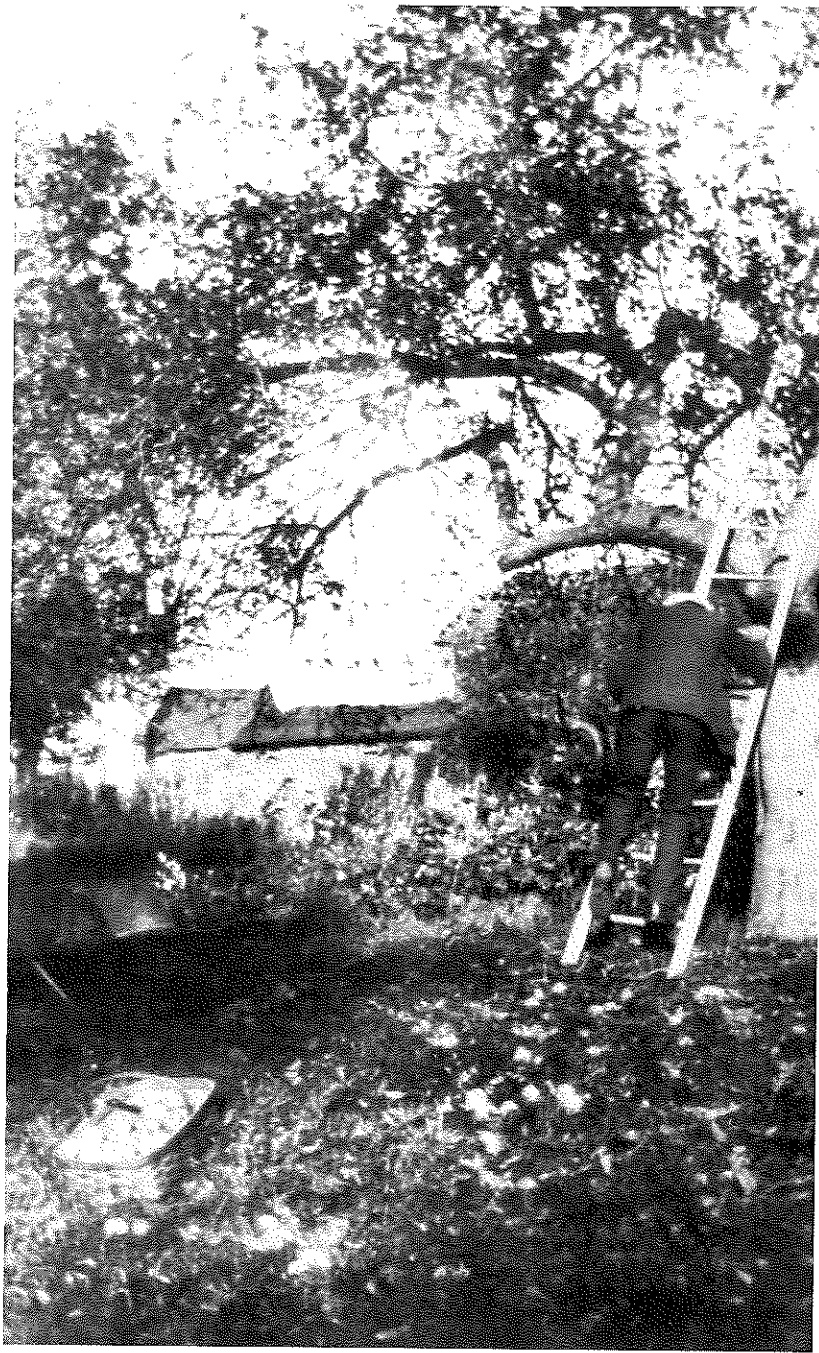
When visitors came, it was always a special occasion. One visitor was particularly special, although at the time no one knew how important he would become. “DuBois used to come up and visit my grandparents’ house. [W.E.B. DuBois, a native of nearby Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was probably attending Harvard at the time. He would become an important black leader.] I was quite a kid then. They had the four girls up there, and they were an attraction to him at that time. But he didn’t marry any of them. In fact, none of them ever got married. Of all my grandparents’ children, only two got married, my mother and the one brother.”

What James liked least about Sundays in Lenox was having to dress up. “Those wide, stiff collars! After a while we got the sailor blouse, the knickerbockers, knee socks.” To the best of her ability, Susan Van DerZee always saw to it that her children were clean and neatly attired for church, Sunday visitors, and school.

There was plenty of time left over for play. There were the meadows to roam and the woods to explore, and important items to acquire. At one time, James went to considerable effort to make a bicycle. “I managed to get as far as the front wheel and the handles, but all that other part I couldn’t seem to figure out.



The Van DerZee home. James's bedroom window is at upper left. To the right is his grandparents' house.



John Van DerZee climbs down from the apple tree that his sons thought was so "fine."



James's Osterhout aunts and uncle. Mattie, Estelle, and David, standing (left to right). Emma and Alice, sitting. This photograph was copied from a tintype made before James was born.



James and Walter, around 1900.



James, age 14, in Lenox.

Before I figured it all out I managed to get one. I think it cost about eight or nine dollars. But then they had the old inner tubes, and the tires could easily get punctured. And it wasn't long before that was traded in, and I got a little better one. And I was all set! Oh, if you didn't have a bicycle, why that was a sentence right there, a crime. All the kids wanted bicycles, would do almost anything to get one.

"Then there was the time when I was interested in telescopes. I remember that a surveyor came by, and on his surveying instrument was a telescope. He left it in the barn overnight, and I tried to figure out how I could get the telescope off there without anybody knowing. But I was the biggest kid in the family, and I knew I couldn't get away with it, so all I could do was take it out and peek through it and put it back. He came back for it the next day. Later on I did save up enough money to buy a telescope, and it had a celestial eyepiece and a terrestrial eyepiece . . . Isn't that some feat they've just accomplished, putting that Viking on Mars? You can't imagine the amount of brains . . ."

The adults had time for pleasure too. "They all liked to fish. My mother's aunts and my uncle used to sit by the river all night long and fish. My grandfather and my uncle were great fishers. We'd go in the springtime and in the winter, cut a hole through the ice. My grandfather did a great deal of hunting, but my father didn't. Sometimes my brother and I would go hunting with my grandfather. One time I shot a little squirrel, and when I picked him up he seemed to have nuts in his mouth, and I had an idea he was taking those nuts home to his babies. I felt kind of ashamed of myself for having shot him and got so I didn't see much pleasure in hunting, other than target practice. Sometimes we'd kill the frogs in the brook and have frog legs for dinner.

"Swam in the brook, too. One part of it was quite deep and we used to wade around and paddle in it. The lake was too far. Our parents were afraid to let us go out to the distant places. There was a golf club out there, and we were very anxious to caddy for the club, but we were never able to do it."

They were too far away from the club for their parents to allow them to try for caddy jobs, but even if they had lived closer to the club, it is unlikely that the Van DerZee boys would have been hired. Lenox, Massachusetts, was a relatively benign environment for blacks, but they had to keep their place; and the black adults, being older and wiser in the ways of small town New England society, were very protective of their children, managing thereby to avoid most unpleasant incidents.

Lenox was a small community and positions were well defined. The Van DerZees and Osterhouts and Egberts occupied service positions that were needed and thus respected. When the two races did come together under circumstances having nothing to do with employment, they were in situations where discrimination was not supposed to show. Everyone attended church socials and went to the few traveling entertainment shows that came to town, and when the wealthy people came, they generally treated the local people, black or white, the same. "Why, they'd take a whole class of children and invite them out to their great big houses. Some would have as many as seventy-five rooms, and we'd play hide-and-seek all through the place. They'd take us on hayrides and boat rides on Laurel Lake or on the Housatonic River."

Over the years, James formed certain opinions about those wealthy people. To begin with, he figured that some of them must have become rich because they were very stingy, like "Mr. J.P.

Morgan . . . We were there delivering some bread—cake or something my aunt had made—and my brother and I were sitting on the seat of the wagon. The gardener came out and gave my brother and me one of the peaches from the orchard. They were the sweetest, most tender peaches, but he said he could only give us one each. My brother and I then begin figuring out how we can get over that fence for some more. But the gardener says, 'The old man counts them peaches. He knows just how many he's got.' He told us that, I guess, to throw a scare in us. Yeah, that was J.P. Morgan."

The daughters and young wives of the wealthy seemed uniformly pretty and nice—and idle. In the summer when they came to Lenox, they would teach Sunday school. "I remember one of the Sunday school teachers was Miss Constance Parsons, another daughter of John E. Parsons. He was a very important lawyer." They would also offer special classes in music and the domestic arts at the Town Hall. And they organized and presented the annual Flower Parade. "One young lady used to arrange the flowers on the altar for the different churches. They had these big gardens and hothouses and so many flowers; they would furnish them for the churches. One time this particular lady was arranging flowers in a vase and she gave me some flowers to hold, and she had the *softest hands*. She didn't do any work, that's why they were so soft. They had a maid, governess; and her hands were *so soft* as she took those flowers out of my hand."

The wealthy people were so different from the Lenox natives that James hardly considered them when he pondered relations between blacks and whites.

On entering school, the Van DerZee children became aware that, as blacks, they constituted a very small percentage of the

population, although the larger white population was by no means ethnically homogenous. James went to school with Irish, Canadian, and Scottish children, and the children of the Italians who worked the stone quarries and made crushed rock for roads in those days before automobiles. "I never heard about any Jews in Lenox." But he would remember the remark of a wealthy woman with a big garden whom he and his brother used to help. "She said to me one time, 'Jimmy, it's terrible down in New York now. You know, the Jews even go to the Waldorf Astoria.' Well, I didn't even know about Jews. I knew there were all the nationalities—I knew they all existed. As long as they treated me all right, I treated them all right. Years afterward, I remember thinking, 'She ought to go to the Waldorf Astoria now!'"

In school, the Van DerZee children were often the only black children in the class, although sometimes one of the Adams or Crockett children would be in the class, too. But James did not encounter any obvious discrimination or prejudice. "There was no way there could be, because the only things we [blacks and whites] did together was go to school and to church."

Nevertheless James had "a certain feeling of inferiority. And I guess that was due to there only being about six or seven colored families there in Lenox, scattered around, and that was it. We knew we looked different from the others, and a lot of the kids didn't understand that we weren't black by choice. They didn't understand that nature has made certain people different because of different climates." Only one incident remained vivid in his memory.

"We were going to have a geography lesson, and I looked in the book and it said something like, 'Africa is the hottest of all continents, it's the home of the Negro, or black race. They are known

by their thick lips and kinky hair.' And I didn't think I wanted to be present at school when that came up. So my brother and I thought we'd take a walk to Pittsfield that day. Just our luck, they didn't have the lesson that day but the day after. One or two of the kids looked back at us because they felt we were the nearest to Africans. Some of the kids knew we weren't. They understood because they'd seen real Africans. Their parents were quite wealthy people who used to travel around a great deal. It made it easier for them in geography to remember the difference between an island and a peninsula, what a strait was, because they had seen all that."

James did not particularly like school. "Somehow or another, I didn't like studying too much, too much brain work." But he liked and respected his teachers, especially a woman named Miss Downs. He can remember being punished only once, for an infraction he has forgotten, and that was by Miss Downs. He enjoyed reading and believes he learned to read before he entered school. "I guess I was so anxious to read that I learned early. My aunts used to tell us stories, as the twilight came on, about the Indians, and we would imagine we saw their camp fires burning . . . And there was the library in town, and we used to be able to get quite a number of books. I remember one of my favorite books was *Jimmy Boy*. It told how the different pots and pans talked to each other."

These preschool experiences—hearing his aunt's stories and reading library books—encouraged what was probably a naturally lively imagination. When James was seven or eight, there occurred the first of two instances in his life when he saw "something that wasn't there." He and some other children were play-

ing a game of jump rope when all of a sudden, "I saw a little imp, smoke all around his feet, coming up under the rope. Looked like a little stuffed doll we had at one time. Nobody saw it but me, but I saw it. I began hollering, trying to tell them what I saw, but nobody believed me. They didn't know what to think, but they knew by the way I was carrying on there must have been something wrong!"

In school, he enjoyed reading poetry because it excited his imagination. Remarkably, for the rest of his life he remembered verbatim some of the poems he had to learn, among them "The Village Blacksmith" and Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." "I had a great many favorite poems, mostly ones that were descriptive. Some of the poems, why, they would put pictures in your mind and you could practically see a picture."

The only time his excellent memory seems to have failed him was when the school had a play and James, age nine or ten at the time, was cast in the role of a vagabond. "I remember I had to recite about a dozen words—'Though the road is rough and stony and branches off in many directions . . .' Something like that. I couldn't remember it half the time. I'd get so excited being up there, I'd get it all mixed up."

Both James and his sister Jennie excelled in forms of imaginative expression. "She'd play the opening song at the beginning of the school day and the closing at the end. There was a pipe organ, and some of the boys would pump it, and she would sit up there with her little legs hanging down, playing 'Now the day is over, night is drawing near, shadows of the eveningtime steal across the sky.' Every graduation, we always knew who was going to be head of the class. Music and art, music and art, James and Jennie,

JAMES VAN DERZEE

James and Jennie. But we never considered that *anything*, just happened to be our luck."

Although Jennie was a more talented musician than James, he had considerable talent himself. "We had a square piano at home and I just kind of taught myself on it. I don't remember when or how I learned to read music. When you're born with a certain amount of it in you, you don't know when you start." He also learned to play the violin. In school, a man named Professor Monroe would visit once a week to give musical instruction, but James feels he was largely self-taught on both instruments.

James was far more interested in music and art than he was, for example, in sports. Although he was strong and healthy and not afraid of work, he simply preferred these activities. "One time I was playing ball and the ball hit me on the end of my fingers, and I decided ball and music didn't go very well together."

The whole family was musically and artistically inclined. "There were many fine musicians among my ancestors. There was one boy who was a very fine pianist. Once, some people went over to Europe, and they found a piano in Germany that they liked very much, so they brought it back to America. But the trip over on the boat somewhat changed the tone of the piano. They gave it to my aunts, and afterwards it was turned over to my mother's aunts, my great-aunts."

His four aunts formed a "singing quartet," and one of them taught music as well. His grandmother and great-aunts played guitar, and his uncle played the fiddle. "My father played accordion and his favorite song was 'The Mockingbird.' He'd always tell us to play 'The Mockingbird.'"

According to James, there were not many musical events in the town, so if people wanted music they pretty much had to make it

GROWING UP IN LENOX

for themselves. "There were no orchestras. There was a town band, and they did a little parading on Decoration [Veterans] Day. My grandfather had served in the Civil War and he used to dress up in his uniform on Decoration Day, until it eventually became too small for him."

At other times, they would listen to the gramophone. "My aunts had an old music box and when gramophones came along—the ones with the horn that played the round disc records—my grandfather got one. Put out by Edison, I think it was. And I always remember one or two songs that were played on it—comical little records. One went like this:

'Twas just a year ago today I took to me a wife
And ever since she's proved to be the burden of my life. . . .

"Then there was another one, 'Cohen on the Telephone':

Mr. Cohen talking to the landlord: Send down the car-*pen*-tah.
Landlord says: The painter?

Mr. Cohen: No, I did not say the *paintah*. I said the car-*pen*-tah.

Last night the wind came and blew off my shuttah and I want the car-*pen*-tah to put it on.

Landlord: Did you say shut up?

Mr. Cohen: No, I did not say shut up. I said, my *shuttah*. Oh, nevah mind. I will do it myself!

Often, during the long winter hours, members of the family would sit around drawing and painting. The impetus for such activity apparently came from John Van DerZee who, according to James, was an excellent painter. Jennie proved to be a talented

artist. "Teacher would give her a chair to stand on, and she'd decorate the blackboards all around the school. And there was a wealthy lady, Miss Kate Carey, whose mother was an invalid, and she'd pay my sister to go there and draw and paint as an amusement for them."

James had considerable artistic talent himself. "The paintings that I was most successful at were landscapes. I never cared so much about faces. I could never get them to look the way I wanted them to look. I was much better at landscapes than I was at faces. . . . There was so much beautiful scenery there. Snow-time, the snow seemed to be so perfectly smooth and white, and occasionally we'd see tracks in the snow. My brother and I could always tell the difference between a rabbit and a fox, different birds that would make those tracks. On our property was an old sawmill, down below a bridge. In the fall of the year it was surrounded by foliage of every kind, red, yellow, and green. And so many artists from various parts of the country used to come and paint. I recall one artist saying he'd been all over and had seen more picturesque scenes in the Berkshires than he had any place else. But I didn't appreciate it as much as I would have if I hadn't grown up with it."

James found drawing and painting rather boring after a while, but it was hard to find new things to do during the long, cold winters, when he and the other children were pretty much confined to the house. "We would draw and paint around the house there, doing the same things. One day, I saw a little advertisement—I think it was in *Youth's Companion*—that said I could get a camera and outfit for selling so many packages of sachet, and I knew that was a way I could get rid of all this drawing and painting." He was eight or nine years old at the time.

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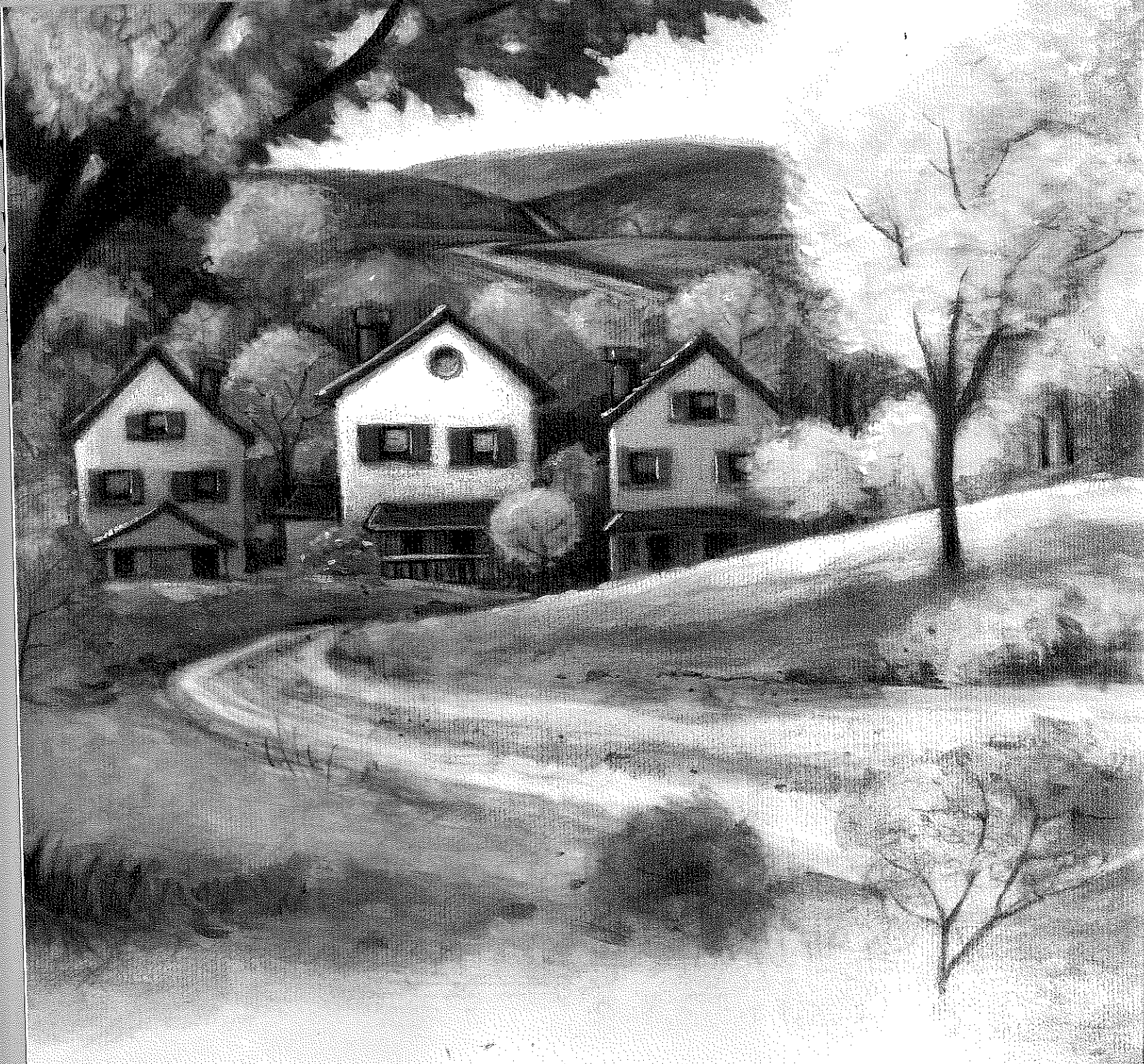
Early Experiments in Photography

By the time James Van DerZee started thinking about getting a camera, the process called photography was progressing rapidly. But before the nineteenth century it had seen little advancement in three hundred years.

The forerunner of the camera, the *camera obscura*, was developed in ancient times. The Latin words mean "dark room," and the first kinds were small, darkened rooms whose only light source was a single, tiny hole in one wall. The light coming through that hole would cast on the opposite wall an upside-down image of the scene outside the wall with the hole in it. It was basically a large version of the pinhole cameras that children nowadays are taught to make out of a box with a pinhole in one side.

Artists began to use the camera obscura immediately because it helped them in rendering perspective, and many of the great art-

\$19.95 US



Deep in the heart of Lenox, Massachusetts,
in a white frame house nestled between his aunts' home
and his grandparents' house,
lived a boy named James VanDerZee.