



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN WITTICK



The last half of the Nineteenth Century was a time of great change in the southwestern United States. The gold rush of 1849 and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1867 brought settlers, tourists, and government officials to the arid lands. George Benjamin Wittick (1845-1903) left his wife and six children in Moline, Illinois, to become a photographer to document the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad's 1878 expansion into New Mexico. He worked for the railroad until 1883, then moved around the Southwest setting up photo shops for a short time in various towns. In 1900 he established his final studio at Fort Wingate, New Mexico. Occasionally he visited his family in the Midwest and a couple of his sons periodically joined him in his travels.



Wittick's studio photographs include portraits of government officials, settlers,

and Native Americans. He staged many of his subjects, often using the same backgrounds and props, thus creating an idealized and odd mixture of cultures that reflect the times in his portraits.



In the field, he captured his subjects as they went about their daily lives, such as Navajo women with their looms, tribal people drying meat, and Hualapai in their brush huts. Although he photographed many of the pueblo tribes along the Rio Grande, he had a special fascination with the Hopi and became the first outsider to gain permission to record their ceremonies. His photographs depicting the grandeur of the land and the lifeways of the people, along with his notes and drawings, are a treasure trove for researchers. All of the 593 glass plates associated with Ben Wittick in the collections of the Centennial Museum have been digitized.



Learning Links: See virtual exhibit of Southwest Photographs by Ben Wittick at <http://museum.utep.edu/Wittick/wittick.htm>. Visit the Centennial Museum/Chihuahuan Desert Gardens website at <http://museum.utep.edu/> for more information about the collections and programs.