



## **Episode 908, Story 1 – Marion Carpenter**

Wes Cowan: This case asks how the owner of this old camera may have gained access to the White House and changed how Americans see the president.

February 14, 1849. James K. Polk poses stoically while cameraman Matthew Brady captures his photograph, inaugurating a tradition that has evolved into nearly constant photographic documentation of the president's every move. With each click of the shutter, the camera holds the power to sway the American public, sculpt the president's image, and in some cases define his historical legacy. Now, a teacher from Ogden, Utah believes that he has a camera that may have recorded history.

Daniel Bigelow: This scribbled note I found in this old camera made me wonder if it hadn't been used to photograph a president.

Wes: I've come to investigate Daniel Bigelow's photographic find. Daniel?

Daniel: Yes.

Wes: Wes Cowan.

Daniel: Good to meet ya. Come on in.

Wes: Thank you.

Daniel: Well, here's the camera I told you about.



Wes: Wow, look at that. Well, it's certainly been heavily used. Where'd you get the camera?

Daniel: Well, my grandmother actually decided that since I was a photographer that she would start an antique camera collection for me.

Wes: So what makes this camera so special?

Daniel: She got it at an auction in Minneapolis and when we got it for Christmas we opened it up and found this note inside that said, "Marion Carpenter, White House Photographer."

Wes: It looks like it's written on the back of a receipt. So, who's Marion Carpenter? I've never heard of her.

Daniel: We actually did some research on her on the internet and found out that she was the first female photographer at the White House.

Wes: When was she shooting at the White House?

Daniel: Well, it would have been back during Truman's time period.

Wes: Okay, so that would have been late '40s then. Well, what is it that you want me to find out for you?

Daniel: Well, we want to know if this truly was Marion Carpenter's camera. And if so, did she use it while shooting at the White House?



Wes: The first thing I got to tell you is that this case does not match this camera. It's the kind of camera that a lot of people might not be familiar with. It's known as a twin reflex camera. There are two lenses. One for focusing, one for allowing you to adjust the F-stop and work the shutter.

Wes: The camera's German. There's no question about that. It's got a great German lens. An Fdekle made in Munich. It's a compor lens. The camera's in terrible shape. It's missing the nameplate on the front of the camera, so other than I can say that it's a German camera, I don't know who possibly made it. Which also means I can't date it.

This to me is sort of the most interesting thing. "Marion Carpenter, White House Photographer." Now it's just written in red magic marker or felt tip pen on the back of a receipt. The receipt's printing style seems recent, certainly not period to the camera, but there's no date. I have no idea, if there is any truth to this little note. But at least it's something to go on.

There she is. There's a picture of Marion Carpenter holding her press camera, looking right at Harry Truman. Let's see what it says here: one of the first female photographers to work in the White House, and traveled with president Harry Truman, covered him daily. She learned photography in St. Paul, Minnesota, and came to Washington when she was just 24, and worked for a news wire service; international news photos syndicate. Marion was the only woman amongst roughly 200 photographers granted access to the White House in the mid 1940's. She's mostly holding a camera called a Speed Graphic, which makes sense, that



was *the* press camera of the 40s and 50s. If this was Marion's camera, would a professional photographer have equipment in such poor condition?

Missy Loewe, the executive director of the Washington School of Photography, thinks she can help.

Wes: Its pretty beat up, but you know, it's a twin lens reflex camera. I'm trying to find out definitive information on who might have made it.

Missy Loewe: It is a little beat up, but I think we can work with it.

Wes: Okay.

Missy: This would have been made in Germany for the German market.

Wes: Okay.

Missy: And it seems like the label has come off, so that gives us a little bit more of a problem. But what we can do is take a look at a few others that I have and maybe try to narrow it down for you.

Wes: Okay, great.

Missy: Here is a Reflecta, and here's a Wirgin.

Wes: Wow. They really do look very similar, don't they?



Missy: Yes. This company Reflecta made a lot of these cameras that would then have a different name plate put on them.

Wes: Missy thinks ours is probably a Wirgin.

Missy: We have the dimpling on the top that's very, very similar, and if we take a look at the backs here, you can see that the backs are very similar. It looks a little more like the Wirgin.

Wes: When were these cameras made?

Missy: The 30s...probably somewhere between '34 and '38, '39.

Wes: She shows me how one of the advantages of twin reflex cameras was ease of use, simple to load, shoot and advance.

Missy: Okay, here we go and then we advance it.

Wes: If I were a professional press photographer in the 1940s, what kind of camera would I have used?

Missy: It would be a Graphlex Speed Graphic.

Wes: That's what I thought.

Missy: We have a baby version called a pacemaker.



Wes: You know the Speed Graphic had the reputation for being the workhorse of the press industry right?

Missy: Absolutely. Also, these were incredibly dependable cameras.

Wes: Are there any disadvantages to using this camera?

Missy: Well, you can see it's large, and a bit cumbersome, and heavy. It would be very slow, because you're only as fast as how fast you can put this in, take your shot, flip it over, do it again you would have to practice and practice to get very quick at this.

Wes: Okay, final question, let's put my little two and a quarter by the Graphlex, is this the kind of camera that a professional photographer might have used?

Missy: Probably not, but possibly. This would be a high end, very serious hobbyist, this is not something that you would just run out and buy. This is not a cheap camera.

Wes: Melina Mara, a Washington Post press photographer, has studied Marion's career. She asked me to meet her where she and Marion have both worked: The White House.

Melina Mara: Would you like a picture, by the way, in front of the White House?

Wes: Oh, you bet!



Melina: One, two, three! Oh, fantastic! So this is the Brady Press Room.

Wes: This is a really pretty small room, I would guess during a press conference it must be totally packed?

Melina: It's completely packed. The seats are all filled, the sides are packed with photographers and scribblers, sometimes photographers are even stacked on top of each other where someone will have a ladder

Wes: Is this the place where Truman would have held press conferences?

Melina: No, there actually was no press room. And so he would have press conferences in offices or in his offices and he would have more of a gaggle situation where media would be around him, where this is much more controlled.

Wes: Melina explains how 24/7 access, in some ways, can be traced back to Truman and his relationship with the press. Previous presidents allowed very little entry into the White House. Before Truman, most presidents allowed very little entry into the White house. Truman's predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, was particularly guarded, getting assurances from photographers not to photograph him in his wheel chair. In contrast, Truman really opened up the doors to photographers and reporters, including Marion Carpenter. I ask Melina if our camera could have been used by Marion to shoot the president. She suggests we take a closer look back at her office, the news rooms.



Wes: Is this the kind of camera that she would have used, as a photographer covering the White House? Her primary camera would have been a Speed Graphic, right?

Melina: Speed Graphic – yeah.

Wes: Melina believes Marion's most recognizable photographs of Truman were taken on the larger camera. On the heels of World War II, the public was hungry for peaceful images like these, an affirmation that things were looking up again.

Melina: When he's walking in the garden at the White House it's a quieter moment.

Wes: Marion had the touch.

Melina: And then him and Lauren Bacall is just really fun, and it's kind of like this jovial moment, and that is one of the true moments that I'll always remember from the Truman administration and that's her, she took that. When Truman was bowling, I just love that bowling alley. I mean it is still there, but to see it in black and white with Truman bowling.

Wes: So, she really took a number of iconic images of Truman.

Melina: She was the lone woman among all those men. I mean, I am welcome, I am part of the press corps, but she had to force her way into the press corps. There's a story somewhere in print someone accused her of actually using her sexuality to get a picture, to get access and she didn't take this very well,





because she considered herself an ethical journalist. And this writer, he had a whole bowl of navy bean soup dumped on him. I mean, she was obviously a really tough cookie.

Wes: What's your best bet about this camera? Do you think she really used this in the White House?

Melina: You know, she had her 4x5, which is her main camera. I think this is the kind of camera, because it's small, and maybe a little quieter, that she would probably use as a secondary camera.

Wes: Melina says some photos do show Marion using a smaller camera, but she's never seen any images of her with our model. She suspects Marion would have had the newest equipment and that our camera pre-dates her days in Washington.

Melina: Maybe if you go back to her roots, maybe if you go back to Minnesota, you know, St. Paul. Maybe she worked with a small newspaper there.

Wes: I've contacted the St. Paul City Camera Club in Minnesota where Marion was a member. Gene Schwope is their historian. Here's what I want to show you. It's the note that's inside this camera.

Gene Schwope: Marion Carpenter, White House photographer. She's a legendary member of the St. Paul Camera Club.



Wes: Just 22, Marion had been working as a nurse when she and her mother decided to learn photography.

Gene: Marion joined in 1942 and learned all about photography from St. Paul Camera Club, as a matter of fact.

Wes: So, when Marion went to the White House this must have been an immense source of pride for the Camera Club?

Gene: She was our superstar. In fact, the first issue of our newsletter which came out in 1946 we invited her to do a front page story.

Wes: Oh, look at that. "Marion Carpenter Tells White House Experiences".

Gene: It says, "The White House press room posts the president's calling list every morning. My motorcycle messenger watches this press agenda and is waiting at the northwest gate for each set of negatives to be rushed back for the office, developed, printed and wired from coast to coast."

Wes: Wow, that says it all, doesn't it?

Gene: It certainly does.

Wes: Now let's get back to this camera. Where would this have fit into her career do you think?



Gene: I would say she probably learned and perfected some of her photographic techniques with that camera or a camera like that. This is a picture from an outing that the St. Paul Camera Club went on. She's sitting on a wall here and she's got a small camera, probably a twin lens reflex roll film camera.

Wes: Oh yeah. There it is. It's a box camera of some sort.

Gene: We've done some enhancement on that picture and we've taken that and lightened it to the point where it could be your camera in a leather case.

Wes: It's obviously some sort of a two and a quarter camera. But there's just not enough detail.

Gene: We really can't make that connection.

Wes: But Gene believes he has something that might help...

Gene: She died in 2002. St. Paul Camera Club was invited into her home to look. She had never sold a camera. Every camera she ever had, she had it when she died.

Wes: Do you remember seeing this camera when you went into the estate?

Gene: I don't remember seeing that particular camera but I think I know someone who would. I set up a video call to Jerry Ducommun, the person who ran the estate sale for Marion Carpenter.



Wes: Really?

Gene: Yes and I think he's got some interesting information for us.

Wes: Hi, Jerry, how you doing?

Jerry Ducommun: Hi.

Wes: Hey, I really appreciate you trying to help me out. So you handled Marion Carpenter's estate I understand?

Jerry: Yes I did.

Wes: Interesting. Well, I want to show you a camera and ask you if you recognize this as coming from Marion's estate.

Jerry: It's possible that was one of her cameras. She had those type of cameras.

Wes: Jerry, I want to show you a note that was inside the camera and see if you recognize the note.

Jerry: Let me put on my glasses here...

Wes: What Jerry says next pulls my investigation into focus. This was an amazing story. Take a look at this photograph.

Daniel: I just see our one female photographer here in the corner.



Wes: That's Marion Carpenter.

Daniel: Oh, wow.

Wes: The question that you had, was, did your camera really belong to Marion Carpenter? I was able to track down the person who handled Marion's estate sale and what I found out next I think you're going to be really interested in.

Wes: Whose handwriting is this?

Jerry: That's my handwriting.

Wes: Really?

Jerry: Definitely my handwriting. Probably somebody asked me and I wrote the note.

Wes: So what you're saying is, that the camera that I showed you came from Marion Carpenter's estate?

Jerry: Yes I would say it did.

Wes: Is it the camera that a photographer like Marion Carpenter would have used in the White House? The answer is no.

Daniel: I see.



Wes: Your camera did belong to Marion Carpenter.

Daniel: It's incredible. It's a great honor to have a camera like this now and to know that it belonged to her.

Wes: Because of your camera and the note that you found inside of it we were able to tell the story about this incredible woman and the story behind her career. It's a great honor to have a camera like this now and to know that it belonged to her.