

## Samuel John Dixon

(Photographer)

Did You Know... that often a non numismatic item can open the door to a wonderful numismatic story?

Recently I picked up an old cabinet photo at an antique mall. The photo was of a woman posing in the studio of Toronto, Ontario photographer S.J. Dixon. Dixon's gallery was located at 4 King St. W., the corner of King and Yonge streets, a very busy and prime location in the late 1800's. It was the back of the photo that intrigued me most because there was an image of a Toronto Industrial Exhibition medal and a statement by Dixon that his 'Electric Light Photo Gallery' had received the highest award at the Toronto, Kingston and Hamilton exhibitions. This photograph would have been taken sometime between 1880 and 1885. Photography, during this period, was an enterprise struggling to be defined as a hobby or an actual career. Most professional photographers across Canada found that they could not make a living and had to have additional income to carry on. During this time, especially in rural areas, one would have gone to the local merchant or druggist to sit for their photo.

However, Samuel Dixon had achieved a degree of success with a process strategically incorporating electric light. This process was described by Dixon in detail; *To make a good negative diffused light, and plenty of it, is necessary. I have tried from one to eight lamps, but have finally adopted four and am perfectly satisfied with the results obtained through them. One I place at a height of eight feet, exactly above the sitter, giving a soft and diffused light all over the subject; two are somewhat removed and placed at a height of seven feet, giving effects of general light and shade, modulation and roundness. The fourth at a distance of five feet from the floor and still further removed from the subject, serves for the sidelight.* Dixon goes on to say that with further methods to diffuse the light one could *complete an arrangement that equals natural light in every respect.* Dixon's process would now enable him to take a photograph with *no change of expression and in one second.*

Samuel J Dixon was born in 1852 in New York City. He established his photography gallery in Toronto in 1872 and located at 191 ½ Yonge St. At one time there was another photographer named James Dixon located nearby at 201-203 Yonge St. Samuel took exception to James Dixon riding his coat tails and began to refer to his own gallery as 'The Dixon' pointing out that his gallery was not connected with any other gallery of the same name. In 1884 Dixon had ten employees in his gallery.

Samuel Dixon was a founding member of the Photographic Association of Canada which had formed January 24, 1884 in Toronto. At the inaugural meeting S. J. Dixon was appointed to the Executive Committee along with two other prominent Toronto photographers. Later Dixon was elected to sit as one of three Vice Presidents. Dixon had also been a long standing member of the American Photographers Association and often travelled by train to the United States to attend convention meetings and to exhibit gallery photos. Several times his exhibits won prizes. It was on one of these trips to a meeting of the American Photographers Association in early 1890 that Dixon came up with an idea that would change his life forever. While his train sat on the Cantilever bridge at Niagara Falls, waiting to enter the United States Dixon looked out of his window and noticed the cable that the tightrope walker Stephen Peer had used three years earlier. Peer successfully crossed the Niagara River here on June 23, 1887. After two nights of celebrating his victory conflicting stories have Peer either climbing on his cable in the night wearing street shoes or falling asleep on the precipice under the cable and rolling off the cliff.

Whichever story may be correct, the end result was that Peer was found bleeding and lifeless on the rocks below the cable. While Dixon stared at the ¾ inch cable an idea formed in his mind. That night he announced to his fellow photographers that he was going to walk across the Niagara River gorge, 190 feet over the wildest part of the Whirlpool Rapids, using Peer's cable. Dixon was a natural sportsman and prided himself in being physically fit but even his close friends did not believe he would attempt something as daring as this. After practicing only a few times out on Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Islands Dixon arrived in Niagara Falls in early September to make his crossing attempt. The cable of 925 feet was pulled tight and lost sandbags and guy ropes were added to bring it up to contemporary standard. A large British flag floated at the Canadian end and an American flag graced the American side. Dixon had notified all his photographer friends so the event could be well recorded. Accounts claim that there were over 1000 photographers on the Cantilever bridge as a crowd of 5000 people looked on. It was anticipated that Dixon would not go through with the feat and when he was not present fifteen minutes before the scheduled crossing most felt this would be the case. However, about ten minutes before the announced 3:30 PM start on September 6, 1890, Dixon appeared. He made some checks and spoke a few words to a photographer who had arranged a camera on the cliff. Dixon then went back to his nearby hotel, returning moments later dressed in yellow tights, red silk stockings, a black coat and a black silk cap. Grabbing his 30 pound 22 foot balancing pole, made from fitted gas pipes, Dixon waved to the crowd and set out, a little shaky at first and then taking complete command.

Stopping periodically to lay on the cable and later to wave to a passing train Dixon made it to the American side in twelve minutes. He rested for about four minutes and then walked the cable to the American flag which he proceeded to wrap around himself. Dixon walked back to the American side where he was picked up in an open carriage and brought back to the Canadian side. Dixon, without pausing to rest, thrilled everyone by walking out on the cable backwards to the floating British flag. He then draped the flag over his shoulder and sat on the cable locking his feet in place. Dixon then returned to his waiting friends who had taken up a liberal collection for him. When Dixon performed this feat he was 38 years old and weighed 138 pounds. There are many, many photos to bear witness to this seemingly doubtful performance by a Toronto photographic artist.

The question of whether Dixon would ever perform this stunt again was answered a little over one year later. On Thursday, October 1, 1891 Samuel Dixon announced to his friend Jim Douglas "*I'm going up to Muskoka to shoot a bear*". Dixon wanted to get up to Wood Lake outside of Bracebridge, Ontario before the Toronto Hunt Club came with their dogs to shoot deer knowing they would scare away the bears. On Friday October 2<sup>nd</sup> Dixon decided he was going to swim across Wood Lake and with his friends on shore set out around noon. A few people were getting nervous about Dixon undertaking this swim and after a while one of the men set out in a boat after him. As the man got within a short distance of Dixon who was now about 200 yards from the opposite shore Dixon was seized by cramps and went under the water. As Dixon came up from under the water, within five feet of the man in the boat, Dixon suddenly went under once more and was not seen alive again. His body was recovered two days later. Samuel John Dixon was buried in Mount Pleasant Cemetery (Plot F, Section 5, Lot 12) on October 6, 1891.

Although Samuel Dixon was only 39 years old when he died it is an understatement to say he lived his life to the fullest. We can only speculate what he may have accomplished given more time.

### AFTERWORD

The most wonderful thing about researching an item found by chance is the amazing stories that unfold about lives forgotten. The photograph I found of the mysterious unknown woman was the best three dollars I ever spent. Samuel J. Dixon had his shop not 30 feet from the building I took my first real summer job in 1967 in Toronto. I walked past this location of 4 King St. W. literally hundreds of times over the years. Yet the name of Samuel Dixon was completely unknown to me. I am so thankful to have had a brief virtual moment to spend with him. What an amazing individual he was.



<sup>1</sup> This is a Starbucks coffee location in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> S.J. Dixon was located at the corner of King and Yonge St. (4 King W.) from 1880–1885 only.

<sup>3</sup> The Photographic Times and American Photographer. Volume 13, 1883. Page 642-643.

<sup>4</sup> History of Toronto and County of York Ontario, Volume 1, 1885 Page 501

<sup>5</sup> The American Journal of Photography, Almanac for 1889. Page 17

<sup>6</sup> The Hamilton Spectator, June 27, 1887.

<sup>7</sup> The Globe, Toronto, Monday September 8, 1890 Page 5.

<sup>8</sup> Account compiled from several different reports in the Toronto Globe, Hamilton Spectator and Buffalo News, Monday September 8, 1890.

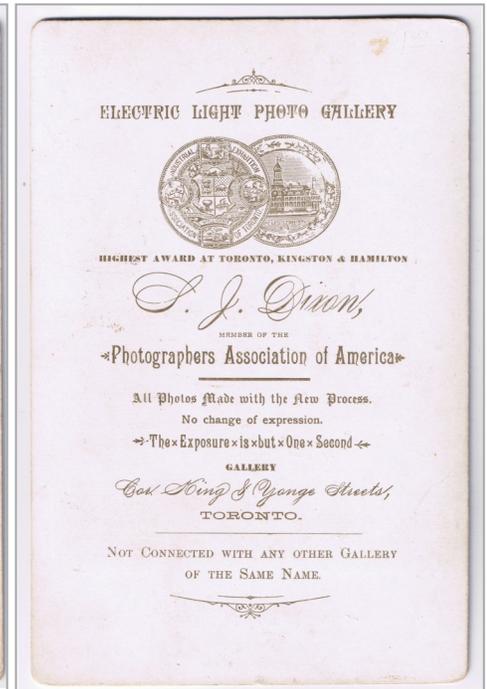
<sup>9</sup> The Globe, Toronto, Saturday October 3, 1891. Page 20

<sup>10</sup> Scott E. Douglas . The Toronto Industrial Exhibition - How important was a prize medal? RCNA journal July/August 2012 page 372-374.

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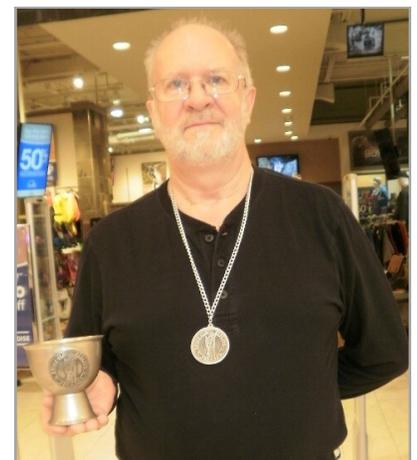
This is the photograph that lead me on my journey. One of the medals Dixon won for his Electric Light Photo Gallery display at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, later known as the Canadian National Exhibition, is illustrated on this cabinet photo. This large size bronze medal was awarded to Dixon in 1883.

These medals (LeRoux 1465) were awarded between 1883-1886 and 1888-1896. In 1883 the Exhibition awarded 5 gold, 108 silver and 189 bronze medals to 151 different exhibit classes. The highest award for the photography class was likely bronze but the physical medal was not as important as the bragging rights that came with such an award.



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**THE BEST PHOTOS**  
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making first class Ambrotypes, and he gives  
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vinced. Note the address,  
**CORNER OF KING AND YONGE STREET,  
TORONTO.**

Samuel J Dixon crossing the Niagara gorge on September 6, 1890. Note the people on the Cantilever bridge.



**Scott E. Douglas**  
FRCNA, FCNRS, FONA, GKOE