

# Sunshine to Greenbacks

## An incomplete history of Ohio photographer Emmor Crew

By Timothy Brookes



*Pvt. Christian Shabe, 115<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteers. This portrait is believed to be an example of E. Crew's early work.  
Author's collection.*



*Unknown sergeant posed with the same chair seen in the Shabe portrait at left, plus the martial backdrop Crew adopted midway through the war.  
Author's collection.*



*Pvt. Jack Hartzell, regiment unknown, posed against a classical backdrop seen less frequently in Crew portraits.  
Alliance Historical Society.*

Collectors of Ohio images regularly find cartes-de-visite with the backmark of “E. Crew, Alliance, Ohio.” Alliance, a small city in Stark County, northeastern Ohio, contained the junction of two railroads, the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago and the Cleveland & Pittsburgh. The Civil War brought heavy military traffic to the city as regiments were transported to training camps or to the front. Partly in response to this traffic, Alliance catered to its temporary visitors with at least two photographic studios that are known to have operated there during the war years. The more prolific of these studios was that of E. (Emmor) Crew.

Crew was listed in the 1850 Ohio census as the son of a well-to-do farmer in western Columbiana County, several miles from Alliance. Aged 17, Emmor was the oldest of nine children and was working on the family farm when the census-taker came calling.

We know little of Emmor Crew's photographic training. His complete absence from the 1860 census may well indicate an apprenticeship in a larger city where recent developments in the field of photography would be more readily available to an aspiring “artist.”

From the evidence of Crew's surviving military photos, it is apparent that Emmor's gallery was in operation during the summer of 1862. Many portraits of men of the 115<sup>th</sup> Ohio volunteer Infantry – recruited in eastern Ohio in August 1862 – bear Crew's imprint.



*Ben F. Woods served as 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. of Co. K, 43<sup>rd</sup> Ohio, from May 1864. This portrait probably was made in December of 1863 when the 43<sup>rd</sup> went on veteran furlough.  
Author's collection.*



Typical backmarks of E. Crew's photograph gallery.



Like other photographers of his time, Emmor Crew's work shows that he made ongoing changes for the benefit of his soldier clientele. Early photos feature a typical drapery and a distinctive Gothic-styled chair as props. As the war dragged on, Crew added a painted martial backdrop, although still occasionally using the same prop chair. Of interest to students of painted backdrops, the Crew version is almost identical to one used in Columbus, Ohio, at the

Reeves & Watt Studio, suggesting the wholesale production of such canvasses.

Crew's attention to the desires of his customers apparently paid dividends. On June 20, 1864, an Alliance resident wrote to the *Stark County Republican* describing local conditions. The paper expressed high praise for E. Crew, who not only operated as a photographer but also had expanded his business premises from "a small storeroom into an

edifice of no mean dimensions," parts of which were rented to other business and professional men. As to Crew's photographic skill, the anonymous booster commented, "Mr. Crew's reputation is not confined to Alliance. Outside the great cities, there are few artists that transmute sunbeams to greenbacks more rapidly than Mr. Crew."



Emmor Crew's portrait of his brother Ben, who died in the Sultana disaster of 1865. Author's collection.



Built by Crew in 1868, the Alliance Opera House collapsed in 1886, a decade after Crew had moved to Texas. Collection of Marcus McLemore.

One of the many soldiers who patronized E. Crew's gallery was the owner's youngest brother Benjamin, who enlisted in Alliance's own Company F of the 115th Ohio on August 8, 1862. After an uneventful history of garrison duty in Cincinnati and along the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad in Tennessee, Corporal Crew was one of 200 men from the regiment captured during Confederate attacks on that railroad in December of 1864. Benjamin was fortunate to survive his incarceration but lost his life when the ill-fated steamer *Sultana* exploded on April 27, 1865.

Emmor Crew continued to prosper in the immediate postwar years. In 1868 he constructed a three-story building called the Alliance Opera House at a cost of more than \$75,000. Then, in the mid-1870s, Emmor Crew sold his properties and departed Ohio for the sunny South. According to the Alliance Historical Society, Crew grew rich "raising watermelons in Texas."

A decade later, in June of 1886, the Alliance Opera House collapsed, causing an uninsured loss of almost \$40,000 and tarnishing the memory of an erstwhile entrepreneur.

While certainly not the last word on Crew's photographic career, this sketch of the Ohio lensman may stimulate the exchange of information to further clarify the story of Emmor Crew. The author would welcome correspondence on the subject and Xerox copies of Crew's military portraits, both identified and not.

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