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professional investigator magazine

\$8.95

January/February 2023

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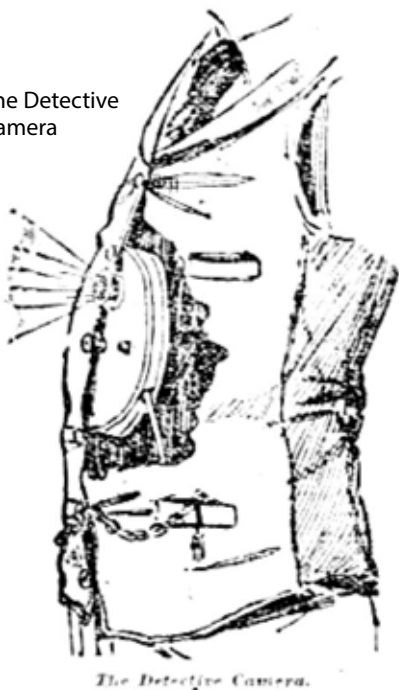
# The Detective Camera and Vote Stuffers

BY DANIEL J. DEMERS

The October 29, 1892, edition of the *San Francisco Morning Call* announced the city's Non-Partisan Political Party had ordered six hundred detective cameras which were to be used to prevent voter fraud in the upcoming general election.

The camera was advanced technology for its time. It was attached to the wearer's chest under his shirt. The camera lens protruded and looked like a button on his vest. The user squeezed a tube running down his arm to take a photo. Each "noiseless" camera contained six rotating cylindrical glass plates. The cylinders could easily be replaced (like a six shooter). The plates, in turn, could be easily developed. Each camera cost \$7.50 [\$240 in current values] but could be returned to the manufacturer for a \$6.50 refund.

The Detective Camera



At the time, there was a common belief that there were between 8,000 and 10,000 vote "stuffers" (or repeaters) in San Francisco controlled by the various political bosses. These individuals registered (or were registered) to vote at multiple locations under fictitious names and addresses. On election day the stuffer would then saunter from polling place to polling place and cast multiple votes for the bosses' candidates.

The bosses compensated the stuffers with one-month's boarding house rent or a room for the night—depending on whether he was a transient. They also comped drinks at a few local "Boss" owned saloons. While the law required the saloons to be closed on election day—the bosses' saloons offered side door access to the stuffers during their arduous day of trekking from polling place to polling place in the city by the bay.

The Non-Partisan party sent a crew of activists throughout the city to street corners, hotel corridors, saloons and "wherever politicians" congregated. They took pictures of men and groups of men who were suspected of being stuffers and then developed a "rogues gallery:" of them. The idea was that on election day a detective cameraman who had reviewed the rogue's gallery would take snapshots of suspected stuffers and compare them to the gallery for identification.



A Single Figure Taken Unawares at the City Hall.  
[Enlarged from a detective camera.]

At the same time, California Governor H. H. Markham offered a reward of \$100 for the arrest and conviction of any violator of the election voting law [\$3200 in current values]. Simultaneously, the Non-Partisan Campaign Committee dittoed the governor's offer under the same terms and conditions. The reward-threat implied stuffers would be incarcerated in either San Quentin or Folsom state prison where they would have their "haircut and a striped suit, working ten hours a day... [maybe] painting pails, breaking stones or spinning jute in the mill where flying dust fills his eyes and nose and throat half strangling him," according to the *Call*.



A Stuffer After Election Day.

By November 1st the *Call* reported "stuffers were leading an anxious and unhappy life" with the threat of the detective camera hanging over their head. By the 5th of November the *Call* reported that the bosses found their reliable stuffers had "shrunk to such an extent that... [they were] unable to find their hirelings."

The paper ran several copies of photographs of single and groups of men loitering about the boss's headquarters. The paper also published a list of the bosses' headquarters which were identified "as the suspected quarters of

stuffers.” On the 3rd of November the paper declared “both bosses and stuffers [were] afraid to run the risk of illegal voting.” A picture of one—John O’Rourke—was published who had approached a detective cameraman and offered his vote as barter for a bed.



*John O'Rourke.*  
[A Stuffer whose picture was caught by a Non-Partisan camera.]

There was a certain irony in that San Francisco newspapers were unable to publish the actual photographs. The recent development of the half-tone process, which used etched metal plates, had not been adopted yet by the city’s newspapers. As a result, the publication’s artists sketched or etched the photograph into a pen and ink depiction which was then published.

By election day the Non-Partisan Party claimed they had dozens of pictures of “well-known plug uglies...[now] deemed mug-uglies.”

The day after the election the *Morning Call’s* headline bragged “Stuffers Were Foiled,” declaring that “the camera brigade did its work nobly and well.” The Non-Partisan candidate, Levi R. Ellert, won the mayoralty election.

In the end, only eight men were arrested for stuffing. Two bonded out for a later trial while the other six were discharged because “the evidence against them [had been] deemed insufficient.” There were more argumentative fist-fights and drunken brawls between the various candidates’ supporters than stuffers.

San Franciscans experienced another first in the 1892 election—it was the first-time voters were given the Australian or secret ballot. For the first time, San Franciscans were able to vote without a political party operative “peering over his shoulder.” Nationally, Grover Cleveland was elected president. The incumbent in 1888, he had been defeated by Benjamin Harrison whom he in turn beat in 1892—becoming the only president elected for two non-consecutive terms.

It’s worth mentioning that in 1892, voting was a male dominated event. Women wouldn’t gain the right to vote in federal elections until 1920. Only white men and former African male slaves and their male descendants could legally vote. Native Americans were also denied the voting franchise at the time. **PI**



San Francisco City Hall wheeling and dealing circa 1895



*“Big enough to serve and small enough to care.”*

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