

Traveling the frontier with a stereoscopic camera and mule-drawn darkroom, William H. Illingworth documented the landscape of the Northern Great Plains in the 1860s and 1870s. His photographs include the first images ever recorded of the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming.

William Henry Illingworth, the son of a clockmaker, was born 20 September 1842 in Leeds, England. His family came to the United States in the 1840s, moving first to Philadelphia before settling in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 1850. For a time, Illingworth worked in his father's shop, but he soon became fascinated with the exciting new field of photography, and by 1864, he was listed among the city's professional photographers.

In 1866, Illingworth volunteered to accompany an expedition under Captain James L. Fisk seeking a route from Minnesota to the Montana gold fields. The photographer undoubtedly hoped to profit from the sale of his pictures to a public hungry for views of the West. He and assistant George Bill produced about thirty images during their two-month journey, including the only known photographs of Fort Union, a strategic fur post.

Beginning in 1867, Illingworth operated studios in Saint Paul, gaining a reputation as a landscape and commercial photographer. In 1874, at the peak of his career, army officials hired him to travel with an expedition led by Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer to explore the Black Hills. Illingworth produced more than seventy glass-plate views of the region and the expedition, but he defaulted on an agreement to provide the government with six complete sets of his photographs. He was later charged with embezzlement, but the case was never prosecuted.

As the popularity of stereo photography declined in the late 1870s, so did both Illingworth's career and personal life. Twice widowed, he had married Flora Leonard in 1872. Their marriage ended in 1888 amid accusations of the photographer's drunkenness and wife beating. Illingworth died an impoverished alcoholic, killing himself in 1893.

After the photographer's death, his son, William J. Illingworth, sold his father's collection of more than sixteen hundred glass-plate negatives. Most of the surviving original images of the 1874 Black Hills Expedition now reside with the South Dakota State Historical Society in Pierre.

by Sara Hagen

Dakota Images



William H. Illingworth

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