

The History of Ralph and Dorothy Crawford

And The Studio Shop of Burlingame, California

By Carolyn Converse Misselwitz February 1978

Dorothy M. Crawford is the professional name which Miss Maude Frink chose for herself when she married Mr. Ralph K. Crawford and opened her photographic studio in Burlingame, California in 1914. She was not a “woman” photographer, (that was before the days of “women’s life”) nor an “amateur” photographer. She loved her work with a passion and would rather work in her dark room any day than eat, but she still did it for a “living” from 1901 to 1944. Her photographs cover the first half of this century, with its changing customs and changing styles in photographic procedures and techniques.

Mrs. Crawford referred to herself as a “portrait photographer,” but she also did pictures of streets, buildings, interiors of home and the gardens of big estates, horses, dogs, copies of paintings, and daguerreotypes—whatever photographers do. During one trip to China and a later tour through Europe, she made many travel-type photographs, largely for her own amusement. She also made some lovely pictures of “The Roost,” her house in San Carlos, and of the views she could see from her hill.

Some of the pictures won state, or even national prizes and were published in newspapers and magazines. But she was not generally known outside of her own areas—Franklin County, Kansas as Miss Maude Frink, and San Mateo County, California, as Dorothy M. Crawford.

Mrs. Crawford was an experienced photographer when she moved to Burlingame, since she had already had twelve years of work in that field in Franklin County, Kansas. She had owned her own studio in Ottawa, Kansas under her maiden name, Maude Frink.

She was born in Brown County, Kansas on a farm outside of a little town called Fairview. All four of her grandparents had come to Brown County in northeastern Kansas as pioneers, moving from the eastern states in covered wagons, as many did, partially for the purpose of being able to vote for Kansas as “free,” as opposed to a “slave” state. They were well established there when she was born in 1877, one of a pair of identical twins. The eldest children of Asa Adelbert Frink and Laura Elizabeth Frink.

Since they were born on May 12, one of the twins was named “May” and the other one “Maude.” For many years, no one except their closest relatives could tell them apart. Until they were both quite elderly, their voices sounded exactly alike. (May Frink, later May Frink Converse, was my mother; Maude Frink was, to her dying day—as far as I was concerned—“Aunt Maude”. My own name is Carolyn Maude). There was a slight difference in their temperaments, which shows up from their earliest photographs. May Frink had a rather shy and diffident look and tilted her head slightly to one side. Maude Frink was the more aggressive of the two, with a straightforward look in her eyes.

Before 1900, Fairview, Kansas had no public high school, so May and Maude were sent to an academy which was part of a Baptist College in Ottawa, Kansas known as Ottawa University. It was at the academy that the two young women met their future husbands, Asa Finch Converse and Ralph K. Crawford.

Asa's mother, Cynthia Caroline (Finch) Converse, had long been a widow and he had to work his way through school—partly by helping out at the "Ottawa Herald." When he finished college, he borrowed \$200 and bought a small weekly newspaper in the nearby town of Wellsville, Kansas—eighteen miles away from Ottawa by train. Although the town had a population of no more than 750 until after World War II, he stayed there until he died in 1942. From the beginning he was a "City Father," friend to every farmer in the townships around, and finally represented that area at the Kansas State Legislature. He married May Frink in 1900 and built a home on Main Street, where he also lived until he died. They had three children—Adelbert Frink Converse, born in 1901, who later became a Rear Admiral in the United States Navy, Carolyn Maude Converse—1908—who later married Henry Francis Misselwitz and now lives in Burlingame, California, and Elizabeth Hope Converse—1909—now the mother of five children, grandmother and great grandmother—Mrs. Glenn Layton, Sr. of Wellsville, Kansas.

Ralph K. Crawford was two years younger than Maude Frink, but in her class at the academy. His parents had moved to Ottawa from Maine, and his father, as a contractor, had built a number of the buildings on the Ottawa University campus. Ralph's much older brother had been sent back east to Brown University, where he was graduated. But a few days after his graduation, his brother, Clarence, was killed in an accident when he fell from end of a horse-drawn structure(?). His family never recovered from this trauma, and it probably affected very much the childhood of his younger brother.

In the academy, Ralph was a tall, skinny teenager with bushy, curly hair, big ears, and big brown eyes (how proud Ralph was in later years of his added pounds! He developed into quite a handsome man). He went straight to Ottawa University, graduating in 1899, a year ahead of his class, as a civil engineer, and took a job as an engineer in Ottawa in 1900.

At the end of their senior year in the academy, Asa Adelbert Frink, the father of the twins, May and Maude, died after a long bout with tuberculosis. There were four of their younger brothers and sisters at home to be cared for, and though their mother and oldest brother, Sid Frink, kept and ran the farm, holding the family together and managing to send the other three children to the academy later on, it was immediately necessary for the twins to drop out of school and become independent on their own. May Frink married Asa Converse and settled down in Wellsville, Kansas.

Maude Frink tried her hand at teaching in a rural school near Fairview (she hated teaching), visited for a while with Frink relatives in Seattle, and then made up her mind that she wanted to be a photographer. During her academy years in Ottawa, the photographer who had taken all their class pictures, group photos, etc., was a Mr. Martin. He was a very good photographer for those days, and later went on to New York to join the prestigious firm of "Underwood and Underwood." Mr. Martin accepted Maude Frink as his apprentice and employee. She was an apt pupil, and when she had learned the techniques, she opened her own little studio in Wellsville in 1904, taking her board and room with May, May's husband Asa and their small son Adelbert.

Most of the photographs still intact which were taken by her at that time are group photos—family reunions, church groups, the school's football team, etc. No gathering was a success without a photo by Miss Frink!

And then, in 1908, I came along, and eighteen months later my sister Elizabeth. That was, for Maude, the beginning of a new interest and a change in the course of her career. With two photogenic

little nieces as free and willing models, she began to specialize in portraits of children. In 1911, she moved back to Ottawa, bought out Mr. Martin's studio when he moved to New York, and started business as "Miss Frink's Studio." Her darkroom there was large and well equipped. She could do what she wanted in her spare time.

It is hard to realize now that in 1911 cameras were big, cumbersome things on tripods or wheel-around stands. They were focused by means of "bellows" focusing the lens, which was moved along wooden bars in front while the photographer looked through the back of the camera with his head under a dark drape. "Negatives" were sensitized glass plates inserted in holders and then unsheathed. The exposed plate had to be taken out, and a new one put in for every picture. The plate was exposed when the operator squeezed the rubber bulb he held in his hand, which opened up the lens through a long tube.

For the sitter, too, having a picture taken was something of an ordeal. Being in a still chair in front of a painted background while the photographer got his focus, being told to "see the birdie" and hold still at the right time. The result was a stiff and formal looking picture most the time, even if the children involved were not actually frightened.

But for my sister and me, the woman behind the hood was no stranger—she was "Aunt Maude." We would pose for her anywhere, in any way that she suggested, and then go on about our play. I don't know how many plates she wasted on us, but with time and practice she developed a mode of working which was very fast and delightfully easy for her "sitters." She captured natural poses, spontaneous expressions—much like the photographs we take today. Pictures like these were new and "different" in the photographic trade at that time, and she received a certain amount of national attention for them.

In the meantime, Ralph Crawford came back to Ottawa from time to time to visit with his family. On one of those occasions, he and Maude Frink "got engaged." But the years went by, and Ralph's work kept him in far-away places. One of his surveying jobs took him to Death Valley to work on the then-being-surveyed project of the Los Angeles Water Company, another to the High Sierras. Four years of engagement were enough for the independent Miss Frink, and tired of waiting, she "disengaged" herself. Then suddenly, in 1913, she sold her prospering studio in Ottawa and left for California to marry Mr. Crawford.

Miss Inez Mabel Crawford was Ralph Crawford's older sister. She and her mother were living at that time in San Mateo, California, where Mabel Crawford was for many years head librarian of the San Mateo City Library. Shortly after his wedding, Ralph Crawford applied for, and obtained, the position of City Engineer for the new and adjoining city of Burlingame.

Within months, his wife had rented a space on Burlingame Avenue in Burlingame—above the old Miller drugstore—and opened up a new studio for herself. She did not think that "Maude Crawford" sounded very good and she had always liked the name of "Dorothy," so she changed her name to "Dorothy M. Crawford." Although new and faster cameras were coming in by that time, her artistic, "natural" photographs made an instant appeal to the residents of Burlingame, San Mateo, and especially Hillsborough. She was, besides being an excellent photographer, a handsome, charming, witty, woman. She deserved her popularity.

In 1914, Ralph Crawford purchased a framing shop which was being operated by a Mr. Schath on San Mateo Drive. In 1915 Ralph and Dorothy combined their two businesses under the name "The Studio Shop," taking temporary quarters in The Stark building on Burlingame Avenue, and between 1918 and 1920 moved into a nearby building which had just been created at 1221 Burlingame Avenue. They added gifts, Rookwood pottery, Spode china and fine prints retaining Mr. Schath as their frame maker. They lived in an apartment above their shop until 1925, when they discovered a "country cabin" in the hills of San Carlos which they purchased for their home.

In 1925 they also acquired a vacant lot at 311-315 Primrose Road at that time. The side street on which the post office was located. Ralph Crawford drew up the design for a new building. English style, which he and Dorothy planned to build eventually for their Studio Shop.

Ralph K. Crawford died of leukemia in 1929. A few months later came the stock market crash and then the depression of the thirties. In spite of all this, Mrs. Crawford went ahead with the building which she and her husband had planned together. It was constructed by Williams and Burroughs, then just getting started in their contracting business, and dedicated as the Ralph K. Crawford building in 1931.

A succession of Frink relatives came during the thirties to share Mrs. Crawford's home in San Carlos and to help with the work in The Studio Shop—a nephew James Frink Basker from Idaho, her brother, Sid Frink from Kansas, and the now Carolyn Converse. It was her niece Carolyn who eventually took over the management of the business, after she had married Mr. Misselwitz in 1941 and the two had moved up from Los Angeles. After that, Dorothy Crawford again devoted herself entirely to the photographic studio. The onset of Parkinson's disease came slowly, but forced her to retire in 1944. Her twin sister, May Frink Converse, also a widow, moved out from Wellsville, Kansas to live with her and the Messelwitzes. The two twins were constant companions until Maude died in 1951.

There was never anyone to take Mrs. Crawford's place in her photographic end of the business, although her studio was rented to the Kellerers for while. Mrs. Misselwitz continued with the gift and framing part until she retired in 1955, after selling the Studio Shop to John and Martha Benson. In 1972 the Studio Shop was moved from the Ralph K. Crawford building to a new location at 1180 Carolan Avenue and Broadway, Burlingame. It is still in existence, operated now by Mr. Benson exclusively as a framing shop. Although it has now come full circle as far as merchandise is concerned, it is probably one of the oldest, continually-operated businesses in Burlingame.

Dorothy M. Crawford never referred to herself as an "artist," as many photographers do. In my estimation she could have. Her sense of composition, her use of light, and the infinite care she gave to the quality of the prints would put many of her pictures in the "art" category. But the portraits which she made are treasured chiefly for the natural likeness to the character of the sitter. Many an old timer will say, "She made the best pictures of me that I'd ever had taken."