

## **Benjamin A. Gifford**

Gifford was born to a farming family on August 11, 1859, in Danville, Vermilion County, Illinois. He decided early that he did not want to be a farmer and left the family farm to become an apprentice photographer in Sedalia, Missouri.

After finishing his apprenticeship, he formed a partnership in Fort Scott, Kansas. In 1884, Gifford married Myrtle Peck and before long decided he could earn a lot more money on his own. So he and his wife headed for the Northwest in 1888 and opened a studio in the heart of Portland, Oregon. There he was to become one of the foremost western pioneer photographers. Though his studio was in town, he preferred to pack up a mule and head for the banks of the Columbia River.

Often, Gifford would take an entire day, and sometimes two, to set up a single shot. When asked why anyone would devote so much time to one photograph, his response was, "Timing is everything." At his death it was said that his photographs had done more to bring farmers and settlers to Oregon than all the books in print.

In 1892, he moved his studio to The Dalles, Oregon, so that he could photograph Indians of the Wasco and Umatilla tribes. In order to overcome the Native Americans' superstition that a photograph trapped their soul, he provided liberal doses of fees and photographed thousands of warriors and women in his lifetime.

One of his most popular portraits was a beautiful Indian mother and her child, **The Indian Madonna**. When one Indian lady took a five dollar gold piece to pose for him and then hid behind a blanket, he took a photo of her mangy old dog and it became a best seller.

Of the thousands of photographs that he took during his 36-year career, his favorite was **Sunset on the Columbia**. The photo looked more like a painting and its subject was the Columbia River, two tepees, a mangy old dog and the setting sun. An Indian called it Wa-ne-ka, which means "going down of the evening sun."

After Myrtle died in 1919, Gifford married Rachel Morgan, who had worked in his photography studio for years. In 1920, he and Rachel turned the business over to his son, Ralph, and they retired to the banks of a creek near Vancouver, Washington where they built a rustic log cabin called "Wa-ne-ka."

Gifford died on March 5, 1936, in Vancouver, Clark County, Washington. His tombstone in Lincoln Memorial Park Cemetery in Portland, Oregon, bears only his famous signature, which is recognized all over the world, as it appears on all his photos.



**Source: Old West Magazine, Spring 1996, *Benjamin Gifford – Timing is Everything*, by Jan Holden**