

Appendix B. “Low Prices,” an article by Harvey T. Wing in *The Boston Photographic Review*, January 6, 1890, Vol. 1, no. 11, published by S. Wing & Company, Charlestown, Massachusetts. Transcription by Randel Mott-Cobb.

In November 1889, the S. Wing & Company assumed full responsibility for the twice-monthly trade journal, *The Boston Photographic Review* (August 6, 1889 – July 20, 1890). It launched to promising notices despite a rogue editor who soon left the project, and despite the general photographic industry trend of falling tintype prices. Interestingly, Simon’s involvement in his photographic company was waning (preoccupied as he was about the economic struggle of the disadvantaged masses), and Harvey T. Wing was left mostly on his own to edit and produce the newly minted journal. Thus, the Wings found themselves with an opportunity to expose the evils of capitalism as the reason for photographers’ losses.

The writings, obtained from outside sources as well as being in-house, ranged from factual and instructive to ironic and dryly entertaining. It may have been work Harvey relished, judging from the quality of his writing and the product itself, and it is obvious that Simon supplied the impetus if not the actual material for some of the articles that centered on the livelihood of photographers and the country’s socioeconomic condition. It is not surprising to see the following piece bemoaning dwindling returns from making photographs, blaming class-based discrepancies between the wealthy few and the penny-poor masses. Harvey stops short of overtly offering socialist observations, saying that *The Boston Photographic Journal* was not the appropriate platform for political economy, but his intentions are barely disguised.

While “Low Prices” offers an explanation for the problematic economics of photography, it should also be seen as a way for its readers to understand the logic behind Simon Wing’s move from business into politics.

LOW PRICES

An article in a contemporary brings the above subject in-view, the same old ghost that each knows the cause of so much better than all the rest. The writer virtually says every reason is wrong but his. That is good. We are glad someone knows. We are going to give our ideas about it.

If the demand for photographs is sufficient to keep everyone busy, we can get to-days prices. If the demand is more than can be easily satisfied, then we can get higher prices. There is no use in trying to get higher prices when the demand is not enough to enable us to refuse work – except at our price. If the demand is so small that it takes only half our time to fill it, then we are obliged to take whatever price we can earn a living at, and we are quite sure to keep down the cost in order to get as much profit as possible; hence poorer qualities of work.

This is not the only reason for poor work of course, for ignorance and carelessness have much to do with it. Good work does not always bring good prices and it is no use to say educate the people up to demanding best work at higher prices, if they haven’t money. We believe that is the greatest cause for low prices. If you want customers you have to supply photographs at such prices as the people can

afford to pay. Photographs are luxuries and cannot be made necessities at any price. When the masses have no money for luxuries and barely enough for necessities, you cannot sell photographs at one cent per dozen. That illustrates we think the principal reason for low prices.

There are many galleries where high prices are still obtained, but those who pay them belong to a class who have money. This class pay high for everything; they buy the best that can be made, whether in photographs, clothing, houses, yachts, horses and all the world brings forth, but they are too few compared to the whole population who are not so favored, and who under the existing conditions cannot get the money to be liberal in paying for photographs or in consuming them.

A friend of ours who was a photographer in Boston some years ago, went to California and started business there, then went to far off Australia, and there got up such a rush for ferrotypes that he made a fortune in a year or two. He found there a people who had money to lay out in luxuries of that kind. From there he went to India and expected to do the same thing again but found a different state of affairs: the masses had no money, not even enough to buy tintypes with. There was a class of very rich people who were above tintypes altogether and there was no chance for his business. He came back to Boston, fitted up again, went to Mexico where he thought to make another fortune, but he found there about the same conditions as in India – a class of very poor, and very rich; no middle class. It is becoming so in the United States. Although there is plenty, it is so manipulated by those who have gained control, that the people at large do not get a fair days pay for a fair days work, and the demand for luxuries is decreasing because they cannot be had without money.

There is no over-production or over-stocking of the trade, as long as anyone goes without what he wants and would have if he had money. People want photographs, but for a man who is only getting but \$10.00 per week (which is perhaps an average weeks pay) if he has a family to support, even \$2.00 or \$3.00 for photographs, is impossible. Then the photographer who gets small margins and not many of them, cannot pay high for assistants or for any of the world's goods. Nearly all lines are dull, if it were not so we would be justified in looking to our trade alone for causes of low prices.

If we can find the reason why the multitude haven't money, and can remedy the evil, then we may expect a return of the days when there was a big demand at good prices, although the photographs were not so good as are common now. The cause is not within the ranks of photographers, and we are wasting time looking there for it. When the bulk of the money is held by the few, then there is a rush and a struggle to get what is left and the strong overpower the weak, who are forced outside and are obliged to take what is hardly worth fighting for. But if there is plenty of money within reach, no competition is necessary, for all will get his fill and have some left to buy photographs with, and if he has a good surplus he will pick and choose for the better grades. Then lookout you careless workmen that someone don't make better photographs than you do.

This is not exactly a journal devoted to political economy, so we will not advance any opinion as to the cause of a scarcity of money, but we have a few ideas on the subject just the same and believe we shall all have to look in that direction, rather than among the photographic profession for the cause of low prices.