



A panoramic photo of airmen posing with Boeing B-10 bombers at Mitchel Field

# Taking a panoramic view

**An antiques collector turns his fondness for 360-degree photos of the 20th century into a picture book**

**BY DANA KLOSNER-WEHNER**  
SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY

Robert MacKay, an avid antiques collector, remembers sitting in his dorm room while a grad student at Harvard in the 1970s bemoaning his empty walls. It wasn't long before he found his first antique panoramic photo in a junk shop down the street.

"Within three days, a friend said his aunt had one in an antique shop down on the Cape, and she would give it to me; she couldn't sell it," MacKay said.

"Well, for a collector, once you have two, that's trouble."

For the past 35 years, MacKay has been collecting panoramic photos taken with the unusual Cirkut camera, patented in 1904, which takes 360-degree images. He has attended ephemera fairs — events that sell works on paper and catalog — antiques fairs and has searched on the Web for these creations. He now owns 100 of them, some that line the walls of his Cold Spring Harbor home; others are packed away in closets.

As the director of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, MacKay has a natural love of history.

It's that love that led him to compile a pictorial history of America in the 1910s and 1920s called "America by the Yard: Cirkut Camera; Images From

the Early Twentieth Century" (W.W. Norton & Co., \$100, 2006).

## Images of times gone by

The coffee-table book includes nearly 100 stunning panoramic images. The photos include a 1908 Wellesley College graduation with hundreds of women in perfect rows; the 12th annual international twins convention in 1946 and a baptism with hundreds of onlookers in 1925. There is also a photo of Mitchel Field with airmen on a wet runway posed in front of B-10 bombers.

These are not typical photos. The Cirkut camera, which has not been manufactured since 1941, sits on a spring-motorized tripod and rotates 360 degrees, making it possible to take large group and scenic

photos with almost perfect resolution. Subjects are set in a semi-circle around the camera, but when the photo is printed it looks as if they were standing in a straight line. It can take so long for the camera to make a complete rotation that someone standing on one end of the line has enough time to run behind the group and place himself at the other end, to be in the photo twice.

"I realized this was a remarkable portrait of America in the early 20th century," MacKay said. "They are amazing portraits of America's pastimes, institutions and industries. I can't think of a set of images that can better tell the story of this nation at that time period. There are town views, pageants, city and town skylines, glaciers, rivers and natural disasters."



Boy Scouts at Camp Powwow in Amesbury, Mass., July 28, 1926

REPRODUCED FROM "AMERICA BY THE YARD: CIRKUT CAMERA; IMAGES FROM THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY"

# of history

The photos are not all from MacKay's personal collection. "I wanted every region to be represented," he said.

### Researching the photos

He looked at thousands of photos from collections at state historical societies, the George Eastman house in Rochester, some private collections, the Internet and the International Association of Panoramic Photographers, known as IAPP.

In its heyday, the early 1900s, the Cirkut was used by commercial photographers to take photos of large

groups of people and then sell the prints to them, MacKay said.

"I looked for photos that told a story. There is a photo of a company outing in Ohio. They went to an amusement park. What the photographer did was compose the picture to include the buses, the roller coaster in the background and even the motorcycle escorts that brought them there. In doing so, he told a story of an entire day."

"In another one, a naval ship is returning from overseas. The crew is lined up on the ship and the USS Constitution can be seen in the background, tying the present to the past."

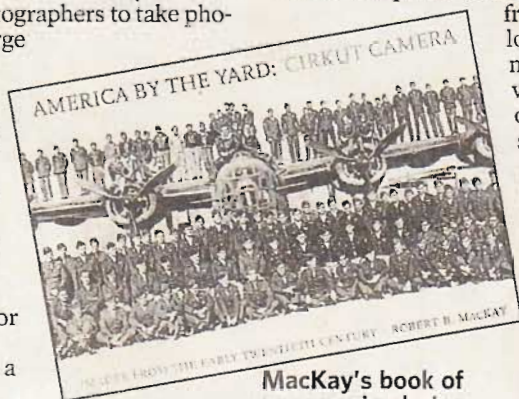
Many photos were 8 inches high and 6 feet long and were known as "yard longs," said Bob Lang of Port Jefferson, a member of the IAPP who uses a Cirkut camera that was manufactured around 1918.

"The Cirkut camera took the nation by storm in the 1910s and 1920s. The prints were made

from very long negatives, very few of which survived." Many of the photos in the book fold out to give the feel of how large the

photo would actually be.

Another IAPP member, Ray Jacobs, a former photography studio owner from Roslyn, studied under Frederick W. Brehm at Rochester Institute of Technology in the 1930s. Brehm patented improvements that



MacKay's book of panoramic photos



The 12th annual International Twins Convention in Grand Rapids, Mich., in 1946

REPRODUCED FROM 'AMERICA BY THE YARD: CIRKUT CAMERA, IMAGES





NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SPENCER

**From left, Ray Jacobs of Roslyn, author Robert MacKay of Cold Spring Harbor and Rob Lang of Port Jefferson. The Cirkut panoramic cameras belong to Jacobs and Lang.**

made the Cirkut camera easier to adjust and run. "It's amazing who owns these cameras," said Jacobs, 88, who also still uses his Cirkut camera. "Doctors, lawyers and engineers. It's a very difficult camera to use."

Lang learned of the camera when solving an issue at work.

"I discovered [the Cirkut] when we were discussing a camera that could take a 360-degree picture. We had come up with a number of ways it could be done, then discovered it was already out there. We went searching for it and found one at a camera flea market. We

bought it, refurbished it and got it working."

Lang agreed with Jacobs that it can be a difficult camera to use.

"It takes a lot of time to set up the tripod, the film is in a separate box that is loaded onto the back and it [the camera] can weigh about 50 pounds," Lang said.

But it is well worth the inconvenience, Lang and Jacobs agree.

"I love taking big group photos or big scenic things like out West in the mountains or intersections and

streets. I love the wide angle; you can see everything you can see from the spot you are standing in all directions. My favorite shot [of my own] is Norris Geyser Basin in Yellowstone National Park."

And, of course, anyone using one of these cameras today can feel the connection to the past.

"I love the fact that you can take a camera that was built almost 100 years ago," Lang said. "that was used commercially by some guy 100 years ago and you could be standing doing exactly what he had done."