



Moonshiners' Night: This photo by Otto Kratzer shows a group of men tasting some home-brew behind a Volland shed. Kratzer's use of flash powder created a certain starkness in this photo, typical of its use. This photo dates from the 1910s. (Courtesy Karen Durso)

The Photography of Otto Kratzer

by Greg Hoots

Otto Kratzer was born in 1886 to German immigrant parents, John Adam and Louisa Christine Kratzer, on the family farm in Wabaunsee County, Kansas. Otto was the youngest of fourteen children, and when he was seven years old, his father died, leaving five children living at home with their mother. Otto attended the rural Alma schools while working on the family farm and spending time in the Alma grocery store operated by his older brothers.

In 1904, just a month before Otto's 18th birthday, his oldest brother, John William "Bill" Kratzer purchased a small house in Volland, Kansas, a tiny burg located on the Rock Island Railroad, nine miles southwest of Alma. Bill's sister, Mary, and his youngest brother, Otto, moved to Volland with him. Bill and Otto rented a one-room country store, located next door to their home, and Kratzer Brothers' General Merchants was born. A year later, early in 1905, Bill Kratzer purchased nearly seventeen acres across the road from the store, along the west side of Volland Road.

Kratzer Bros. mercantile became the center of social interaction in a very rural Washington Township. Bill Kratzer became the postmaster of Volland, and the store was well-patronized by the 350 residents of the township who made their livings by ranching, farming, and by working for the Rock Island Railroad.

About the time that the Kratzers moved to Volland, Otto Kratzer discovered photography. His first camera used 4x5-inch glass plate negatives that had to be loaded into the camera, individually, by the

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photographer. Otto exhibited a talent for photo composition as well as proficiency with the camera. And, although Kratzer took many photos of family and friends, even in the early years of his glass plate photography (1905-1908), he enthusiastically began using his camera to document the history of life at Volland.

Kratzer's photography captured his friends and neighbors in their daily work, be it a farmer planting a field or a telegraph operator sending messages from the Volland Western Union office. The Volland store was teeming with life, and three nights a week the store stayed open until 10:00 pm to accommodate farmers who were working in the fields. Many photographs featured the Kratzer store as a backdrop for group photos, carefully orchestrated by Otto. Kratzer's photos also chronicled the lives of the Rock Island Railroad workers, many of whom lived in tiny houses along the tracks.

In 1908 Otto purchased a new camera, a Kodak Folding Pocket Camera, commonly referred to as a postcard camera for its 122 millimeter roll film, which produced a negative the size of a postcard. Kodak's camera helped popularize the "penny postcards," which were frequently offered for sale in mercantile stores, like the Kratzers'. With his new camera, Otto began taking photographs in earnest; he was rarely known to be without a camera. While Otto produced a large number of postcards to be sold at the store, he used his postcard camera for virtually everything he photographed. And there was little that happened at Volland that he did not photograph.

By the early 1910s the Kratzer store had become quite successful. Their business formula combined the ability to offer everything that a family or farmer might need, along with the great sense of community that the store offered Washington Township residents. In 1912 the brothers decided it was time to build a new, modern store. Bill Kratzer had purchased the property along the west side of the road seven years earlier, it was there that they decided to build the new store.

Work began on the basement in the spring of 1912 with a flamboyance that was a trademark of Otto Kratzer. A hole was drilled into the ground and a dynamite charge exploded, creating a crater that was then enlarged into a basement-sized excavation, dug by men driving teams of mules pulling slips. Water was hauled to the site for mortar-mixing, and a crew of masons laid a native limestone foundation, which was completed in September. Masons immediately began laying brick that had been

brought to Volland by rail. Wagonload after wagonload of brick was hauled from the depot to the site of the new store.

All of the bricks had been laid and the roof and windows installed for the new store before the first snowfall arrived in Volland, allowing the men to continue to work throughout the winter inside the building. By spring the plastering of the interior walls was underway, to be followed by the finish carpentry. In the late summer Otto Kratzer and his niece, store clerk Louise Dittman, traveled to Kansas City on a buying trip to purchase stock for the new store. The stock for the new store arrived by train and was picked up at the depot by wagons and taken to the store for stocking on the shelves.

Opening day for the new store was October 18, 1913. The *Alma Enterprise* dated October 24th, reported on the grand opening, "*There were right close to 500 people gathered at the little hamlet of Volland Saturday afternoon to attend the grand opening of the Kratzer Bros. new store.*" The story continues, "*Volland comes nearly being a one-man town and Kratzers are the whole show. This fine new two-story brick store, built at a cost of \$7,000 to \$8,000, looks somewhat out of place in its surroundings, but it is just what Kratzers wanted and needed, and they built it.*" The news story concludes, "*It was a great day for Volland, the like of which they will never see again.*"

Otto Kratzer's camera was busy, as well, while the store was under construction. He took scores of photos from the moment the first dynamite blast exploded until the crowd gathered at the store for opening day. In fact, with the affluence that came with the store's success, Kratzer began taking more and more photographs. It became part of his charismatic persona; he was never without his camera.

In 1913, Otto Kratzer purchased an Indian motorcycle, and the motorcycle began to appear as a prop in many of his photographs. In 1914, with his friend, Rock Island depot agent, Gene Hawes, who also owned an Indian, Kratzer decided to take a motorcycle trip to California. Their ultimate destination was the 1915 World's Fair, being held in San Francisco; however, their trip would take them through the heart of the American West, along the Santa Fe Trail.

Just prior to the trip, Kratzer purchased a new 1914 Model 3A Kodak Folding Pocket Camera, featuring the company's patented autographic window on the camera's back, which allowed the photographer to use a stylus to write a short message on the stub of the negative. Many of the images from Kratzer's California trip have a date and location written

on the end of the negative.

Again, Otto Kratzer's flamboyance was not lost on the *Alma Enterprise*, which reported in its October 23, 1914 edition, "*Otto Kratzer, one of the Volland merchants, and Gene Hawes, former agent at Volland, left on their motorcycles for California Saturday. They expect to tour several states and spend several weeks camping out, hunting and fishing...before they continue their trip to California where they will stay to take in the Fair at San Francisco and San Diego next year. We wish the boys good luck and hope that they reach their destination without mishap. Both are dandy good boys, and we want them to come back.*"

The men traveled southwest across Morris and Chase Counties and then on to Wichita, staying there for a day before departing for Hutchinson, Dodge City, and Garden City, arriving at the Colorado border eleven days after leaving Volland. The road conditions were tougher than the pair anticipated, and their ability to purchase fuel often dictated their schedule. Kratzer and Hawes cycled through Trinidad, Colorado before crossing the Raton Pass in northeast New Mexico. The pace that the men kept could be considered, at times, leisurely, as they would often stop for days to trout fish in mountain streams or to enjoy pleasant accommodations.

The end of November found the Kansas travelers in the Sangre de Christo Mountain Range, at Fulton, New Mexico, and unable to find fuel. Finally, the men decided to place their motorcycles on a freight train, sending them back to Volland, and the pair boarded a passenger train bound for Los Angeles. The duo spent the next five months in California, traveling the length of the state, seeking adventure. On February 20, 1915 the World's Fair opened in San Francisco, and Kratzer and Hawes were present for the festivities. After spending three days in San Francisco, the men left for Westwood, California, a company town owned by the Red River Lumber Company, located in the southern Cascade Mountain Range. For three months Kratzer worked as a photographer for Red River Lumber, enjoying his unlimited access to the thousands of acres of land at Westwood. In early May, the men decided that their California adventures were complete, and they returned by train to Volland. Kratzer brought with him scores of stories and hundreds of photographs.

Upon his return to Volland, Otto Kratzer resumed his role as shopkeeper at the store. On October 27, 1918, Otto married Mabel

Meseke, the daughter of Herman and Etta Meseke of rural Washington Township. In 1919 the two established residence in a new home constructed just south of the store. Otto and Mabel had two sons, Vernon, born in 1919, and Waldo, born in 1924. In 1929, the Kratzers' house burned to the ground at mid-day from a fire originating in the attic. The Kratzer family moved into the upstairs of the store with Otto's brother, Bill. In 1930, Bill Kratzer passed away, suffering a heart attack while working in the basement of the store.

Throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s, Otto and Mabel continued to operate the store successfully, despite the economic upheaval felt by most of the residents of Washington Township. It was not uncommon for area farmers to trade commodities at the Volland store. The Kratzers would take eggs, for example, in trade, and then ship the eggs in bulk to buyers in Topeka and Kansas City. Numerous customers of the Kratzers, who were also their close friends, lost their farms during the Great Depression. The demographics of the Kratzers' customer base in Washington Township began to change.

In the fall of 1941, Otto's oldest son, Vernon, decided that he, like his father, would travel to California by motorcycle. Vernon departed Volland on September 16, 1941, finding work in California in an aircraft manufacturing plant. In 1944, Vernon married Leone Noonan in California, and five months later he joined the Army. After the war, Vernon and Leone returned to Kansas, settling in Topeka. In September, 1954 Leone gave birth to their only child, Karen, who was also Otto and Mabel's only grandchild.

The end of the war signaled changes at Volland. The Rock Island Railroad closed the freight and passenger depot, relegating the railroad stop to one solely for the shipment of cattle. Cattle trains continued to stop at Volland until around 1960 when the Rock Island ceased the transportation of livestock.

With the closing of the railroad depot, Otto had to rely on freight trucks to bring some items to the store, but for the most part, he drove to Topeka weekly to purchase store goods from Fleming Foods' Cash and Carry. As the population of Washington Township continued to shrink, so did business at the Kratzer store. However, Otto and Mabel soldiered on.

The early 1950s brought a new delight to Otto. He purchased an eight-millimeter movie camera and began filming with the same enthusiasm that he exhibited with still photography. Often, Otto would

be armed with two cameras, his Kodak postcard camera and his movie camera. And, as with his still photography, Otto devoted thousands of feet of movie film to recording history and daily life at Volland. When the U.S. Postal Service notified Postmaster Otto Kratzer that the Volland Post Office would close on October 31, 1955, Otto created a detailed documentary film showing the movement of mail and freight in and out of Volland.

It was in 1970 that the greatest tragedy of Otto's life occurred. His beloved Mabel was stricken ill, and she passed away that spring at the age of 74. Otto and Waldo remained at Volland, yet it was never the same. Kratzer's granddaughter, Karen Durso remembers that time, "*He loved my grandma so much. He only lived for a year and one week after she died. I can remember how sad he was that whole year.*" On April 21, 1971, just one day short of his 85th birthday, Otto Kratzer passed away. The town of Volland followed suit. The Kratzers' son, Waldo, moved to a nursing home in Alma. An auction was held at the Volland store; a second one was planned but was never held. Vernon Kratzer locked the door of his childhood home, the Kratzers' store; and Volland, the town that had lived and died with Otto Kratzer, officially became a ghost town.

Otto Kratzer left behind over 2,500 negatives and photographs of life at Volland, along with over 3,500 feet of movie film. Those negatives and films are currently archived at the Wabaunsee County Historical Society.



California trip 01: Gene Hawes, left and Otto Kratzer prepare to leave Volland, Kansas for California on October 17, 1914. The men were each driving twin-cylinder Indian motorcycles. (Courtesy Wabaunsee County Historical Society)

Photograph West of Dodge City, Kansas, 10/26/14.



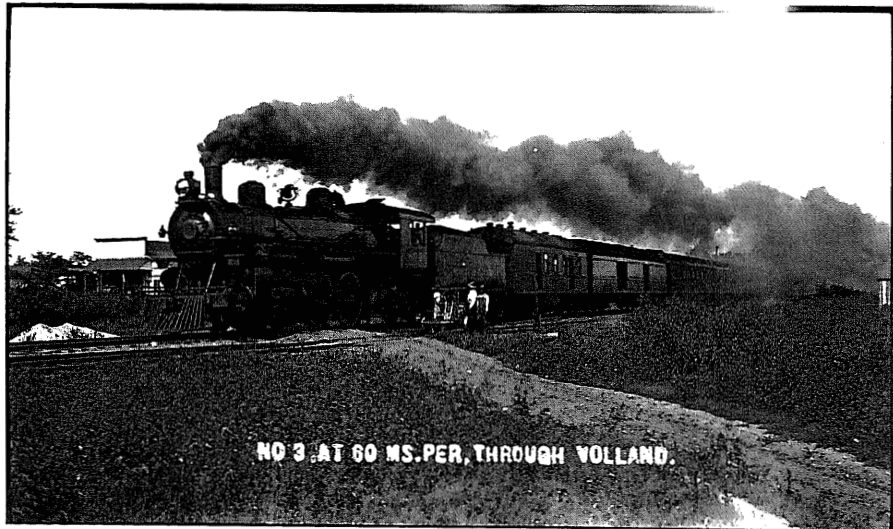
California trip 02: Dated 10/26/14, this Otto Kratzer photo is titled, "west of Dodge City, Kansas". The roads continued to deteriorate as the men traveled west. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



California trip 04: Opening day of the 1915 World's Fair was captured by Otto Kratzer's camera in this view, dated February 20, 1915. This broad avenue at the fair was known as "The Zone." At the far left is the American Souvenir Watch Co., and beyond that, the tall building with pillars was the Panama Canal building, which contained a scale version of the newly-opened canal. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



New store 01: Four teams of mules pulling slips excavate the basement for the new Kratzer Bros.' store at Volland in this Otto Kratzer view from the summer of 1912. (Courtesy Wabauunsee County Historical Society)



Golden State Limited: The Golden State Limited westbound No. 3 is seen roaring through Volland in this photo by Otto Kratzer, circa 1910. The Golden State was the Rock Island's express passenger train, providing service between Chicago and Los Angeles. Notice the Volland section crew seen on the sidetrack in the foreground, and the old Kratzer store behind the train. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



New store 04: Clara Fix, Louise Dittman, and Bill Kratzer prepare for the grand opening of the new store in this view dated October 18, 1913. (Photo courtesy Karen Durso)



Old store 01: Bill Kratzer and four of his brothers stand in front of the first Kratzer Bros. store at Volland in this photo circa 1910. (Photo courtesy Karen Durso)



Old store 02: A large group of Washington Township residents gather at the Kratzer store at Volland in this early Otto Kratzer photo made from a 4x5-inch glass negative, circa 1905. (Photo courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland depot Western Union: The telegraph operator at the Western Union office, located inside the Volland Rock Island depot, is seen typing a received telegram. This Otto Kratzer photo dates circa 1905, and was produced from a glass plate negative. Notice the insulators on the feet of the operator's chair and the pistol hanging from the board on the back wall. (Photo courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland motorcycle date: Otto Kratzer and an unidentified lady pose on his Indian motorcycle for an early "selfie" in which Kratzer used a timer to open the camera's shutter. This photo was produced from a 122 millimeter film negative and dates from around 1915. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland depot: The Volland depot agent waits on an arriving train, holding a canvas mailbag containing outbound mail. This view of the Rock Island depot dates from around 1905 and was produced from a glass plate negative. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



Three horse planter: A Volland, Kansas farmer utilized a three-mule team to pull his planter at Volland in this Otto Kratzer photo from the 1910s. Notice the tall "Volland hill" in the center of the background. (Photo courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland Picnic: Mabel Kratzer, at left, holds her youngest son, Waldo, at a picnic gathering in the shade near Volland, Kansas. Her older son, Vernon, is seated on the nearest end of the opposite car's running board. This photo, from a film negative, dates from about 1925. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland rabbit hunters: John Cromer, left, Volland, Kansas, and an unidentified young man pose with their rabbits from a hunt in rural Volland. The men are seen in a 1913 Overland truck. (Photo courtesy Wabaunsee County Historical Society)



Volland School: The last day of school was an event that brought out the parents for a festive afternoon of baseball and socializing. Otto Kratzer photographed the Volland School District No. 26 in this view, circa 1930. (Courtesy Wabauensee County Historical Society)



Volland Stockyards: Two cowboys pause from their work at the Volland stockyards for a brief refreshment. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland railroad men: A group of Rock Island section hands and workers pose in front of one of the railroad buildings located along the track at Volland. This photo was created from a 4x5-inch glass negative and dates from around 1905. (Courtesy Karen Durso)



Volland water wagon: Bill Kratzer stands on the rear of this water wagon, driven by an unidentified man, as they pause in front of the Volland Blacksmith Shop. Water wagons were commonly used to haul water to steam tractors working in fields, but were also used to haul water to locations where cement mortar was being mixed. (Courtesy Karen Durso)