

Peter Britt, Frontier Photographer

By Peter Britt

Peter Britt is one of the Pacific Northwest's most celebrated photographers. This self-portrait, probably taken in the 1860s, shows the stately Britt standing next to one of his first cameras, most likely a daguerreotype or wet plate model. His right hand holds a lens cap, which functioned as a shutter.

Britt was born in Switzerland in 1819, immigrating to the United States with his father in 1845. Unable to make a living painting portraits, Britt decided to learn the new art of photography, a technology developed in the late 1830s. He opened his first photography studio in Highland, Illinois, in 1847.

Five years later, Britt decided to seek his fortune out west, joining three other Swiss immigrants on the Oregon Trail. Dissatisfied with Portland, Britt moved to southern Oregon shortly after his arrival in the state, settling in the newly established mining camp of Jacksonville, where he would remain until his death more than 50 years later.

Over his long career, Britt took thousands of photos of southern Oregon and its people, tracing the region's development from a rough mining frontier to a settled agricultural landscape. Although specializing in portraits, Britt also became an avid outdoor photographer, traveling around the region in a portable studio he dubbed "The Pain," a pun on Bain, the manufacturer of the wagon. In 1874, he took what would become his most famous photograph, the first ever taken of Crater Lake.

Britt was also an avid horticulturalist. He established the first orchard in the Rogue Valley in the 1850s and pioneered the use of smudgepots to protect the trees from late frosts. He also planted one of the first vineyards in the region.

Peter Britt died in 1905 and was buried in Jacksonville Cemetery.

Further Reading: Miller, Alan Clark. *Photographer of a Frontier: The Photographs of Peter Britt*. Eureka, Calif., 1976.

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