This image represents three generations of Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) women from the Chandler/ Hawley families of Hays, Montana, circa 1940. The seated woman is Cora Chandler. Her daughter Virginia Hawley (nee Chandler) stands behind her, and her little granddaughter Sylvia Hawley stands by her side.

Western Authentic: *The Portraiture of A.M. Allison*

BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES

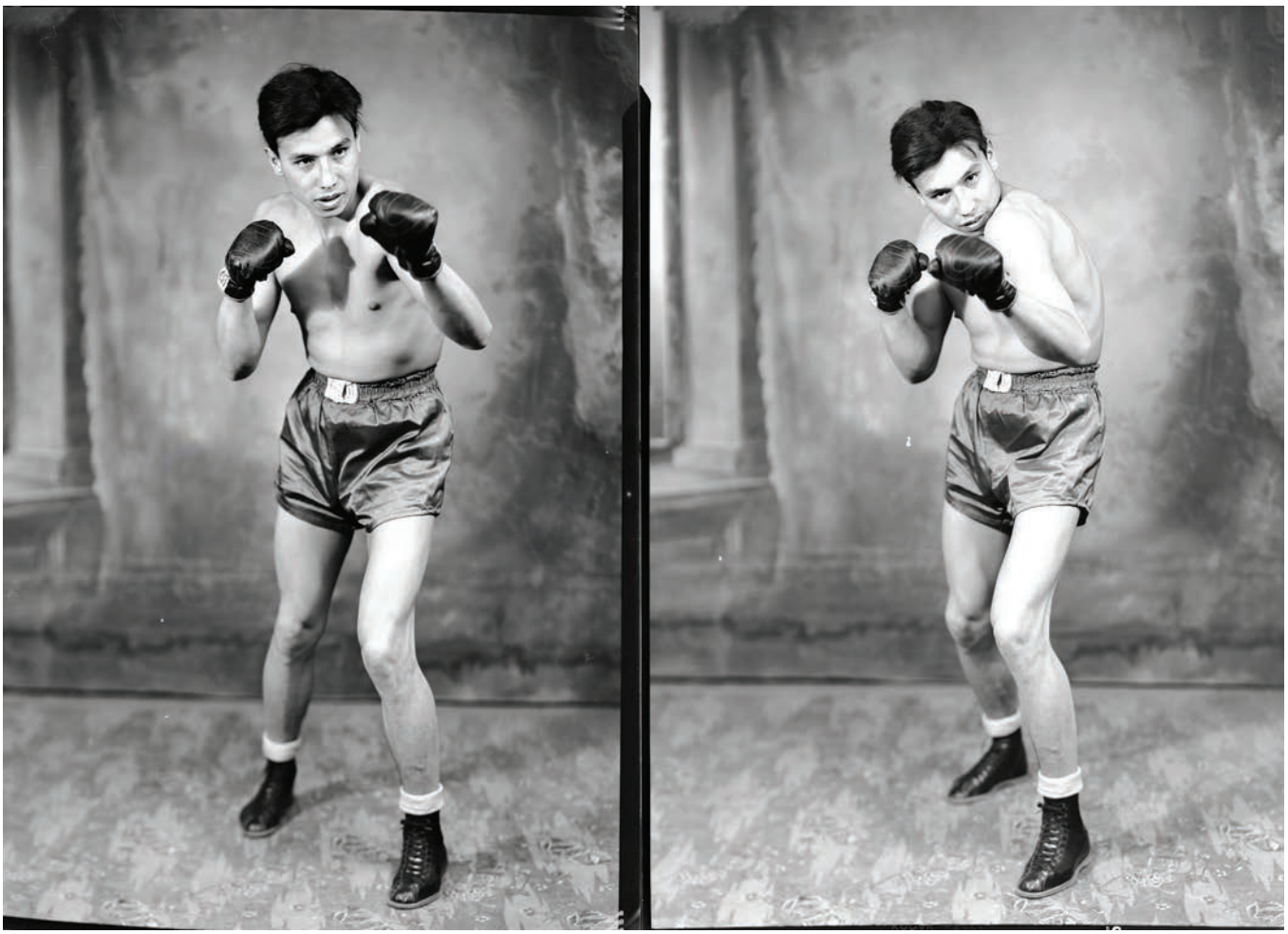
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY
OF BLAINE COUNTY MUSEUM

ONE OF THE FINEST PORTRAIT photographers in the American West, mostly forgotten now, worked for more than 40 years in the tiny, windblown town of Chinook, Montana. In 1908, Andrew (A.M.) Allison rolled up on the Hi-Line as a young Scottish immigrant. A couple of years later, having bought some equipment from frontier photographer Charles E. Morris, he opened his own shop.

Photography in those days still had some magic about it, some mystique. To capture a likeness on paper was a miraculous thing, and the photographer behind the camera was a bit of a wizard. Walking into his shop, you would have smelled the acrid stench of darkroom chemicals, noted the background drapes, the camera and enlarger and easels. The arcane tools of a mysterious trade.

Samantha French, Director of the Blaine County Museum in Chinook, said that Allison started out as a photographer "really when the community itself was just getting its start." He couldn't support his family on photography alone, though, so he eventually opened an art supply business and became a Philco radio dealer. It's a familiar story in the West, where so many have a second job, maybe a third.

A.M. Allison in his studio in 1908.



David Briere, a boxer and veteran of World War II, returned from his deployment overseas to live and work in Chinook.

In Montana, the Great Depression arrived 10 years early. After World War I, as the global farm market weakened, a drought dried up the state, copper plummeted, and cash was generally in short supply. For a little town up on the Hi-Line, even with Milk River sugar beets for seasonal work, times must have been hard. If you were trying to scratch out a living from family photos, a few shots for the county sheriff, it would have been a constant temptation to throw in the towel.

And yet Allison kept at it, photographing the region's cowboys and farmers, newlyweds and county fair winners, immigrant laborers and flyweight boxers. He had the technical chops but also had a knack for setting people at ease. He served a term as mayor of Chinook, another as alderman. He was a Mason and an Eagle and an Odd Fellow. He photographed friends, neighbors, colleagues, and because they knew him and trusted him, he was able to capture their authentic wry glances, their half-smiles, their fleeting concerns. No one else could have done it as well.

Allison died in 1967. His negatives, more than 3,000 of them, were rescued by his daughter and donated to the Montana Historical Society (MHS). The MHS then passed them along to the Blaine County Museum. There is now a space in that museum dedicated to a revolving display of his prints.

Chinook can be a place of extremes: baking in the summer, freezing in the winter. Passing through the doors of the museum can feel like a reprieve. And if you make it to the Allison exhibit, past a couple of Charlie Russell's illustrated letters and a Bear Paw Battlefield display, you have the sense of stumbling upon something extraordinary. Here's early Chinook, unvarnished. Here's Montana fresh out of the oven. Here's a genuine artist, and a few of the faces that focused his attention.

Doris Hartman was likely a student at Chinook High School sometime around 1946 to 1947 when she brought her 4-H baking to be photographed in Allison's studio. According to Hartman's daughter, Veda Funk, Hartman had cerebral palsy, and was uncomfortable speaking in front of others, which may have accounted for her discomfort before the camera. Hartman was quite capable, however, even with her disability, and "did everything she wanted," according to her daughter.

Billy Renda graduated from Chinook High School in the Class of 1941.

Dick Rusch was the first chief of the Chinook Volunteer Fire Department, starting in 1905. He retired in 1946. The little boy was most likely one of his 10 grandchildren.

Henry Tilleman, above left, photographed around 1925, was part of a small wave of Belgian immigrants who homesteaded in the Chinook area around 1910. Tilleman and his wife, Irma, had a large farm near Zurich, Montana. One of their children, Mike, was an outstanding athlete and went on to a successful career as an NFL defensive tackle.

Fransereo Galvan and Cesaro Carlos Murillo, above right, were likely Mexican migrant workers who would have labored in the sugar beet fields during World War II.

In roughly 1945, a young man named either Sergio or Serapio Padilla, right, came to Chinook as a laborer from Mexico.

Conrad Hatland, left, owned a Chevy dealership in Turner, Montana, in the far northeast corner of Blaine County.

During WWII, Japanese families were forcibly relocated to the Milk River Valley to work in the sugar beet fields. Kirashi Takata was likely part of this labor force.

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