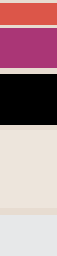




| *Vaniman Panorama*



A free exhibition until 31 January 2010

Exhibition opening hours: 9 am to 8 pm

Monday to Thursday 9 am to 5 pm Friday,  
10 am to 5 pm weekends

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**This exhibition draws on research by the Library's Curator  
of Photographs, Alan Davies, which was greatly assisted  
by the work of Alan Tierney.**

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## *Foreword*

The State Library of New South Wales is fortunate to hold the world's finest and most extensive collection of photographic panoramas by Melvin Vaniman, an American adventurer, singer, balloonist and photographer. These panoramas, taken between 1903 and 1904, survive as platinum prints, contact printed from the original negatives.

*Vaniman Panorama* showcases a selection of Vaniman's panoramas as enlargements — the way he had always intended that the viewing public appreciate his photographs. The wealth of detail captured in these images highlights his technical and compositional skill.

We hope you enjoy these enhanced prints of Melvin Vaniman's distinctive photographic panoramas.

**Regina A Sutton**

NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive



## Melvin Vaniman was a photographer with a head for heights.

His panoramic photographs were nearly always taken from high above the ground and if a nearby building or ship's mast was not at hand, he erected his own 30-metre pole to achieve a bird's-eye view. When his trusty pole didn't give him the height necessary to photograph the entire city of Sydney in a single sweep, he imported a balloon from America and spent months tethered 180 metres above North Sydney, experimenting with the new perspective. Vaniman even built his own camera, able to record panoramic views on film up to two metres in length and 50 cm wide in a single shot.

The viewing public in the early 1900s greatly enjoyed panoramic exhibitions, and Vaniman had always intended that his panoramas be seen as massive enlargements up to five metres long. Most of Vaniman's panoramas survive as platinum prints, contact printed from the original negatives. These prints were expensive to produce and required exposures of between two and four hours in sunlight, but their longevity and exquisite tonality have made Vaniman's persistence with the technique worthwhile.

Chester Melvin Vaniman was born to a farming family in Illinois in 1866, the eldest of four sons. His formative years on the farm gave him a lifelong interest in agriculture and experience with all sorts of machinery. He went on to study music at Valparaiso University in Indiana and later in Chicago. He became a music

teacher in Iowa, before joining a touring opera company in Louisiana in 1887 and singing his way through almost every state of America. It was during his 11-year singing career that Vaniman developed an interest in photography, recording the towns he visited. Around 1900, he married hometown sweetheart Ida Loud in Honolulu and spent two years as an electrician, before trying photography as a profession in Hawaii in 1901.

Vaniman's unusual panoramas caught the eye of the Oceanic Steamship Company, which commissioned him to photograph places visited by their vessels in New Zealand and Australia, as an incentive for tourists. Vaniman arrived in Auckland in 1902 and spent a year photographing both islands, not only for the company, but also for the New Zealand Government, who wanted his spectacular images to encourage tourism. The *New Zealand Free Lance* described his panorama of Auckland as 'a poem that will run into several editions, and take a good deal of wall space to give it effective exhibition' <sup>1</sup>.

Vaniman reached Sydney in February 1903. His itinerary is not fully known, but he clearly spent a year, on and off, photographing Sydney. He described it as his favourite place in Australia: '... my chief love in this country is Sydney. I am very fond of it; its residents and — of its climate' <sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Free Lance* 21 March 1903

<sup>2</sup> *New South Wales Railway Budget* 2 May 1904

Detail from

Manly Water Chute and Toboggan

November–December 1903



Journeys were made to Melbourne in November 1903 for the Melbourne Cup, the Blue Mountains later in the month and to the central west of New South Wales in December to photograph the record wheat harvest, which impressed the agriculturalist in Vaniman greatly. He travelled the New South Wales coast between Nowra and Newcastle, with excursions as far afield as Cairns and Rockhampton in Queensland; and Hobart, Launceston and Queenstown in Tasmania.

Without doubt, the most technically interesting of his Australian photographs was the panorama of Sydney taken from a balloon in March 1904. Photographs from balloons had been taken in the mid-nineteenth century, but they were mostly poor quality. Vaniman always believed his to be the first attempt to record a city landscape. Celebrated American aerial photography pioneer George Lawrence used a balloon in 1901 and certainly recorded San Francisco from an array of kites with a panoramic camera in 1906, but Vaniman's 1904 image of Sydney seems to predate Lawrence's best known

achievements. Determining soon after his arrival in Sydney that an elevated viewpoint was necessary to show the harbour city to best advantage, Vaniman ordered a balloon from America. It arrived at the end of June 1903 and tests began almost immediately, although the first successful ascent using town gas was not recorded until October of that year. Vaniman thought his cameras were not good enough for the task and built a new rotating camera, which he described as a special 'box of tricks' <sup>3</sup> to counter the swaying of the balloon and the difficulty of the distant subject. After expending nearly £200 and nine months experimenting with the balloon and camera, Vaniman took his celebrated image on or about 27 March 1904.

After leaving Sydney in May 1904, Vaniman took panoramas in South Australia and Western Australia, before leaving for Europe the following August. He had intended to continue his balloon photography of major cities and travelled through Austria, Germany and France, but apparently was less successful there because of poor atmospheric conditions.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Mail* 27 April 1904

<sup>4</sup> *New South Wales Railway Budget* 2 May 1904

Vaniman knew that Australia's clear light was a bonus to photographers and had even commented on it in an interview just before he left Sydney: 'You have a splendid light ... and beautiful clouds: no question about that. Especially up country the atmosphere is beautifully clear, and in Bathurst I got one of the most beautiful skies I have ever met' <sup>4</sup>.

Vaniman's lack of success in Europe curtailed his career as a photographer and sadly, his legacy of exceptional panoramas is limited to the period from 1900 to 1904. Never one to be idle, Vaniman soon turned his attention to the latest novelty of the age — aeroplanes — and became involved in their construction in France. In 1906 he tested a triplane of his own design and in December 1908 was credited with the first successful triplane flight, exhibiting the machine at the first Paris Airshow in 1909. It was in France that Vaniman made the acquaintance of Walter Wellman, an American journalist and newspaper proprietor, who wanted to be the first to reach the North Pole. After two unsuccessful attempts using dog sleds, Wellman decided to use a hydrogen filled dirigible for his next expedition. He employed Vaniman as mechanic. In 1907, after some delays, the airship *America* took its first flight, which ended after just two hours in the air. Nevertheless, *America* was rebuilt for a second journey in 1909, which also proved

futile, the airship being rescued from the sea by a passing steamship after travelling only 51 kilometres. In the meantime, Admiral Robert Peary reached the Pole on 6 April 1909.

Wellman turned his attention to a more impressive feat — the first aerial crossing of the Atlantic. The *America* was enlarged to 9760 cubic metres volume, giving a lifting capacity of 12 tonnes, with a new gondola and engines fitted. Vaniman and his wife Ida moved from Paris back to the United States to complete the modifications. The dangerously overloaded *America* was launched on 15 October 1910 for its historic journey, with a crew of six, including Wellman and Vaniman. It was anticipated the trip would take five days, but after just 38 hours, the motors failed and the airship drifted south. All excess baggage was thrown overboard, including the heavier of the two useless engines and some of the food. By good fortune, after 71 hours aloft, a passing Royal Mail steamship came to their rescue and its passengers were treated to the astonishing sight of the giant airship dropping a lifeboat with its occupants into the ocean ahead of them.

For Wellman, the trip was a disaster and he never took to the air again, but Vaniman vowed to continue. In 1911, at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in Akron, Ohio, Vaniman supervised the construction of another dirigible.

With a capacity of 11 300 cubic metres of hydrogen, the *Akron* was the first American airship to compare favourably with European dirigibles. It boasted two decks, with cabins above, and dining room, saloon, kitchen and promenade below. After a series of trials, the *Akron* set sail for Europe from Atlantic City, New Jersey on 2 July 1912. The balloon left its hangar and held its course, rising steadily. After just 15 minutes, at a height of 750 metres and two kilometres from its place of launch, the *Akron* exploded. Melvin Vaniman and his crew of four were killed.

So ended the extraordinary career of farmer, music teacher, opera singer, electrician, photographer, mechanic, pioneer aviator, aeronaut and adventurer Melvin Vaniman. His legacy was a range of innovations for dirigibles, including orientable propellers and steel fabric; and an extraordinary series of photographic panoramas, the like of which have never been equalled.

**Alan Davies**

Curator, Photographs, State Library of NSW

For a more detailed biography of Melvin Vaniman, see Alan Tierney's book: *Melvin Vaniman (1866–1912) A Biographical Note*, Goulburn 2000





Sydney

McLaren Street

Neutral Bay

Garden Island

North Sydney Post Office

Balls Head

Long [Iron] Cove

from a balloon

27 March 1904

Vaniman struggled to find a suitable elevated viewpoint to record the city and began experimenting in October 1903 with a balloon imported from America. He had to wait until a clear day without factory smoke or wind. The balloon was tethered 180 metres above Dr John Hay's house at 'the Crow's Nest' (North Sydney).



Bennelong Point  
tram sheds

Government House

Customs House

Government Printer  
power station

Dawes Point Battery

Bennelong Point

Circular Quay and  
Dawes Point

1904

This view from a ship's mast shows the newly finished chimney to the Government Printer power station in The Rocks. It still stands beside the Harbour Bridge, but never generated any power. Also just visible on the right is the Dawes Point Battery, built in 1791 to prevent invasion by the Spanish, but it never fired an angry shot. It was demolished in 1925 to make way for the Harbour Bridge.



Sydney Town Hall

George Street

St Andrews Cathedral

Sydney Town Hall

Druitt Street

Queen Victoria Building (QVB)

and Queen Victoria Building

1904

The Town Hall's Victorian architecture has not always been regarded highly. In 1929, Sydney Ure Smith proclaimed 'a city the size of Sydney should have razed the Town Hall to the ground years ago'. Attempts at modernisation resulted in the removal of the ugly 1892 *porte-cochère* (coach door) in 1934. This image shows the curvature imparted to George Street by Vaniman's rotating panoramic camera.





George Street

St Andrews Cathedral

Sydney Town Hall

Druitt Street

QVB

This photograph approximates Vaniman's rotating-camera view of the same subject, taken over 100 years earlier. Working from the roof terrace of the Citigroup Centre, we used a Noblex Pro 06/150 camera and 120 format Fujicolor Pro 160S Professional colour negative film. The Noblex camera features a drum-mounted lens that rotates through a complete revolution with each shot. As the constant-width shutter gap sweeps across the curved film plane, it captures a 146° super-wide view.

This scene was photographed for the State Library of New South Wales by Matt Wrixon of The Melba Studios, Sydney.

Sydney Town Hall

and Queen Victoria  
Building

21 May 2009



Blue Mountains  
scenery

Leura

November 1903

Bridal Veil View  
Lookout (above)

Bridal Veil Falls

This location has been identified as the cliff face just south of Leura Falls, looking westward across Leura Falls Creek from a point on the ridge leading from Cliff Drive to the Bridal Veil Lookout. Vaniman was entranced by the area, declaring, 'Photographically, I do not think there is anything more charming than the Leura Falls'.

## Item list



Bennelong Point, Circular Quay  
and Dawes Point [1904]

DLPg23



Darling Island and Harbour,  
looking towards the city [December 1903]

DLPg26



Blue Mountains scenery, Leura  
[November 1903]

DLPg27



Government Stud Farm,  
Coolangatta Estate, Berry [1904]

DLPg29



Katoomba from atop a pole  
[25 November 1903]

DLPg30



Manly Water Chute and Toboggan  
[November–December 1903]

DLPg31



Harvesting wheat, Narramine Station,  
Narromine [December 1903]

DLPg34



Cricket at the Sydney Cricket Ground  
[12 December 1903]

DLPg35



Newcastle from the Dyke [1904]

DLPg36



Palace Gardens and Farm Cove [1903]

DLPg40



Sydney from a balloon [27 March 1904]

DLPg43



Sydney Town Hall and Queen Victoria  
Building [1904]

DLPg44

All items are available as prints from the Library Shop, see back page for details.



# the library shop

TAKE HOME  
YOUR OWN  
VANIMAN  
PANORAMA



Fine art prints of 22 different Vaniman panoramas are available exclusively from The Library Shop. Priced from \$150 (unframed) or \$295 (framed). To see the full range visit the Shop or go to [slnsw.gov.au/shop](http://slnsw.gov.au/shop). Vaniman postcards also available.

## State Library of New South Wales

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## Events

### Under 35s special viewing

Date: Thursday 2 July

Time: 6.30 pm

Venue: Galleries, Mitchell Wing

Cost: \$15

Curator of Photography Alan Davies will talk about Melvin Vaniman and photography of the time.

Image: Melvin Vaniman climbing a pole to take a panoramic photograph of the Canterbury Frozen Meat Company's works at Belfast, Christchurch, c. May 1902. Photographer unidentified. Image thanks to Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand

