



ALBUMS AND JOURNEYS [4] XAVIER RIBAS

The previously unpublished photographs made by Mabel Loomis Todd at Oficina Alianza in 1907 are, perhaps, the only known images of that time and place not made by the nitrate producers themselves.

Mabel Loomis Todd travelled to Atacama as part of the *Lowell Expedition to the Andes*. She was well known as a writer of travel literature, but more so for being the first editor of Emily Dickinson's poems after her death in 1886. Mabel Loomis was Emily Dickinson's neighbour, friend, and long-time lover of her married brother, being herself married to David Todd. While staying at Alianza Mabel Loomis Todd wrote *The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá*, a long literary account of the expedition, including a detailed firsthand description of the entire production cycle of sodium nitrate as she witnessed it at Alianza, from the explosion of the desert crust to the shipping of the sacks of refined mineral. To illustrate her article and lectures she took about a hundred photographs.

In her text Mabel Loomis Todd makes constant allusions to the movements and sounds of manual labour, the bodies of men and animals, tools and machines, making of this article a unique contribution to the reading of the photographs sent to Lord Aldenham seven years earlier. Her photographs, taken from the hip and without a tripod, seem to address, in correspondence with the text, the movements and sounds of bodies at work. In one of the pictures, her shadow is partially visible at the bottom of the frame. Other photographs show the physical toil of men and animals, moving ore or refuse from one place to another. Unfortunately, her negatives are in a bad state of conservation, being faded, scratched or with chemical alterations, the majority slightly out of focus, or blurred.

The images clearly respond to imaginaries associated with the 'border of Empire', seeing natives and workers not as individuals but as part of the scene. But the subject of her photographs is not investment, or property, or the production cycle, as it is in the other known photographic albums of the nitrate desert. Neither is it the worker, or the machine, or the worker standing, as an extension of the machine. Loomis Todd's photographs constitute a visual diary of a frontier territory, capturing fleeting moments of hard labour around the nitrate fields of Alianza, making visible the movement of the bodies, of men and animals, at the very moment of exploitation. While not providing a vision 'against the grain', Mabel's photographs do give,

however, a 'deviant' view. These negatives are, perhaps, the only known photographic images of that time and place not made by the nitrate producers themselves. It is for this reason, and because they have never been published before, that her photographs are an important contribution to the visual history of the nitrate desert.

These 21 photographs from the Mabel Loomis Todd archive, hand held and photographed against a white A4 paper in the Yale University Library, are an interpretation of her visual diary, the part of it that looks more closely at what other photographers left unseen, and a presentation of the actual negatives and of the process of working through her archive at Yale University Library. The lines of text under some of the photographs are captions written by Mabel Loomis Todd for images she selected for her lectures.

IMAGE 1

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 2

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 3

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 4

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 5

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 6

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 7

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 8

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 9

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 10

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 11

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 12

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 13

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and

July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

IMAGE 14

A selection of negatives and lantern slides taken at Oficina Alianza during June and July 1907 by Mabel Loomis Todd. David Peck Todd Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven.

Cluster: Nitrate

Source URL: <https://www.worldofmatter.net/albums-and-journeys-4>