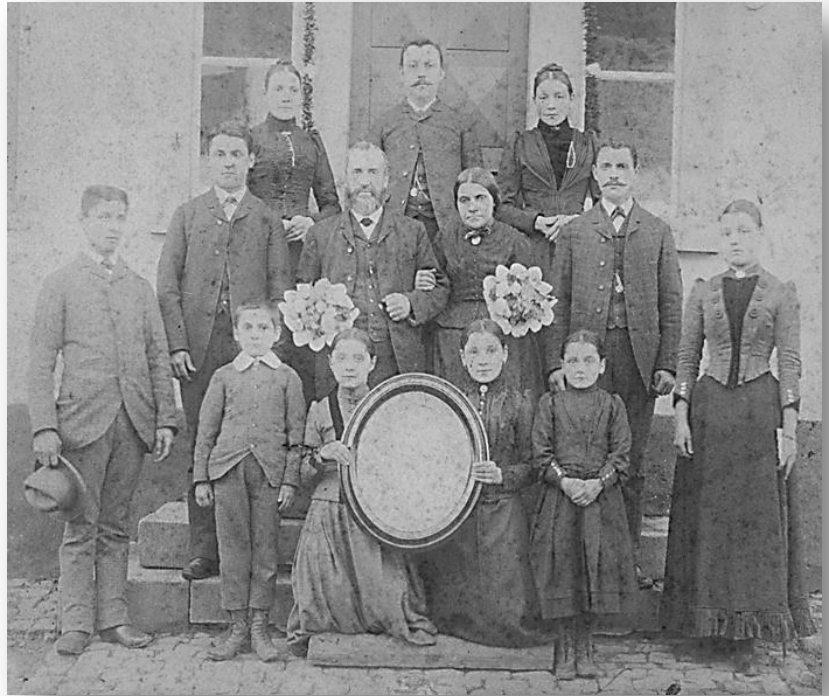


## ❧ *Why Weren't They Smiling?* ❧

When we look back at old family photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we can't help but notice the lack of smiles. In photos from this era, people rarely smiled for the camera. This is evident in the many family photos of the Claas family. They were just so darn serious.

Whether in group portraits like the one on the right of our extended European family, a celebration of Harry Claas' German cousins from the late 1800s ...

... or photos of Harry's own family, like the one below. Harry is the young boy seated between his parents in this family portrait from around 1895 ...



... people just didn't seem to smile much. Whether posing for a formal picture, playing, or simply sitting informally, their hands were on their laps or at their sides, and the expressions on their faces were serious, almost stern.

In those early days getting a photograph was a serious affair. People sat still, stiff in their Sunday best, their hands positioned carefully, their eyes looking straight ahead. To smile would be to break the solemnity of the occasion. A photograph was really a record for us, the generations who followed. It was a testament to seriousness, not to happiness. People looked into the lens knowing that this moment was about them and not their emotions. And that's how they would be remembered.



Here's the wedding portrait of Harry's older brother, William (Willie) Claas, and his first wife, Elizabeth, from 1893 ...

... and here he is again, this time with his second wife, Katherine, in 1901. (For the record, Willie's first wife died in 1900.)

In both images, the bride stood next to her seated husband. She gently placed her hand on her husband as they looked into the camera with somber expressions, as if they were burdened by something in an uncertain future.



Here is the wedding portrait of Harry and Tonie Claas. They posed in the manner of the period, and likely after several takes, the photo captured the perfect pose. They were a handsome couple, yet there are no visible signs of joy or happiness following their 1907 wedding ceremony.

Their stern yet solemn expression conveyed respect for the process. A smile, perhaps, might have seemed less dignified, not a reflection of whom they were in that moment. They must have wanted to be remembered for that dignity. They must have been saving their smiles for the party that followed.



A quarter century later in 1932, Harry and Tonie celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. This treasured family portrait, taken on October 22, 1932, captures them with their five grown children, in their finest attire. Tonie wrote in her journal:

22 To church to Mass. To Milwaukee had  
22 my family picture taken.



**October 22, 1932 –**  
*“To church to Mass.  
To Milwaukee had our Family picture taken.”*





Everyone is immaculately dressed - men in three-piece suits, women with short, soft waves in their hair, wearing the elegant, feminine fashions of the time. One can imagine the off-camera banter: "Can we just finish this already?" or "I think I blinked!" The expressions remained serious, mostly unchanging.

The following day, Tonie wrote:

23 To church. In the afternoon celebrating  
our Silver wedding. Raining a little

**October 23, 1932** – *"To church. In the afternoon, celebrating our Silver wedding. Raining a little."*



solemnly stared into the camera, their faces serious as ever. This was certainly not how we remember our parents.

The smiles, it seems, were saved for the celebration. Even during times of fun, smiles were rare.

It wasn't that people didn't have reasons to smile. Life gave them many reasons to smile. This 1933 photo of the Claas siblings, Cela, Roman, and Tona, caught them playing their guitars. They were always the center of attention at family gatherings. Yet, in this moment, they



My mother, Tona Claas, when recalling her 1928 eighth grade graduation day from St. Anthony School, often said it was one of the happiest days of her life. Yet, in the photo, after receiving her diploma, you'd never know it. Her face looks anything but joyful - she almost seems angry. Was it really the happiest day for her? When the camera captured the tone of that special day, it certainly didn't seem special. That moment was preserved but it surely didn't look like a time for merriment.

So, why the somber faces? Why no smiles?

There are several theories as to why this was the case. According to Wikipedia:

- Early cameras required people to sit still, most often indoors, for extended periods to capture a clear image. People became impatient.
- Since portraits were considered a rare treat, somber expressions may have conveyed a sense of serious dignity.
- Practices around dental care were not what they are today, so showing a toothy grin was discouraged.
- Smiling was seen by some as a characteristic of the lower-class, so people avoided smiling to appear more refined and intellectual.

But what caused all this to change?

One thing, cameras became more accessible to the average person. They became part of everyday life. Those early, simple to operate box-like cameras, made photography something for the public. And with this shift, something subtle began to change: people began to play with the camera.

People became less concerned with formality and more interested in the idea of capturing a moment as it happened. People began to experiment with their expressions, and before long, smiling for the camera became a part of it. Consequently, during the hardships of the Great Depression, when most people needed them, smiles began to appear in family photographs.

Perhaps it was the anticipation of the end of Prohibition ...



... or the collective need for friends, family, and neighbors to come together during tough times and celebratory times.



Or maybe it was the excitement of acquiring the latest modern gadgets or fancy cars. Take, for instance, this photo of Harry Claas in 1934, proudly posing with his new Pontiac.

There's a certain swagger in his stance and his expression, one of confidence and accomplishment. His shiny new car was something to smile about during a tough era.







But maybe it was simply the joy of being together.

My parents certainly shared their buoyant smiles. They weren't holding back. We feel their lively energy. My Mom had come a long way from her earlier graduation picture. We can infer a sense of joy.

Since flash photography wasn't yet available, most family photos were taken outdoors in informal settings, while formal photos were taken in studios. The sense of community grew, with neighbors bonding over shared resources and experiences. People gathered together more frequently, often coming up with their own entertainment - whether it was through music or, more lightheartedly, "mugging" for the camera.

In the end, the hard years of the Depression drew people closer, creating a sense of joy in simply being together. It was a turning point and those lighthearted Claas family photos documented it all for us. It was during this time that smiling for a photograph began



to take hold. Folks were no longer afraid to show their teeth in a picture. The smiles that had been so rare in earlier photos slowly became more common as families found new ways to connect and celebrate life, despite the ongoing struggles. Smiling wasn't just a sign of happiness - it was a sign of a new era.