Those Schemers, Brooks and Wylie

"Having opened a Photograph Gallery on West Avenue, Fairport, I shall for the next thirty days make fine Cabinet Photographs at 2.00 per dozen; Card Photographs for $1.00 per dozen, and four tintypes for 50 cents. All work guaranteed satisfactory. Dark weather practically makes no difference as I use instantaneous plates entirely.

A.F. Brooks, Photographer, Fairport, N.Y."

With this announcement, published in the Monroe County Mail in November of 1886, our community had its first professional photographer. A.F. Brooks and his partner, Charles D. Wylie, were soon swamped with customers. Their prices beat the competition in Rochester, and local newspapers promoted the business as if they had a stake in their success. The initial gallery was on a vacant lot leased from Jeremiah Chadwick, and was probably nothing more than a glorified tent. As orders flooded in, Brooks and Wylie rented the second floor of the newly constructed Deal Block on North Main Street, the same building that has been the home of the Barranco clothing and shoe store for the last 80 years or so.

Brooks and Wylie's low advertised prices omitted a crucial detail. Payment was required when the client's photographs were taken, up front. While a few customers eventually received their photographs, most did not. Brooks and Wylie had run this scam before, in Webster, Victor, Phelps, and other locations. They typically set up a temporary gallery to show examples of their work and take customer's pictures. After telling clients that their images would be ready at a date in the future, Brooks and Wylie would close up shop and move on to the next unsuspecting community, before providing finished photographs to most of their customers. The people of Phelps were so distraught over the situation, a poem was published in the local newspaper, a portion of which is reprinted here:

From miles around the victims came, of old and young, 'twas all the same.

They quickly climbed the trembling stair, and yielded up their ducats spare,

To the waiting Brooks and Wylie.

"Oh pass me not," the old man said, "But take this snow-besprinkled head,"

They took his head (a profile view), and then they took his money too,

Those schemers, Brooks & Wylie.

Soon filled as full as they could hold, their purses overflowed by gold,

"I find we're richer than before, EIGHT HUNDRED DOLLARS, less or more,"

Reported Brooks to Wylie.

And then they judged it time for flight, while no one dreamed but all was right.

So on a fine September day, like Arabs silently away,

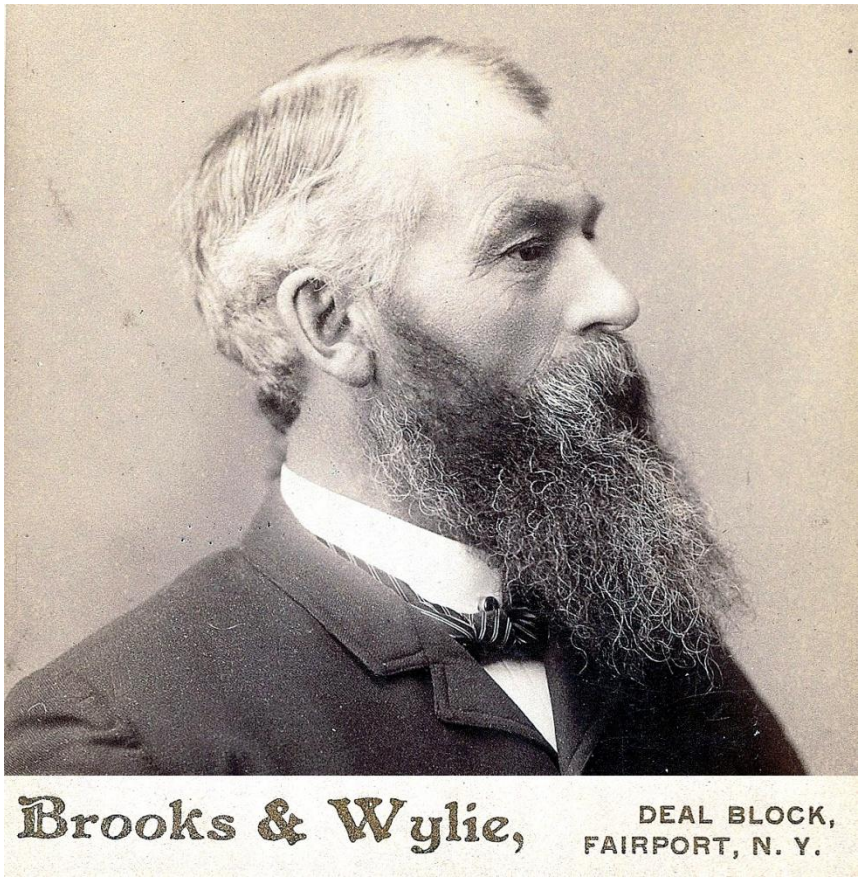
Stole prudent Brooks and Wylie.

Let traveling artists now beware! No more we'll climb that fatal stair!

No more be caught in such a net, for while we live we'll ne'er forget,

The firm of Brooks and Wylie.

Brooks and Wylie did perform some legitimate business in Fairport, and stayed longer than at most other locations. But when they left, it was in the dark of night, under the same circumstances as they had in Phelps. The Fairport newspapers that previously urged residents to patronize the new photographers of Fairport, scolded their readers for their naive gullibility, and published a lengthy postmortem of the situation, including the following: "The whereabouts of Brooks and Wylie is at present a deep, dark and dismal mystery…they did up Fairport in great shape, that is the gullible portion of it, and if anyone is sorry that they have departed for new pastures we would like to hear of it."



57 year old William Bly of Perrin Street received his cabinet card photographs, making him one of Brooks and Wylie's few fortunate customers.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 10/10/2013