

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Film Review

Carvalho's Journey. Directed, produced, and written by Steve Rivo. Down Low Pictures, 2015. 85 minutes

Solomon Nunes Carvalho was born in 1815 and raised in the thriving Jewish community of nineteenth-century Charleston, South Carolina, but the most thrilling experience of his life occurred during his crossing of the Rocky Mountains with John C. Frémont in the winter of 1853–1854. Born to comfort and status, Carvalho decided to leave his portrait business behind, not to mention his wife and children, to explore the western frontier, barely surviving the expedition. While *Carvalho's Journey* pays proper attention to its hero's South Carolina origins, its highest achievement is its consistent, sometimes visually stunning homage to the western wilderness, which in the 1850s had yet to be fully mapped into the American political consciousness. As it recounts Carvalho's role in Frémont's transcontinental expedition, the film reminds us that while Jews were part of the fabric of nineteenth-century America, they also viewed and experienced it from a distance. They might, like Carvalho, have been looking down at the country from the crest of its greatest mountain range.

Despite his family's history in Charleston (his father, David Carvalho, was among the founders of the city's Reform movement and enjoyed a prosperous career as a merchant), Carvalho strayed from the traditional mercantile path and pursued his interests in painting and portraiture. When his family moved to Philadelphia in the early 1840s, he began a course of study with the famed American portrait painter Thomas Sully. Before long, he gained artistic recognition, particularly after one of his still lifes found its way onto several issues of paper currency in the United States and Canada during the 1850s and 1860s. In

one of the film's most poignant sequences, we are told about how the news of the 1838 burning of Charleston's Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE) synagogue deeply affected Carvalho. Based solely on the memories he retained of the building's interior from the countless hours he had spent there as a child and as a young man, he created a lovingly detailed, evocative portrait of its interior. The painting was as much a conveyance of his fondness for the place as it was an accounting of its physical contours.

*Solomon Nunes Carvalho,
daguerreotype self-portrait,
c. 1850. (Library of
Congress.)*

The daguerreotype was invented while Carvalho was trying to find his way in the portrait field, which was floundering because most Americans could not afford a painting of their likeness. Beginning in 1849 he established daguerreotype studios in New York, Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. In 1853, on the basis of his growing reputation as a purveyor of the new photographic technology, Carvalho quickly embraced the opportunity of a lifetime. John C. Frémont, "The Great Pathfinder" of American legend, wanted Carvalho to serve as an officer in his expeditionary corps. The group was seeking a route by which a transcontinental railroad might cross the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada. In order to select a viable and permanent route, they would

have to complete their traverse in the middle of winter, since the railroad would need to operate year-round. Carvalho was to be the expedition's chief documentarian, and his participation would be integral to its success both as a scouting mission for the railroad venture and as a public image boost for Frémont, who was building on major political ambitions. Sadly, despite the extraordinary lengths to which Carvalho and the other members of Frémont's crew went to protect and carry several chests full of daguerreotyping equipment through blizzards, across raging rivers, and up mountainsides, only a single one of the hundreds of images he produced on the journey survived. (The collection of glass plates was lost in a New York fire in the 1880s.) The primary record upon which the film's director, Steve Rivo, had to rely, therefore, is Carvalho's written recollection of the journey, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (1857). In addition to Carvalho's verbal descriptions of the various features that he recorded by daguerreotype, the book also included a handful of artists' etchings that had been drawn from those daguerreotypes.

If there is anything lacking in Rivo's film, it is attention to the wider political context that made Frémont's career such a momentous one in historical terms. Frémont was not just any western explorer, after all—he was a notorious Free Soiler, and in 1856 he became the first Republican to run for the presidency of the United States. When this Georgia-born (and Charleston-educated) staunch opponent of the southern slaveocracy decided to recruit a Charlestonian Jew as his expedition's official daguerreotypist, he was declaring the sectional divide null and void. When Carvalho chose to accept Frémont's invitation, he was not only consigning himself to an extremely dangerous physical undertaking; he also was implicitly relinquishing whatever sectional ties he may once have had to the culture of slaveholding that had helped to set the terms for his family's prosperity. Rivo's thematic and visual focus on the far western landscapes that Carvalho saw and attempted to record by daguerreotype is infused with a powerful though unnamed subtext: the Civil War. Perhaps this is why *Carvalho's Journey* poses these terrible and beautiful landscapes as its central motif. For Carvalho and Frémont alike, the beauty and possibility of the Far West ought to have transcended sectional rivalry. As the film suggests, the makeup of Frémont's crew reflected its leader's continental predilections. Besides its Jewish

Solomon Nunes Carvalho, "View of a Cheyenne Village at Big Timbers, Colorado," 1853. Despite the damage to the plate, it is possible to see a group of tepees, hides hanging to the right, and the figures of two people to the left of center.
(Library of Congress.)

daguerreotypist, it employed a cross-section of America's multiracial frontier society, including participants of Mexican, Native American, and European origin.

At its heart, *Carvalho's Journey* is not only an attempt to retell an old, mostly forgotten story of frontier travel, but also an attempt to re-see an experience that had been instigated by Frémont's determination to create a substantial visual record of his journey. While the film assigns significant speaking parts to several prominent historians (including Martha Sandweiss and Jonathan Sarna), its most frequent contemporary presence is that of Robert Schlaer, a present-day daguerreotype artist (perhaps the only one in the world) who has devoted himself to recon-

structing and recreating Carvalho's journey by visiting each of the sites where the artist is known to have set up his camera and producing modern-day daguerreotype images of the same landscape features. Schlaer's form of historical reenactment is unique because it produces verisimilitude in a documentary, as opposed to an experiential form. The artist does not pretend to be a modern-day Carvalho, although his romantic love for the landscapes of the West appears to mirror that of his predecessor. He drives across the Utah desert in a van, stores his equipment in large plastic tubs, and employs electricity when he needs it to develop his images. The daguerreotypes he makes, on the other hand, offer a window into Carvalho's world. On the basis of their subtlety and splendor, we can see why, despite his having nearly perished from malnourishment, extreme cold, and fatigue, Carvalho looked back upon his experience as a member of Frémont's party with such fondness. While his western adventures set him apart from most other Jews (not to mention gentiles) of his time period, he seems to have been uniquely poised, as a Jew, to appreciate the grandeur of a land that he felt he could call his own.

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