

Early Photographers Of First Peoples In British Columbia

The adventurers and explorers who, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, visited British Columbia needed a means to convey to their contemporaries at home what they had experienced during their voyages of discovery. Journals, ship's logs and diaries supplemented the oral accounts of their journeys. Accomplished artists recorded the flora, fauna, landscapes and peoples in sketches and watercolours prior to the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. Although many of these prints and paintings were executed with great care and attention, they do not contain the detail that is afforded in a photograph. The introduction of the Daguerreotype in 1839 and somewhat easier to use "wet-collodion" method in 1851 eventually resulted in the first photographs being taken in British Columbia in the 1850s.



Many of the early ethnographic photographs were created on the tours of inspection by colonial and dominion officials. Photographic artists were commissioned to document the peoples, cultures and villages visited by the officials. These collections form the basis of the early archival holdings at the Royal British Columbia Museum. Photographs taken by Frederick Dally during a circumnavigation of Vancouver Island in 1866 by Governor Arthur Edward Kennedy are among the first photographic images of B.C. The tours of Dr I.W. Powell, British Columbia's first Commissioner for Indian Affairs, were photographed by Richard Maynard (1873 and 1874), Oregon Hastings (1879) and Edward Dossetter (1881).

Other major collections of ethnohistoric photographs are those taken by scientists in the service of the Geological Survey of Canada and by anthropologists who travelled throughout British Columbia recording the cultures and lifestyles of the First Peoples. George M. Dawson visited the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1878 and the Kwakwaka'wakw of Vancouver Island in 1885 on behalf of the Geological Survey. Harlan I. Smith, Franz Boas, Dr Charles Frederick Newcombe, Samuel Barrett, Albert Parker Niblack, George T. Emmons, Marius Barbeau and Edward Sheriff Curtis are among the amateur and professional anthropologists who documented their work with cameras. (In addition to his still photographs, Edward Curtis produced "the first full-length documentary motion picture of aboriginal North Americans" in 1914, entitled *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. This silent 1914 motion picture was re-released in 1974 as *In the Land of the War Canoes*.) Two notable native photographers were George Hunt of Fort Rupert, a field assistant and informant of Franz Boas, and Benjamin Haldane, the village photographer from the native community of Metlakatla on Annette Island, Alaska.

The photographic images from this era still existing in museums, libraries and archives provide social historians, anthropologists, curriculum development researchers, museum curators and especially the casual, non-academic collections user with a rich visual legacy of life in British Columbia during the past one hundred and thirty years. These photographs document changes in architecture and monumental carving in coastal villages. They show material culture collected in the context of everyday use and are invaluable in assisting museum curators in identifying and authenticating artifacts. A historic field photograph that documents a box drum in situ helps the museum conservator monitor the deterioration of the piece over time. Research curators working with informants often use photographs to elicit additional information about traditional and transitional aspects of culture. Designers can create a sense of past village life in permanent and travelling museum exhibits by enlarging panoramic views to mural size.

When examining a photograph for documentary information, one should be aware of the biases the photographer brings to the image. Commercial photographers were, to some extent, driven by the tastes and expectations of their customers, Euro-Americans, who often wanted exotic images of Aboriginal peoples of the northwest coast. Edward Curtis, to whom Northwest Coast anthropologists owe an immeasurable debt, posed aboriginal subjects in cedar bark clothing, though they commonly dressed in the fashions of the time. This is not to diminish the ethnographic value of the early still photographs, but to caution the viewer that even these must be examined with a critical eye.

The Royal British Columbia Museum has a large collection of ethnohistoric photographs dating from the late 1860s to the present. Other significant photographic collections of Northwest Coast and Interior British Columbia Aboriginal peoples can be found in repositories throughout North America and Europe.

Holm, Bill and George Irving Quimby. 1980. *Edward S. Curtis: In The Land Of The War Canoes, A Pioneer Cinematographer In The Pacific Northwest*. Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.

Mattison, David. *A Fair Wind Blowing, Richard Maynard's Tours on HMS Boxer, 1873-1874*. Photographic Canadiana, Vol. 12, No. 4, The Photographic Historical Society of Canada.

Riley, Linda. 1988. *Marius Barbeau's Photographic Collection: The Nass River*. Canadian Ethnology Service Mercury Series Paper No. 109, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Scherer, Joanna. 1990. *Arctic Anthology*, vol. 27, no. 2.

(A listing of repository sources for ethnohistoric photographs.)

Tepper, Leslie. 1987. *The Interior Salish Tribes of British Columbia: A Photographic Collection*. Canadian Ethnology Service Mercury Series Paper No. 111, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Tepper, Leslie. 1991. *The Bella Coola Valley: Harlan I. Smith's Fieldwork Photographs, 1920-1924*. Canadian Ethnology Service Mercury Series Paper No. 123, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Willsberger, Johann. 1977. *The History Of Photography*. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York.