Framing identity : social practices of photography in Canada (1880-1920)

Close, S.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
CONSTRUCTING PHOTO NARRATIVE

Women have pioneered forms of writing about the past that explore areas tangential to the mainstream of political and economic change.... Blurring the boundaries between personal reminiscence, cultural comment and social history, paying attention to the overlap between history and fantasy, using popular entertainment, reading official histories between the lines and against the grain, these exploratory styles fit easily with the bricolage and the loose ends of the family album (Holland 1991: 9).

Questions we have all asked ourselves such as Why am I doing this? or even more basic What am I doing? suggest the way in which living forces us to look for and forces us to design within the primal stew of data that is our daily experience. There is a kind of arranging and choosing of detail — of narration, in short — which we must do so that one day will prepare for the next day, one week will prepare for the next week.... To the extent that we impose some narrative form unto our lives, each of us in the ordinary process of living is a fitful novelist... (Rose 1984: 6).

Patricia Holland, a British photo historian, asserts that the creation of the family photograph album is a social practice, a practice providing women the opportunity to construct a personal history, a narrative that transcends the boundaries that traditionally separate the personal from the political. Phyllis Rose, a noted American literary scholar and biographer, contends that establishing identity is part of an ordering and understanding that assists us in the narration of our daily lives. These two comments by women writers are brought together as arguments in order to focus the discussion to
follow on the existence of and necessity for alternative productions of personal narrative, such as the family photograph album. The creation of the family album, a popular turn-of-the-nineteenth century activity, was primarily undertaken by women and recognized as part of their domestic duties to the family. As more women became interested in taking as well as collecting photographs, they began to use the camera to produce their own images for the family album. In this manner, women repositioned themselves, moving from consumer and subject of photographic imagery to the more active role of producer. Through the use of photographs, women were able to re-sign themselves as strong and independent.

In a previous chapter, I analyzed a number of photographs from the family albums of an amateur photographer, Mattie Gunterman, made during the years 1899 to 1911. I read the photographs as being the vision of the photographer who used the viewfinder of her camera as though a voyeur peeping through the keyhole. The photographer, or looker, has been discovered and we, as viewers of the spectacle of her looking, must now draw back and consider the construction of her photograph albums so as to be able to position them in terms of her larger life story.

PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS

First, I want to direct attention to the albums themselves and define more precisely what Gunterman produced as her visual, autobiographical narrative. There are three existing Mattie Gunterman family photograph albums. The first, a commercially purchased album, is elaborately bound and contains thick, cardboard pages with pre-cut frames for the insertion of cabinet cards (4.5 x 6.5 inches) and the carte de visite (2.5 x 4.25 inches), both popular formats of the time (Robideau 1995:10). It contains Mattie Gunterman's collection of studio portraits of her family and friends and covers the period 1875 to 1893. The images document Gunterman's childhood in La Crosse, Wisconsin; the early years of her marriage to Will Gunterman in Seattle, Washington and include baby pictures of her only child, Henry. Her second photographic album is a small, five-inch square, twenty-page book and includes, for the first time, Gunterman's own photographs. These images were made with George Eastman's popular invention designed for amateur use, the Kodak "Bull's Eye" camera. This album continues the narrative of Gunterman's life and includes snapshots made in 1897 of family, friends in Seattle and records of her travels to eastern Washington State. The third album was described to me by photo-historian Henri Robideau as a "scrapbook," because it contains approximately 147 photographs pasted by Gunterman into a book assembled from Chinese folded paper with a sewn binding. The photographs were primarily made between 1899 and 1901 with her 5"x7" glass plate camera, however, it also includes several older images made with her earlier, 4" x 5" camera.

All three of these albums are held by the Gunterman family and were not accessible for research for this study. In 1927, Gunterman's home in Beaton, British Columbia was destroyed and all her work was lost except for the three family albums mentioned above.
These prints were made by Henri Robideau from Gunterman’s original glass plate negatives in the VPL collection for the exhibition, *The Photographs of Mattie Gunterman*, curated by Sylvia Jonescu Lisitza for the Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1977.

and approximately three hundred 5” x 7” glass plate negatives that had been stored in an outdoor shed that served as a darkroom. The Gunterman photographs examined in the previous chapter and in this one were selected from 59 modern prints in the permanent collection of the Photographers Gallery (PG) now known as PAVED in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. They were printed by Henri Robideau from the surviving 5” x 7” Gunterman negatives now in the Vancouver Public Library (VPL) collection. Robideau confirms that prints of two of the selected photographs (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2) also appear in Gunterman’s third album. The other photographs selected have not been connected with a specific album but are part the modern Gunterman print collection held by PG. This collection includes 13 family portraits, three self-portraits, 31 community portraits and 12 landscape photographs made between 1898 and 1910. Two of the landscape photographs (Fig. 1.10 and 1.11) are from the collection of the Vancouver Public Library. The images selected for examination in these two chapters were chosen to represent Gunterman’s photographs of self, family and nature. From these I have constructed an “imaginary” family album of photographs selected from Gunterman’s actual albums, which, I argue, can be read as a visual autobiography.

**FAMILY ARCHIVIST**

... it is largely (women) who have become the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive. The continuity of women’s stories has always been harder to reconstruct, but here, the affirmation of the everyday can itself assert the coherence of women’s memories (Holland 1991: 9).

Photography always held a fascination for Mattie Gunterman, who became one of those women family archivists. She learned the basics of photography, including camera operation, portrait techniques and darkroom procedures, from her uncle, Charles Warner, who was a commercial photographer in Gunterman’s hometown of La Crosse, Wisconsin (Robideau 1995: 14). From an early age, Gunterman saw the potential in the photograph album to create a personal narrative and so began to collect commercial studio portraits of her family, her friends and herself. She assembled these into a small album that is documented as being among the few items that she took with her when she left La Crosse for Seattle, Washington in 1889. It is not known why the seventeen-year-old left her hometown, but Henri Robideau speculates that it might be attributed to better economic conditions on the west coast and the imminent remarriage of her grandmother.

A working class woman, Mattie Gunterman found employment in Seattle as a hotel maid. Her social position did not change with her marriage to William Gunterman, a candy-maker, in 1891. As the personal narrative of her photographs confirms, Mattie Gunterman found it necessary to remain employed throughout her life even while taking on the domestic responsibilities of a “wife” and mother. In 1892, the Gunterman’s first and only
child, Henry, was born. After his birth, Mattie Gunterman’s interest in photography was revived. Holland points out that “the most ardent makers of family pictures are parents with young children,” and Gunterman was no exception (1991: 19). She exemplified Holland’s description. Being a photographer, the family archive that she constructed was largely visual.

In 1896, Gunterman developed what her doctor thought was tuberculosis and she was advised to get away from the damp. In the spring of 1897, she and her family took a holiday to the dry, desert-like interior of central Washington State. She used this opportunity to take her first photographs with a Bull’s Eye Sharpshooter camera. This simple box camera had a fixed aperture of approximately f/18 and a single shutter speed of about 1/25 of a second and therefore, given the relative insensitivity of the available film, could only be used outdoors in bright sun. Each roll of film allowed for 12 exposures and had the special feature of a built-in mask that allowed the user to create either a square or a round image. The family toured Washington, camping and staying with friends. Gunterman used her new camera to document the journey. The beginning of the Klondike gold rush in July of 1897 brought the family back to Seattle to assist Will Gunterman’s mother in the operation of her hotel as the city became an important supply point for the prospectors outfitting to go north to the Yukon.

Mattiie Gunterman continued to photograph, documenting her family and their everyday activities at home and at work in the hotel. Like other amateur women photographers of this period, Gunterman arranged these family snapshots, along with travel photographs made earlier that year, in small photograph albums. These were the first albums to contain only her own photographs.

Gunterman’s interest in photography continued to grow and she soon became frustrated by the technical limitations of her Bull’s Eye camera. In early 1898, she purchased a more sophisticated, glass plate camera “that offered such features as ground glass focusing, a bright anastigmatic lens with an iris diaphragm, and a multispeed shutter” (16). This 4” x 5” camera required the use of a tripod and more technical skill to operate than her previous Bull’s Eye camera. Assisted by her brother-in-law, Frank Smith, Gunterman quickly learned to use this new instrument as well as the darkroom techniques necessary for processing the film and making prints. Smith also introduced her to the use of magnesium ribbon, an artificial light source to photograph interiors or at night. This new camera greatly enabled Gunterman to continue the visual journal that was to document the lives of her family and herself. She began to make self-portraits and included herself in group portraits with the assistance of an air bulb release attached to 30 feet of tubing that controlled the camera shutter button. This allowed her to include herself in the image while making the exposure.

The return to Seattle proved difficult for Gunterman, whose health again began to deteriorate. Prompted by her correspondence with Hattie Needham, a cousin who lived
in Thomson's Landing, British Columbia, the family considered a permanent move to Canada. In the spring of 1898, the Gunterman family began an arduous journey from Seattle in which they walked over 600 miles, arriving in Thomson's Landing in June. They purchased a hill-side property overlooking the town and camped while clearing their land and starting to build a log house. As the house was not completed by winter, the Guntermans returned to Seattle to settle their affairs and arrange shipment of their household belongings to their new home.

In Seattle, Gunterman took advantage of having darkroom access to process, print, and arrange her photographs into homemade albums. These albums were modest, comprising 4" x 5" contact prints glued into newsprint scrapbooks (16). In 1899, just before their permanent move to Canada, Gunterman made another serious commitment to photography by investing in a No. 5 Cartridge Kodak for $35, a sum equivalent to her month's wages (Robideau 1995: 28). This 5" x 7", glass plate camera was, as Robideau describes, a marvel of the most current advances in photographic technology:

The No. 5 came with a rapid rectilinear lens, Eastman pneumatic shutter, iris diaphragm f-stops, rack and pinion focusing, focusing scale, rising/falling/sliding front, two viewfinders — one for horizontal and one vertical — three tripod legs, four plate holders and a handy leather case to pack it all around in. Her new camera was one of the best looking models released by Kodak in 1898, finished in mahogany and fine leather with buffed brass and nickel fittings. It loaded in daylight and had the novel feature of taking either glass plates in plate holders or spools of 5 inch wide roll film. It was a gem (28).

After testing her new equipment by photographing Sunday family gatherings, Mattie Gunterman was ready to begin the documentation of her venture into what her mother-in-law referred to as the “god-forsaken wilderness” of Canada. From this point on, Gunterman's camera became a tool for recording the pioneer life of her family and friends. No doubt the creation of her own photograph albums helped Gunterman come to terms with this new environment in British Columbia.

As Holland argues:

Snapshots are part of the material with which we make sense of our wider world. They are objects that take their place amongst the other objects that are part of our personal and collective past, part of the detailed and concrete existence with which we gain some control over our surroundings and negotiate the particularity of our circumstances. Snapshots contribute to the present-day historical consciousness in which our awareness of ourselves is embedded... (1991: 10).

Gunterman's photographs chronicle not only her daily activities as a working “wife” and mother, but also serve to position her and her family within the broader social community. Most of her adult life she spent working as a camp cook in a variety of logging and
mining camps where often her spouse was also employed. This, too, is reflected in her photographs. In addition to the family, Gunterman's photographic subjects include the community in and around Beaton in the Arrow Lakes District of British Columbia and her occasional travels to the Pacific Northwest and California.

As their understanding of photographic technology grew, and as a consequence of the restrictions upon women, some, like Gunterman, began increasingly to turn the camera upon their personal world, positioning themselves within a family archive. Cultural historian Marianne Hirsch views self-portraits and family photographs as existing on a continuum, “a continuum that traces the subject’s constitution in the familial and the family’s visual reflection of the individual subject” (1994: 109). This is particularly relevant to the study of Mattie Gunterman’s photographs, since Gunterman appears in more than half of her own images. Most albums of the period include photographs of the album owners, but seldom are so many self-portraits represented. Sylvia Jonescu Lisitza, curator of the 1977 exhibition The Photographs of Mattie Gunterman, notes this characteristic: “She seems to have regarded herself more as a vital component of the life she photographed than as a photographic observer detached from real participation in the activities of the community” (1977: n.p.). Robideau concurs:

The importance of Mattie’s photographs lies in their portrayal of pioneer life by a participant rather than a detached observer of that lifestyle. They are intensely personal statements about the presence and the role of a woman as a family person in a frontier environment at the turn of the century. The personal nature of Mattie’s photographs is emphasized by the fact that she frequently photographed herself, or included herself with other people she was photographing (1989: 16).

Such habitual positioning of self in photographs functions in much the same manner as a narrator commenting “I was there” or “I remember.....” Gunterman’s presence within the frame as a narrator underlines the role played by these photographs in the creation of her story.

Although an amateur photographer, Gunterman’s work often surpasses that of her professional contemporaries, yet shows no evidence of the soft focus of Pictorialism so fashionable among photographers in Britain and the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Pictorialism was a movement of art photography that began in Europe after 1860. It found its expression primarily in still life and in genre images or staged scenes that often were created by joining photographs together to form composites. Pictorialists used techniques such as soft focus to simulate the qualities of painting. This movement did not take hold in the United States until 1880, American photographers tending to prefer a more documentary approach (Rosenblum 1994: 94). As the production of artistic photographs was expensive, Pictorialists generally came from a privileged class (95). Photo-historian Val Williams suggests that many working class women
photographers simply could not afford the equipment or materials to produce anything more than straightforward photographs (1991: 20). Gunterman’s documentary approach was, however, a conscious stylistic choice, as she had the necessary photographic equipment and technical skill to create more pictorial images had she wished to do so. Jonescu Lіsіtца states that it was this direct approach that gives her photographs their visual impact:

Her straightforward presentation of subject and her lively sense of the moment suggest that she was motivated primarily by a desire to record her love for pioneer life and the characters who lived it. The convincing sense of life in Mattie’s work contrasts sharply with the stylized and sentimental artificialities that characterize much of the better known photography from her era (1977: np).

Major improvements in photographic technology, such as the invention of the gelatin dry plate in 1880, made photography more affordable and thus greatly expanded its use by less wealthy amateurs (Pedersen and Phemister 1990: 102). Gunterman built her own darkroom in 1900 and did all of her own processing and printing until 1910. An inventive woman, she eschewed the confines of the studio to work with her cumbersome cameras outdoors. This allowed her to more to more directly document her everyday life.

SELF PORTRAITS AS PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The photographs and photographic albums that Gunterman made between 1899 and 1910 trace both her personal development and the close inner relationships between her and the members of her family as they work, travel and share their lives together. Not coincidentally, this was also the period when Mattie and Will Gunterman were raising their son, Henry. This kind of photography has become a social ritual that is part of family life, which, as noted by Susan Sontag, allows each family to construct “a portrait chronicle of itself — a portable kit of images that bear witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed as long as the photographs get taken and are cherished” (1978: 8). In Gunterman’s time, the photographing of children and the maintenance of family records, such as photograph albums and baby books, were considered some of the duties of a good mother. Indeed, Sontag comments that not photographing one’s children when they were small was viewed by society as a form of parental indifference (1978: 8). In this respect, Gunterman was clearly a devoted mother, as she not only took photographs of Henry but also duplicated all her images and made separate albums for him (Robideau 1995: 8).

The framing of photographs in a family album also carries its ideological burden, however. Jo Spence (cited in Hirsch 1994: 119) has stated that “visual representation privileges the nuclear family by naturalizing, romanticizing and idealizing family relationships above all others.” Somehow, Gunterman managed to avoid these pitfalls, for by no stretch
of the imagination can the work in her albums be seen as “romanticizing” or “idealizing,” family relationships. Indeed, even though still documenting actual events, the visual narrative that flows through Gunterman’s family albums clearly features their author as protagonist, with all others, including her family, relegated to supporting roles. In Gunterman’s hands, the ostensibly private study of the photo album becomes a narrative of social and cultural heroism in which her family fully participates. This aspect of her albums is explored further below.

While eschewing the soft-focus appearance of Pictorialism, Gunterman wholeheartedly embraced its penchant for staging tableaux vivant and metaphoric representation. This is most evident in her self-portraits through which she explores identity, often in highly theatrical poses staged to convey the heroic pioneer image that she sought to portray. Her family portraits also share certain dramatic characteristics that establish her personal narrative about the family’s quest for a new life in Canada.

The heroic pose is evident in Near Beaton/Mattie, c. 1905, (Fig. 3.1). Positioning herself as a lone figure standing on snowshoes and holding a rifle in one hand and a dead grouse in the other, Gunterman orchestrates a romantic image of herself as pioneer woman. Her gaze is directed outside of the frame to the right, and she appears fully absorbed in a kind of introspection or reverie common to many of her self-portraits, including Figs. 1.3 & 1.4. At this time, mining operations were about to close near Beaton. Gunterman knew it would become increasingly difficult for her family to make a living. Her identity being closely tied to her lifestyle, she reacts to adversity by representing herself as a solid and self-reliant figure. She poses as the lone hunter able to live off the land, using as her props the snowshoes, a rifle and a dead bird to confirm her status. As in an earlier self-portrait (Fig. 1.1), she chooses the natural backdrop or “prop” of logged trees as a metaphor to symbolize, in this case, the difficult economic times the family is facing. Once again, a natural background serves as a metaphor for her state of being that weaves itself through Gunterman’s narrative. In Fig. 3.1, however, the depth of field in the image is deeper and the wilderness backdrop has been thinned and cultivated as opposed to the thick, visually impenetrable overgrowth presented in Fig. 1.1. This cultivating or civilizing of the
landscape signifies Gunterman’s view of herself as a conqueror or colonizer of her chosen frontier homeland. The formality of her dress, a lace-collared suit, contrasts sharply with the snow-covered landscape within which she stands and contributes to the staged, tourist-like quality of the image.

Taken together, the three self-portraits shown in Figs. 1.1, 3.1 and 3.2 trace Gunterman’s assimilation into the natural environment and the developing confidence she has in her mastery over it. While in all three she presents as the lone, woman figure isolated within a natural setting, as the years pass this positioning assumes increasingly heroic form. In 1899, when the earliest self-portrait, Fig. 1.1, was made, Gunterman is content merely to sit in or, perhaps more accurately, before the natural environment. In her photographic narrative, this image records the first real contact we see her make with nature, a highly tentative acknowledgement expressed through the outreaching touch of her hand. Six years later, in the self-portrait made in 1905 (Fig. 3.1), we can see the developing changes in her representation of self. There is a definite movement away from the tourist spectacle presented in Fig. 1.1 toward an image of a woman more assimilated into the landscape. Here she dominates the frame, the huntress with a rifle at her side, steadfastly confident of herself and her place within the order of things. What had previously appeared an overwhelming and slightly ominous natural setting has been reduced to a secondary position and has become far less threatening. This second self-portrait reveals a new image of self and attests to Gunterman’s successful integration into her pioneer life.

In the third self-portrait, entitled Beaton, Mattie on her horse Nellie, c. 1910, Gunterman photographs herself seated firmly astride her horse (Fig. 3.2), the heroic equestrienne, fully in command of herself and her destiny. As in the 1899 self-portrait, Fig. 1.1, Gunterman again looks straight into the camera, a gesture remarkable only because it has so obviously been avoided in other images made in the intervening 10 years. Curiously, in at least one respect the rationale behind the gaze is the same; both photographs show a woman sufficiently confident of herself to be unafraid of what her gaze might reveal. What differentiates them, however, is profound. In Fig. 1.1, the woman who looks back at her audience is a townswoman, an urbanite who would, were she shown in that context, appear wholly
conventional. Seated amongst the organic chaos of an indeterminate landscape, however, grasping a branch at least as much for support as connection, she appears an innocent, her only point of reference, of security, being the comfortable familiarity of her camera’s cyclopic eye. In Fig. 3.2, Gunterman presents herself in a wholly different way. Here the directness of the gaze goes beyond self-confidence; it is rather the gaze of a woman comfortable not just with herself but, equally, with her place in the world she inhabits.

Solomon-Godeau writes that such self-portraiture allowed women photographers a rare kind of freedom, for “a woman might be author of her own images and through self-representation resist both photographic and social norms” (cited in Bottin 1988: 11). This too is evident in Fig. 3.2. With the exception of her masquerade photographs (see Fig. 1.6) in which, of course, eccentric dress was sanctioned by custom, for the first time in Gunterman’s pioneer narrative she records herself wearing men’s clothing in public. Mounted on horseback, wearing heavy leather gloves, a man’s felt hat and an extremely feminine lacy, flounced blouse, we see her less as she wants to be seen than as she sees herself, an authoritative, active participant, comfortable in her world — a world into which, unlike the 1899 self-portrait, she has become fully integrated.

This last photograph marks the end of Gunterman’s most productive period as a photographer. When she made it, Gunterman had lived in Canada for 10 years and had fully resolved the seemingly contradictory juxtapositioning of tourist-within-nature and self-with-nature so evident in her 1899 self-portrait, Fig. 1.1.

Throughout her career Gunterman made extensive use of props and an implied, almost melodramatic story line to create photographs comprised equally of documentation and contrivance. As a significant aspect of self-representation, dress or costume feature prominently in her work, often contributing the punctal element to what otherwise could be mere studium. This is apparent in each of Figs. 1.1, 3.1 and 3.2. In Fig. 3.2 for example, Gunterman appears dressed in a conservative and rather formal riding costume that contrasts sharply with the rugged environment of logging slash in the background. There is a similar contrast between costume and environment in Figs. 1.1 and 3.1 that while seeming to acknowledge the image of feminine respectability characteristic of all of Gunterman’s formal self-portraits, also suggests a more subversive agenda. Fig. 3.1 offers perhaps the clearest example of this.

In the photograph, Gunterman positions herself alone in the landscape, dressed in a fashion that to modern eyes seems wholly inappropriate to her environment. While on the one hand this can be taken as evidence of Gunterman’s limited wardrobe, it also reflects the restrictions imposed upon women by the dress codes of the day. Women of Gunterman’s class and situation did not own many clothes nor, deep in the backcountry of British Columbia, would there have been much from which to choose. Her clothes-buying decisions would thus have been subject to a number of factors: availability, affordability, practicality and propriety. On the surface, then, Gunterman’s appearance in her
photographs could be seen as no more than evidence of the response of a sensible woman to the constraints of circumstance. The simple, dark wool dress, heavy wool jacket and light-coloured, most probably white blouse in which she appears in image after image would seem to support this, and it would be easy, too, to assume that the startling incongruity of Gunterman’s appearance in her wilderness self-portraits results less from design than necessity.

It is my belief, however, that she had a more subtle and sophisticated purpose. As Estelle Jussim argues:

 Investigators into the meaning of nonverbal communication agree that clothing is an important indicator of more than socio-economic status. Occupation, nationality, relation to the opposite sex, official status, mood, personality and values may all be indicated (1989: 98).

From Gunterman’s work, we know both that she was fully cognizant of the public view of feminine respectability coded into women’s clothing and equally that, when condoned by circumstance, she was not fundamentally opposed to donning a pair of pants. We know too that the self-consciousness inherent to self-portraiture results, before all else, in an image of someone having their photograph taken and finally, that as a self-portraitist, Gunterman always exercised an extraordinary level of control over every aspect of her work. If we acknowledge that trousers and a shirt are far more practical attire for hunting than a heavy woolen skirt and frilly-collared blouse, especially if, as we see in Fig. 3.1, one is negotiating a snow-covered mountainside in snowshoes and carrying a firearm and a dead bird, then we must conclude that the mode of Gunterman’s attire is not circumstantial, but rather, a carefully contrived expression of personal identity.

In her essay “From Noble to Notorious: The Western Adventure Heroine,” Marilyn Burgess states that this kind of re-signing was also practiced by many women wild-west show performers. She gives as an example Martha Jane Cannary or, as she came to be known, Calamity Jane, who had herself photographed as a trapper, hunter and frontierswoman. Burgess writes:

The cowgirl of popular culture is a fictional construction. She exists in stories, in still and moving pictures and in wild-west performances. She also exists in the self-consciously crafted personas of outlaws such as Belle Starr and Calamity Jane. We can trace the earliest cowgirl heroines to nineteenth century, western adventure novels (1992: 71).

Another and perhaps better known contemporary was Annie Oakley, a trick rider and sharpshooter employed from 1885 to 1902 in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Known as “Little Sure Shot”, because of her remarkable ability with firearms, Oakley remained a popular North American heroine well into the middle of the twentieth century. Figure 3.3 shows an advertising poster for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show that features Oakley demonstrating
both her abilities as a trick shooter and her frontier taming skills. Figure 3.4 is the cover of a 1950s era child's book, *Annie Oakley, Sharpshooter*, in which we see Oakley on her horse, racing a steam locomotive on her way to a party where she will shoot out the candles on a birthday cake.

Gunterman, however, is unique less because she was her own photographer but more because of the gestalt of her strategy. By setting the conventional femininity of her appearance against a rugged and chaotic wilderness, she succeeded not only in re-signing herself as an independent, self-sufficient, frontier woman but simultaneously created an image that could directly challenge the norms and societal expectations of women at the time.

**SPECTACLE OF NATURE**

The tourist impulse to use photography to record an association between self and the exotic is also evident in another of Gunterman’s family portraits, *Along the Trail from Beaton to Camborne, Mattie and Will*, c. 1901 (Fig. 3.5). This photograph was made between Comaplax and Camborne, BC and documents the so-called “Pierced Tree,” a spectacle created when an avalanche drove one tree through the trunk of another. In the image, Gunterman has her partner Will sit facing the camera on the trunk of the piercing tree while, on the ground below, she presents herself to the camera in profile. In keeping with her insistence upon controlling every aspect of her photographs, Gunterman has staged the
placement and gesture of the figures to suggest a casually informal response by ordinary people to the exotic — a visual syntax that has since become an identifiable characteristic of tourist imagery.

The small size of the figures in relation to the surrounding forest emphasizes the power of natural forces. As we have seen, this is a feature typical of many of Gunterman's early wilderness photographs, showing the importance she placed on her relationship to this environment (Figs. 1.1, 1.2 and 3.1). What is most immediately striking about this image, though, is the lack of any apparent relationship between the man and the woman. Not knowing that these two figures are married, it would be easy to believe that there is no connection between them, that the woman is entirely unaware of the man seated on the tree above her. Mattie Gunterman positions herself in nature and, as usual in her photographs, directs her attention to the environment rather than toward other people or the camera. Will Gunterman is clearly comfortable both in nature and in front of the camera, looking
directly into the lens from his perch high up on the tree. While Will appears to have been a supportive and active participant in the creation of Mattie’s personal narrative, in the photographs he and Mattie always appear apart, individuals linked only by common experience, each having their own, emphatically separate identity. This is equally true of the photographs that include their son, Henry, for invariably in Gunterman’s family photographs, figures are isolated one from another, each occupying a separate, private space within the frame (Figs. 1.3 & 1.4). In fact, throughout her work, Gunterman always appears to the camera as self-contained and self-sufficient, an independent woman defined less by who she is with than by where she is.

Also apparent in her self-portraits is the growth of Gunterman’s awareness of the pictorial Semiotics of her day. Following its introduction in the late 1830s, photography naturally adopted many established pictorial conventions. This was particularly true for portraiture where to be shown square on, staring directly at the viewer, clearly identified the sitter as being common or of lower class. Conversely, turning away to show only a profile or three-quarter view, and thereby making oneself less available to the photographer’s gaze, marked the subject as being upper class or, at the least, culturally sophisticated (Tagg 1988: 36). The implications of these social and cultural conventions suited Gunterman’s purpose well. Quite apart from eliminating the possibility of a too direct gaze betraying some personal or private aspect of personality, her avoidance of frontal confrontation with the camera greatly assisted in her rigorously controlling the identity she so persistently sought to create (see Figs. 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 3.1 & 3.5).

This use of photography to re-sign herself is further emphasized by Gunterman’s attitude toward authorship. For example, the image Fig. 3.5 is signed “Mrs. M.G. 1901” (56), not as one might expect, on the print, but in pencil on the negative, attesting once again to the importance Gunterman assigned to individual identity in her personal narrative.

**IMAGES OF THE COMMUNITY**

Produced for a limited audience of family and friends, [Mattie Gunterman’s] work is now valued for the social insight it provides of a vanished style of life applicable to a whole community (Koltun 1984: 55).

**Mattie Gunterman used her camera** as a point of entry into her community, quickly establishing herself as the local photographer. As such she was often called upon to document events in the Lardeau district, giving her the opportunity to both represent and position herself and her family within her new community. Beside herself, many of Gunterman’s photographs record images of family or friends participating in community events or activities and often suggest the character of her subjects through the portrayal of interrelationships. In this respect, historian Naomi Rosenblum makes a comparison between Gunterman and the American photographer Alice Austen, who
also “often inserted herself into the images depicting the milieu in which she felt most at home” (Rosenblum 1994: 110). Austen, like Gunterman, used the camera to explore her own identity through staged self-portraits and often included herself in group portraits with family and friends.

Gunterman's community photographs show the range of possibilities available to women in her pioneer community. They provide insight into the multi-faceted life of the woman pioneer that includes domestic labour, friendship and motherhood. As well, they indicate how photography enabled Gunterman to position herself and her family in the community. This type of self-positioning in the family photo album is recognized by Thomas. He writes:

...obviously the family photograph album encourages self-perception and a certain degree of objectification of self and family; the figures in its pages play out, as it were, roles and stories to an audience of family and friends. Naturally it is possible for the owners to shape these stories, in conformity. of course, with the data, and guided by prevailing ideas of what the facts mean (1981: 57).

For pioneer women compelled often to work long hours on isolated farms and homesteads, developing a network of friends and neighbours among the women in their community was particularly important:

Despite the primacy of family for most, women did not define themselves solely by their familial roles and obligations. Victorian and Edwardian women also saw themselves increasingly as individuals in their own right, with obligations and friendships outside the family (Prentice 1988: 150).

Gunterman certainly fits this description; what makes her extraordinary is that as well as being a woman who worked outside the domestic sphere, she was also a photographer having both the sanction and desire to make images in the workplace.

Such photographs are rare for a number of reasons. At this time, only about 16 percent of Canadian women worked for wages, and of those who did, few had access to cameras or had sufficient training or knowledge to know how to use them (Denton & Ostry cited in Burt 1988: 14). And then there was the cost; photography was expensive, meaning that for those at the lower end of the economic scale, photography was generally reserved for documenting special occasions, not the commonplace of the worksite.

“Pictures of me? At work? Well, I don’t think so, dear.”
“Catch someone taking a photo of me in my old apron!”
“Well, I’ve got plenty of me with the GIRLS from work, when we went out, but nothing in the factory, you know. Well, you wouldn’t. Why bother?” (Stanley cited in Spence & Holland 1991: 60).
Thus the photographs in Gunterman’s albums are exceptional records. Typical is *Entrance to Tunnel #4*, 1902 (Fig. 3.6) which shows her friend, Anne Williams, standing in front of the entrance to the Nettie-L Mine where she and Mattie Gunterman were employed as camp cooks. Williams stands with one arm raised, holding a snowball in what could be considered a coquettish pose. Two miners, one stands next to Williams and the other next to the second pillar, accompany her on the right. The relatively small scale of the figure of Anne in relation to the surrounding landscape is reminiscent of a similar compositional strategy Gunterman employed in an earlier photograph, *Somewhere on the trail from Seattle to Beaton*, Fig. 1.2.

Despite the winter weather, Williams is wearing a lacy white blouse beneath her light coloured cook’s apron; a combination that makes her appear to be wearing a long, flowing, white dress. Both pose and dress seem more appropriate to the popular, romantic “women in white” imagery created by the American Pictorialist photographer Clarence
White, than to the portrait of a lumber camp cook. The photograph is doubly coded, informing the viewer about a heavy snowfall that has covered the roof of the mine entrance on the one hand, while indirectly addressing the construction of femininity on the other. This is established through William’s dress and gesture and by contrasting her as a female figure in white with the male figures lurking in the dark shadows. The point of view, distance of the camera from the subject and flattened perspective make the photograph appear a record of a stage upon which Anne and her shadowy companions perform the roles of gender stereotypes. In the *tableau vivant* of Gunterman’s personal narrative, femininity is a role “played” by women “opposite” men.

In *Rose and Anne Williams*, c. 1902 (Fig. 3.7), Anne is again featured, this time washing dishes with her sister Rose, another of Mattie Gunterman’s co-workers at the Nettie L Mine. Rose, to the left, appears rather hesitant, as if she did not expect to be photographed in this situation; Anne, on the other hand, appears oblivious to the camera,
FIGURE 3.8
Nettie L. Mine, Rose Williams and Mattie (on the Stove) and Ann Williams, c. 1902, gelatin silver print, PG 77.1.9.8
focusing her entire attention upon the saucepan in her hand. By having the piles of dirty dishes take up half of the frame, Gunterman makes clear that it is domestic labour and the role of women in carrying it out is the true subject of her photograph. Again, Gunterman carefully controls the structure to ensure that the image carries her message and again she presents her friends not as individuals, but exemplars of women and their social status at the time.

In addition, the photograph exhibits a number of unusual features that show Gunterman’s remarkable syntactical understanding of her chosen medium. First, while the image has the appearance of a snapshot, this is obviously contrived, the size of Gunterman’s camera and the necessarily methodical process that it imposed making impossible the production of snapshots as understood today. Gunterman’s camera had to be used on a tripod; each exposure engaged her in a time-consuming ritual of viewing, focusing and film loading. Working indoors further complicated matters as to ensure a sufficient exposure upon the relatively insensitive plates of the day, she also had to set up of a flash pan loaded with ignitable magnesium powder. It is ironic then, that it is precisely this flash that should enable Gunterman to so effectively employ the snapshot aesthetic, the instantaneity of its exposure eliminating the need to pose and allowing the two women to move freely before the camera. The seemingly informal, frozen moment, snapshot quality of the resulting photograph, greatly enhances its documentary credibility. The image has a double significance, first in that it exists at all and second that it has been preserved in a family album, not usually a showcase for mundane and, at the time, certainly womanly activities like dishwashing.

Nettie L. Mine, Rose Williams and Mattie (on the Stove) and Ann Williams, c. 1902 Fig. 3.8 was made shortly after the dishwashing image and, being made in much the same way, exhibits many of the same qualities. Rose and Ann Williams are shown posing with Mattie Gunterman who sits astride the dining room heater. The short, flash-enabled exposure captures an artlessness of gesture and emotion that makes this photograph of three women enjoying themselves completely believable. Despite its apparent spontaneity though, the technical production, composition and structure of this image must also have been thoroughly pre-planned. As there is no evidence in the image of a shutter release hose, and as it would be entirely contrary to Gunterman’s usual practice to have someone else operate her equipment, it seems likely that she first opened the shutter upon the darkened room, then arranged herself and the Williams sisters before the camera before igniting the flash powder. The result is an image that convincingly reveals the companionship and playfulness possible among women, even in a workplace environment in which they were expected to be maintaining a domestic passivity.

Today, in an age overflowing with casual images of this kind, it is difficult to fully appreciate the significance of Gunterman’s achievement. Despite George Eastman’s introduction of the hand-holdable, No. 1 Kodak camera in 1887, photography in 1902 largely
remained a highly ritualized and formal affair, neither films being sensitive enough, nor shutters fast enough to arrest any but the slowest action. For those using anything but the most highly specialized equipment, recording a clear image on film still required a static subject. “Snapshot” was a term still associated with users of firearms, not cameras. In fact, it was only in 1902 that the seven-year-old photographic prodigy Jacques Henri-Lartigue, later acknowledged as one of the greatest exponents of what came to be known as the snapshot aesthetic, made his first photograph. What John Szarkowski, for many years Director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, said of Lartigue could just as easily be applied to Gunterman:

There are...rare occasions on which exceptional talent, the right horoscope, and an unexploited new technique all coincide.... In such cases the results can be astonishing (1989: 66).

Gunterman’s purpose was the creation of her own narrative. Her chosen instrument was the camera and to achieve her goal she exploited the capacity of her available tools to their limit, in the process discovering for herself a form that has since become a commonplace of photographic syntax.

Over time, Gunterman and her camera appear to have become an accepted, almost
expected part of community activities. In Lux's Ranch, *Upper Arrow Lake*, 1905 Fig. 3. 9, a group of bathers stands in the lake posing for Gunterman's camera. The town of Beaton is in the background. The flotsam of loose logs and wood scraps around the group are from the mill across the lake at Comaplix and indicate heavy activity in the forest industry (Robideau 1995: 109). To make this large, formal, group portrait, Gunterman has distributed the 20 individuals across the full width of the frame in the foreground, being careful to ensure that everyone, particularly their face, is clearly visible. With the exception of Henry Gunterman, the photograph includes only women and girls. As with her other images, this one is deliberately staged. Gunterman obviously having arranged the composition so that her son is the central figure. Unusual for portraits of such large groups, although not, as we know, for Gunterman, is the special separation between the individuals. It is particularly strange to see an image featuring so many mothers and offspring in which there is so little physical contact, where all of the subjects, even the children, appear isolated from each other, each in their own space. This photograph provides a symbolic view of Gunterman's world, a world that revolves around her only child that radiates out to include her women friends and their children, all set against the background of her small, beloved community of Beaton. Gunterman has captured her "universe" in a single image.

In Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, women photographers were not only those from privileged backgrounds seeking a leisure activity. Mattie Gunterman and others like her used photography as a means of documenting their families and narrating their own stories. They were women seeking a voice at a time when few women had real control over their destinies. Some found in photography a medium through which they could represent their identities and subsequently used the family album as a gendered format within which they could author a coherent narrative from these representations.

My analysis in this chapter shows how Gunterman used the representative discourse of the family album to situate herself both in nature and as a member of the Canadian frontier community to which she immigrated as a young woman. Her photographs, in particular her self-portraits and her albums in which she structured her photo-narrative, show how she used her camera as an effective tool for re-signing herself as a pioneer woman. Gunterman was able to extend the potentials of both photography and the conventional photograph album by creating, and then photographing, carefully staged, metaphoric tableau outside of the domestic sphere. Effectively, she employed photography as a social practice through which she could pursue a personal identity, producing a body of work that traces her evolution from urban dweller and tourist to strong, self-sufficient, pioneer woman able to thrive in the wilderness of interior British Columbia. By rigorously controlling the various components of her photographs—framing, people, props, and backgrounds — she made of each image a framed scenario within which she could both create and play out the drama of her life and, by implication, pass comment upon its context.