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

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These biographical sketches are meant to give the reader a brief background of each of the four women whose work I analyzed in my case studies. It was not my intention to provide their complete biography but instead to outline some pertinent details from lives that are relevant to my study. This information was collected from a number of sources including archival records, interviews, books, letters, interviews and catalogues.

**MATTIE GUNTERMAN (1872-1945)**

Mattie Gunterman was born Ida Madeline Warner in the spring of 1872 in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Little is known about her family or childhood except that she was considered to be a “delicate child” and was raised by her widowed grandmother, Mary Arnold. Maintaining her health was a constant struggle for Gunterman that affected her life and significantly influenced her photographs. She learned to photograph from an uncle while still a teenager living in Wisconsin. After finishing school in 1889, at the age of 17, she moved to Seattle, Washington, where she found work as a hotel maid and, within 12 months, had married Will Gunterman, a mild mannered candy maker. Their only child, Henry, was born the following year. In 1886, Gunterman’s health deteriorated, necessitating a move to a drier climate. Seeking a better place to live, in the spring of 1887 the family travelled on foot to eastern Washington. They camped along the way, and by the end of the summer her health had dramatically improved. Gunterman also took this opportunity to photograph, recording her adventures in the wilderness; however, the return to Seattle in the autumn brought back her old health problems. That winter Gunterman spent time improving her
photographic skills and looking for a new home for herself and her family. She eventually settled on Thomson’s Landing (later known as Beaton) in British Columbia, where a cousin already lived. The family relocated there in 1898, walking the entire way — a journey of over 600 miles. They were able to find employment cooking in the logging camps, yet somehow, Gunterman still found time to photograph. She created extensive family albums in duplicate, one for herself and one for her son, Henry, who was the centre of Gunterman’s universe and found his way into many of her photographs. Gunterman used her photographic skills to establish herself in her new community by photographing a variety of local events, ranging from masquerade parties to open air picnics. Unusually at the time for a woman, Gunterman also made photographs of the landscape. By 1913 Gunterman’s photographic productivity had cut back significantly, and she switched her camera equipment to smaller more portable roll film cameras. In the years that followed, the family’s economic situation became increasingly difficult, and Gunterman was seldom able to make any photographs at all. She died at her home in Beaton on June 18, 1945. Photographer Henri Robideau has chronicled Mattie Gunterman’s life in his book, Flapjacks and Photographs, The Life and Times of a Pioneer Camp Cook and Photographer (1995).

GERALDINE MOODIE (1854-1945)

Geraldine Moodie (nee Geraldine Fitzgibbon) was born in Toronto on October 31, 1854. Her maternal grandmother was the celebrated Upper Canada writer Susanna Moodie, and her great aunt was Catherine Parr Traill, another accomplished writer. It is not known how or where Geraldine Moodie came to photograph, although most women at that time in Canada were either self-taught or instructed by family members. While visiting England in 1878, she met and married a distant cousin, John Douglas Moodie (J.D.). Two years later, the couple emigrated to the Canadian west, settling as farmers near Brandon, Manitoba. Both Moodies were interested in and practiced photography.

In 1885, after the outbreak of the Second Riel Rebellion, the Moodie family, with their three children, returned to Ottawa where J.D. Moodie took up an appointment with the North West Mounted Police (NWMP). Over the next six years, the Moodies were posted to various locations throughout the Canadian West — Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge and Maple Creek. Geraldine Moodie’s extraordinary balancing of a professional career with her family of six children is striking. Her professional photographic career was a significant part of her life. Even after the lengthy illness and death of a son in 1895, she continued to operate her photography studio. Photography not only gave her the opportunity to have an independent career while J.D. Moodie was away on his numerous excursions and exploratory missions, it also allowed her the flexibility to raise her large family at the same time.
As with Mattie Gunterman, photography provided a significant outlet from domestic responsibilities and gave Moodie an entry into the variety of new communities in which she found herself. Geraldine Moodie’s social position in the community was also established by J.D.’s position as an officer in the NWMP. As J.D. Moodie rose in the ranks of the force, Geraldine gained access to an ever-broader variety of events in both the Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal communities of the early Canadian Northwest. Geraldine Moodie’s success as a professional photographer increased as she took full advantage of the opportunity given by her position to promote herself to government officials. It was through these contacts that she was granted a number of significant commissions.

By 1891, the Moodie family had finally settled in the prairie town of Battleford, NWT, where they remained for five years. During this period, Geraldine Moodie ran a successful commercial studio and took many photographs of daily life on the frontier. Moodie’s images included portraits of the NWMP, townspeople and the Plains Cree of the area. She was interested in recording the life of Native people and made photographs of the sacred Native ceremony known as the “Thirst dance.” In 1896, J.D. was re-posted to Maple Creek, and Geraldine immediately re-established photography studio.

By 1904, J.D. Moodie was appointed Governor of the Hudsons Bay district that took in much of the Canadian Arctic. He held this position for six years. Geraldine accompanied him into the North aboard the ship, Arctic, and remained with the mission for one year, creating an impressive body of photographs. She set up a darkroom aboard ship and did all her own printing and processing while they were traveling. She made a second trip to the North in 1916-17. Supt. Moodie retired in 1917, and the couple moved back to Maple Creek where they operated a ranch for several years. In 1933, the Moodies moved to Duncan, BC. Geraldine Moodie died on October 4, 1945 at the home of her granddaughter, Geraldine Perceval, the Countess of Egmont, near Midnapore, Alberta. Geraldine Moodie’s complete biography is detailed in Donny White’s In Search of Geraldine Moodie (1998).

NURSING SISTER RUBY GORDON PETERKIN (1887-1961)
Ruby Gordon Peterkin was born in Toronto on September 1, 1887. In 1911, she graduated from the Toronto General Hospital as a professional nurse. She enlisted in the army in 1915 and served in Canada, Britain, France and Macedonia. She was discharged in 1918 as being unfit for service having developed pulmonary tuberculosis. She was invalided to England and then later back to Canada to a sanatorium for recovery. Peterkin was decorated with the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Her photographs and letters describe the living and working conditions she experienced in the medical hospitals where she was stationed. In 1920, she married Dr. Hugh Alexander McKay, who served in the Canadian Medical Corps and later in various psychiatric hospitals in Ontario. McKay died in 1935. Peterkin died in Georgetown in 1961 at the age of 73.
Ruby Gordon Peterkin’s 304 photographs, together with some letters that she wrote to her sister, Irene, are buried deep in the National Archives of Canada. I only learned of Peterkin through a casual conversation with Peter Robertson, the now retired, National Archives photo archivist who is a recognized authority on military photographs. To the best of my knowledge, these images have never been published or written about before.

NURSING SISTER ETTA SPARKS (1879-1917)

Etta Sparks was born in Britannia Village, Ottawa, Ontario on May 25, 1879. She was the daughter of John Sparks and Jane Bradley. She had one sister, Annie, who died in 1906. Her great uncle was Nicholas Sparks, who played a key role in the development of Bytown, which later became Ottawa, the capital of Canada.

Sparks trained as a professional nurse in Boston and Canada prior to the outbreak of World War I. She enlisted in the Canadian Nursing Division on May 5, 1915, and served with distinction in the United Kingdom, France, the Dardanelles and Egypt. She served with the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force.

Her album contains 145 photographs of personnel and activities at No. 5 Canadian stationary hospital in Cairo, Egypt. Also included are views of Cairo, Memphis, the pyramids and the Nile River. Many of the images are only partially identified. A note in the file speculates that this might possibly have been because she died from cancer before being able to complete the task. The final pages of the album document a trip to a cemetery and feature arrangements of photographs showing wooden crosses marking the graves of fallen Canadian military service personnel. These final pages are a sad narrative, prophetic of Spark’s own eminent death. The album concludes with seven blank pages. Sparks died from cancer in active service on August 20, 1917, in the Kitchener Military Hospital, Brighton, England. She was 38 years old. She was remembered with affection as a positive, cheerful personality by her own colleagues who created a memorial in her memory in a cemetery in Brighton, where she is buried.

What little is known about Etta Sparks comes from her file at the National Archives of Canada and her military service records. There is no documentary evidence that Sparks herself was a photographer or even owned a camera yet, during her short military service, she maintained an album of remarkable images, although from what source there is no record. As with Peterkin, I was introduced to her album by the photo archivist Peter Robertson. Included with her album of photographs at the Archives is a brief biographical note written by an E. Taylor, who is identified as a historian with the Britannia Women’s Institute. To date, there have been no other publications about her.