DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE: (RE)-EXAMINING PHOTOGRAPHS OF CANADIAN MINERS

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Standard forms of history tell the story of a robust and steadily developing Canadian nation, built on the backs of tenacious, hard-working men. Blue-collar labourers have been celebrated as important contributors to Canadian industry and to the collective Canadian venture for progress and prosperity. The mining industry, however, has been portrayed in a distinctive light, different from other forms of Canadian manufacturing. For example, romantic tales of the Klondike Gold Rush have often been evoked to portray mining as a right of passage or heroic quest. While miners have regularly been depicted as courageous and inventive, they have also been stereotyped as lawless and capricious. The intention of this virtual tour is to analyze portraits of Canadian miners and their surroundings in mining camps and towns to reveal the challenging social circumstances and economic difficulties they faced. This exhibition will not provide an overarching portrayal of Canadian industry and labour, rather it will deconstruct the conventional image of the noble and heroic Canadian miner. By utilizing the imagery from the 'Porcupine Camp' and mining in Timmins, Ontario, which will be discussed first, as well as visual documentation of the Klondike Gold Rush in northern British Columbia and the Yukon, which will be considered next, this tour will provide a candid approach to Canadian mining history. Through an analysis of various portraits, what is revealed is less the frenzied nature of gold rush culture and the opportunity to make a fast fortune, but further, the sobering reality that miners faced on a daily basis. The eight photographs discussed will support a more comprehensive understanding of the

expectations, working and living conditions, and the cultural growth that accompanied

these two major gold rushes and Canadian labour forces. Although the Klondike Gold

Rush is firmly cordoned to history, as it was short lived and most seekers were

unsuccessful, the economy of Timmins, Ontario continues to revolve around its mining

industry.

Storm and Fire in Porcupine, 1911
Henry Peters, South Porcupine, Ontario.
Silver albumen positive
Library and Archives Canada / PA-029820
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3259302&rec_nbr_list=3259302&title=Storm+
and+fire+in+Porcupine.+&ecopy=a029820&back_url=()

Although not a portrait in the traditional sense, this dramatic image illustrating the

devastating Porcupine Camp fire of 1911 points to the miners whose lives were

consumed and obstructed by the flames. At the height of the Timmins gold rush, the

Porcupine Camp fire killed at least seventy people and razed almost five hundred thousand acres of land.[1] The outline of miner's homes in the distance encourages the viewer to imagine the people whose lives were affected by this disaster. In this photograph, Henry Peters has captured the turbulent waters and billowing smoke so thick that the viewer can hardly make out whether the photograph was taken in the morning or evening. Peters' writing on the negative contributes to the documentary aspect of this image; inserting his name denotes him as a witness to this devastating event. Although the fire destroyed much of the development in the Northern mining community, very few people abandoned Porcupine. The potential for further discovery and excavation kept the thirty thousand miners and prospectors living on the shores of Porcupine Lake, before the relocation to the vicinity of Hollinger Mine.

Carrying the Dead, Porcupine Fire, 1911
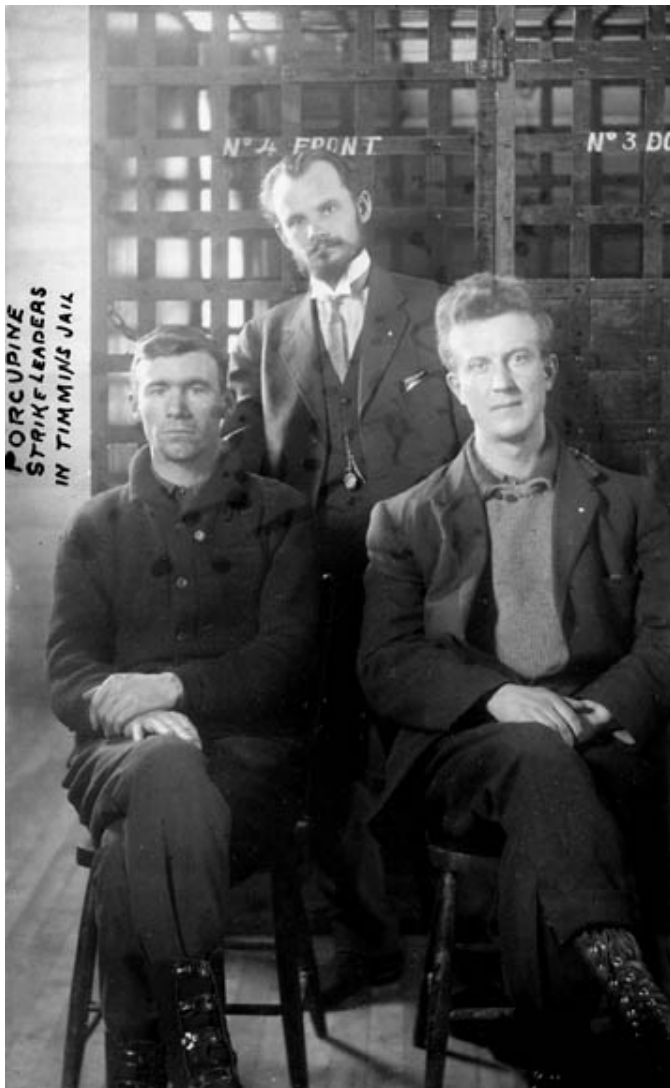Arthur Tomkinson, Porcupine, Ontario
Silver gelatin print
Library and Archives Canada / Pa-029806
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3192633&rec_nbr_list=3192633

Carrying the Dead illustrates the few bodies that were recovered after the fire of 1911. In this melancholy image, able men are shuttling their dead across the water to be given a

proper burial on the other side of the lake, at 'Dead Man's Point.' The only audience for

this haphazard funeral procession are the stilled waters and looming forests, alluding to

the isolation of the miners who lived in Porcupine. Many of those who died were not

prospectors or engineers, but shopkeepers and merchants employed in the mining towns.

Due to the Great Porcupine Fire of 1911, 200,000 hectares (over 494,000 acres) of forest

were destroyed and at least 70 people killed.

Porcupine strike leaders in Timmins jail, 1913
Henry Peters, South Porcupine, Ontario
silver albumen positive
Library and Archives Canada/PA-029974
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3259495&rec_nbr_list=3259495,7130

This photograph depicts three strike leaders in a Timmins jail, as the photographer Henry Peters has inscribed. Peters, the main photographer in the Timmins area from the early 1900s to the mid 1920s, photographed the Porcupine camp from its inception. The well-dressed man in the centre of the photograph is William Holowatsky, an organizer for the Porcupine Local 145 branch of the Western Federation of Miners.[2] Holowatsky mobilized the strikers of 1912, who rallied for the introduction of eight-hour days and the regulation of wages. In an attempt to control and disempower their employees, mine owners hired aggressors to intimidate and harass strikers. The strike lasted for about six months and the miners' demands were not met. The three men depicted in Peters' photograph were important faces of the Timmins labour movement, and are represented as such. This closely cropped portrait presents the men as proud, dignified leaders. Only Peters' scrawled writing and the jail doors behind the leaders disclose their unusual setting, and points to the risks that they faced in defending the disempowered working class.

Hollinger Mine - 1800' level - Miners off shift waiting for up cage, 1913
Photographer Unknown, Timmins, Ontario.
Photograph
Canada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys / Library and Archives Canada / PA-017570
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193693&rec_nbr_list=3193693

This image depicts healthy and happy looking miners waiting for the cage to take them up and out of the mine. This photograph was very likely a propaganda image commissioned by the mining corporation to communicate the well being of their employees to the general public, in order to avoid labour unrest. Although the men's headlights glare into the camera lens, declaring their presence in the mine, the workers remain unnamed, and some faces appear in shadow while others are cut off completely. Logan Hovis and Jeremy Mouat state, "By the (19)30s, skilled craftsmen had disappeared from most mines…making a shift from quality to quantity in extraction."[3] As the mining

industry developed, less importance was placed on these skilled labourers and more emphasis was on supervision staff.[4] This photograph can be interpreted as a representation of the inter-changeability and commodification of labour, and ultimately, the disposability of humans in the mining industry. This celebratory image bears no connection to the awful suffering that the Timmins mining had experienced just two years earlier.


Hollinger Houses, 1965
Peggy Kreiner, Timmins, Ontario
Kodachrome Photographic Print
Private Collection

This photograph depicts the 'Hollinger Houses,' which were prefabricated homes built for Hollinger mine's workers and their families in the 1950s. The original homes, one storey with flat roofs[5] were simple one-and-a-half room buildings constructed with tarpaper and subsequently torn down in the 1960s. This amateur photograph scanned from a family album depicts the second wave of these easily produced, homogenous, and

substandard dwellings, which perhaps also reflect the Hollinger corporate philosophy

regarding the uniform and ubiquitous concept of their employees.
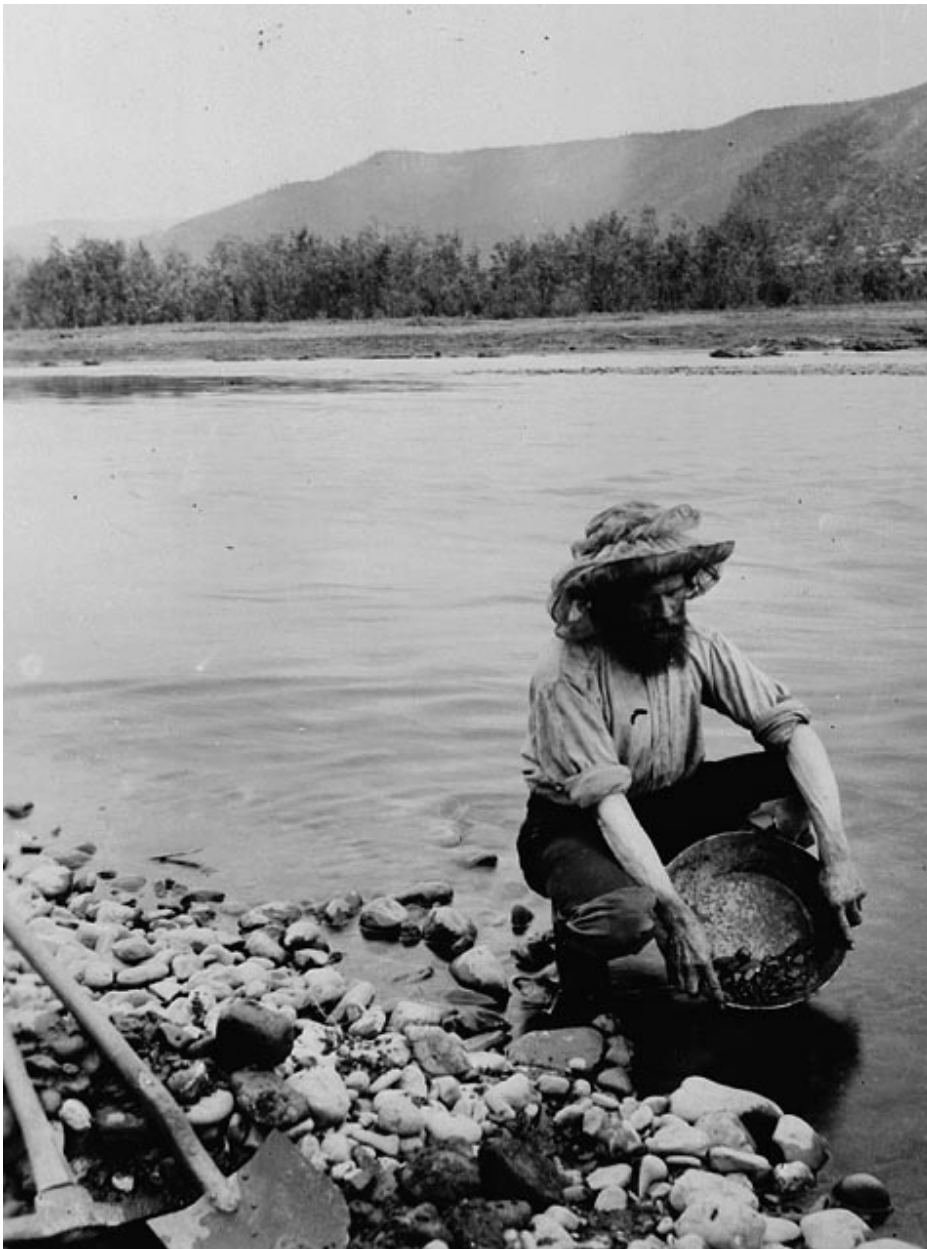
Panning gold during the Klondike Gold Rush, 1897 – 1908
George G. Murdock, Yukon.
Photograph, 127 x 83 mm
Library and Archives Canada / PA-005389
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3193685&rec_nbr_list=3193685,3624350

This photograph depicts an unnamed, weary-looking man panning for gold in a river in

the midst of a vast landscape. Although little detail is known about the subject, or George

G. Murdoch, the photographer, this photograph can be read as an analogy for the miner's relationship to his environment. The miner's shovel and pick, strewn haphazardly in the foreground, offer little promise as aids to rupture the sublime wilderness enveloping him. The picturesque framing also does little do alleviate the feeling of insignificance and hopelessness of this miner's struggle for prosperity.

Life in the Klondike during the gold rush. Packing up Chilkoot Pass, 1898-1899
Photographer Unknown, Chilkoot Pass, B.C.
Photograph, 72 x 121 mm
Library and Archives Canada / C-004490
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.d
isplayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194557&rec_nbr_list=3194557

The diagonal composition of this photograph contributes to its exceptional aesthetic effect; but more striking is the effort exerted by hopeful miners hiking up a treacherous forty-five degree angle slope of ice.[6] To make the journey even more difficult, men were forced to carry burdensome packs of supplies. Regulated by the Mounties, potential miners were not permitted to stop and rest, as the line of hikers stretched on infinitely.

These prospectors resemble worker ants, anonymous and analogous, appearing to carry more than their own weight, and toiling away together to attain the wealth envisioned in their collective imagination.

Klondike Rush, 1 May 1898
H.J. Woodside, Lake Bennett, B.C.
Glass negative – silver albumen
Library and Archives Canada / PA-016092
http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3192756&rec_nbr_list=3192756,3630888,3194557,3193685,3378591,3378589,3623799,3207237,3207236,3624722

Henry Joseph Woodside, originally a military photographer, worked as a photographer in South Africa and the Yukon in a journalistic mode. His portrait, *Klondike Rush*, depicts a lone man standing amongst a mass of informal tents set up on the journey to the great Klondike Gold Rush in Lake Bennett, British Columbia. The photograph emits a sense of solitude, of independence and self-determination. Each man has created his own dwelling,

as he would carve out his own success or failure in the Yukon. It is fascinating to

compare the transient forms of shelter in Lake Bennett with the prefabricated homes built

for Hollinger miners in Timmins, which had been organized and built by the mining

corporation. The vast difference between these two types of dwellings speaks to the

varying degrees of financial prosperity to be had and held onto in different mining

communities.

[1] *SOS! Canadian Disasters*. Library and Archives Canada. (14 Feb 2006.) Web 31 October 2011
[2] Karen Bachman. "Union Set Up Camp in 1912." The *Daily Press*. October 2008. Web. 9 Oct 2011.
[3] Logan Hovis and Jeremy Mouat. "Miners, Engineers, and the Transformation of Work in the Western Mining Industry, 1880-1930." *Technology and Culture*. Vol. 37, No 3, (July, 1996), 434.
[4] Ibid, 152.
[5] Philip Kreiner. Email message, 6 Oct. 2011.
[6] *City of Gold*. Dir. Wolf Koenig and Colin Low, National Film Board of Canada, 1957. 16mm film.