

Yukon Archives Visual Photograph Finding Aid

by LINDA JOHNSON

Among the most widely used sources at the Yukon Archives are the historical photographs.¹ The problem of creating finding aids to such documents, which have come into prominence in our institution only recently, demanded some rethinking of our traditional approaches to access. Displays and special lecture series had been used to make available selected collections over the years, but a more comprehensive circulation of the photographs was a need long felt. The solution was found in an imaginative utilization of one of the recent advances in electrostatic technology, and may be of interest and applicable elsewhere.

The photographs in the collection document early contacts between southern newcomers and the native inhabitants of the Territory, often recording aspects of traditional native cultures before these were changed by outside influences. They also show nascent Yukon settlements at the turn of the century, some of which have been abandoned because of changing transportation systems and modes of living. The over-all scope of the collection spans the Yukon and surrounding communities, street scenes and buildings, interiors of businesses and homes, social life and sports, varied mining activities, transportation, sternwheelers, stagelines, road houses, aviation, railroad and Alaska Highway construction, North-West Mounted Police activities, Yukon personalities and native people.

Photographers arrived in the Yukon with the Klondike Gold Rush. Most stayed only long enough to record the excitement of gold fever at Dawson City, then moved on to new bonanzas in Alaska or returned to their southern

1 The Yukon Archives was established by the Territorial Government in 1972 to provide a permanent repository for the Yukon's documentary heritage. Modelled upon the "total archives" concept developed at various provincial archives and the Public Archives of Canada, it has grown quickly to encompass private, corporate and government records in the various media. A comprehensive imprint collection of socio-economic, environmental and historical publications complements the primary sources. Since the Archives is the only research centre in the Territory, it is utilized by a broad spectrum of people. Teachers, students, civil servants, genealogists, environmentalists, historians, tourists, lawyers, film makers, anthropologists and geologists were among the more than four thousand users in 1977. During the frenzied days of the Alaska Highway Pipeline Inquiry the Archives was flooded with requests for data on permafrost construction methods, northern pollution problems, the social and economic impact of the wartime Alcan and Canol Projects, traditional indigenous land use and numerous other developmental concerns.

homes. A few, however, established studios in Dawson and Whitehorse to serve the dwindling number of post-Rush residents. E.A. Hegg, E.F. Keir, Adams and Larkin, Case and Draper, H.J. Goetzman, Cantwell, Hamacher, H.C. Barley, Winter and Pond Co., Larss and Duclos, and Arthur Vogee are a few of the well-known early Yukon photographers. Unfortunately, most of their original prints and negatives were acquired by outside institutions long before the Yukon Archives was established. Reference prints have been acquired, however, and these form one important part of our collections.

The essential base of the collections is provided, however, by the work of a number of talented, local, amateur photographers. The advent of less expensive and more portable cameras encouraged the same proliferation of amateur photographic activity in the Yukon as occurred throughout the world. Many people acquired cameras and focussed on the people, events and surroundings that affected their lives. A number of Yukoners developed exceptional abilities as photographers during the 1920s and 1930s and their photographs provide very intimate insights into the changing life of the Territory. The George Johnston, Bill Hare, Kates, Connolly, Harbottle, Gairns, Faulker, Schellinger and Van Bibber collections are unique to the Yukon Archives. Inasmuch as they document the roots of the Yukon's permanent population they are more important in many ways than the earlier, more famous photographs of the Klondike Gold Rush.

The personal nature of many of these photographs and the Yukon's relatively small population of twenty thousand have fostered an intense local interest in these documents. For many people they are the only source for photographs of grandparents or family members no longer living. For others, the photographs provide the means by which the growth and development of their community can be assessed.

The problem of access to these photographs, however, frustrated the general public's desire to savour their richness. The card catalogues to the photographs had severe shortcomings for staff and researchers. In our reading room, researchers would consult the catalogue descriptions and quite regularly present lists of a hundred or more photographs they wished to see. Often they would take a hurried look at all of them, decide that none were appropriate and request numerous others. Considerable staff time was spent retrieving and later refiling the photographs, but there was no alternative, since the researcher could not judge from the short verbal card descriptions whether a particular photograph was suitable.

This problem was even greater for people living outside of Whitehorse and unable to visit the Archives. In response to letters requesting photographs relating to particular activities we would photocopy a sampling of photos, but were unable to indicate the full range available. When travelling to the outlying communities to explain the Archives functions, it was not possible to illustrate the rich variety of our collections. This was unfortunate, since the people who know most about the Yukon's past are often those in the outlying communities. They are our most important sources of information and identification, as well as new collections. Since we had nothing to show them, it was difficult to communicate our interests and services.

This situation endured until the spring of 1975 when Brian Speirs, through the Yukon Historical Society, was able to use the Student Community Service Program of the Office of the Secretary of State for Canada to realize his dream of a visual finding aid for the Archives photo collection. The federal program was designed "to strengthen and further develop voluntary organizations by improving their capacity to respond to changing community needs, and by channeling the energy and imagination of youth into the voluntary sector."² Grants were to be made only to non-profit organizations with at least twenty volunteer members for projects which would foster improved communications and have some lasting benefit within the community. In response to these criteria, the Speirs proposal called for the production of ten sets of Xerox copies of the Yukon Archives' photograph collection, one each to be placed in the MacBride Museum, the Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, the Dawson Public Library, the Yukon Regional Library System (to circulate to all communities), the Alaska University Archives in Fairbanks, the Alaska State Historical Library in Juneau, the Vancouver Public Library, the Provincial Archives of British Columbia in Victoria, the University of Washington Archives in Seattle, and the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa. These finding aids, it was suggested, would help to increase an "awareness of and appreciation for Yukon's history and development both within the Territory and outside."³ The project would be carried out at the Yukon Archives, under the supervision of the Territorial Archivist. As the program further stipulated that 25 percent of the total project cost had to be contributed by the voluntary organization either in money, services, materials or a combination of these, the Yukon Archives proposed to "donate" the Xerox paper and other supplies to the Society for use in the project, to the value of 20 percent of total costs. This proposal was approved and on 1 July, with money for salary and supplies assured, and the use of a Xerox machine free of charge,⁴ the first of the one hundred thousand pages of the finding aid was produced.

The visual finding aid could not, however, overcome several organizational weaknesses in the collections and these had to be confronted as the project got underway. The six thousand photographs that then constituted the Yukon Archives Photograph Collection had been inventoried separately as each collection arrived, but the numbering carried on consecutively from one collection to the next. Each photograph had been numbered, then a brief description written, usually including identification of the location, activity and individuals where possible, plus date, photographer, provenance and size. Each photo had at least one primary and usually several secondary subject entries by geographic location or subject matter in the card catalogue, all interfiled alphabetically. But the collections had been processed by different staff members over the years and no subject authority list had been developed, with the result that considerable variation in style of entry and subject specification appeared. These inconsistencies had created some difficulties in the use of the card catalogue and so two archivists worked almost full time for the dura-

2 Canada, Office of the Secretary of State. *Student Community Service Program* (Ottawa, 1975).

3 Yukon Archives. Application to the Student Community Service Program (March 1975).

4 The machine, supplied by the Xerox Corporation for the duration of the eight-week project, allowed the regular business of the Archives to continue uninterrupted, an important factor in the success of the project.

tion of the project in order to standardize the entire card catalogue. This was an unanticipated aspect of the project that added to its over-all expense in terms of Archives staff time, but would have had to be undertaken eventually, and was well worth the effort.

The actual production of the finding aid required the withdrawal of the numbered three-by-five inch descriptive cards and Xeroxing these together with the reference print of the photograph on sheets of legal-size paper. Ten sets were produced, bound in Accopress Binders. The approximate basic costs of the project were eight hundred dollars for the student's salary, nine hundred for supplies, four thousand for the Xerox machine and two hundred for mailing. With the grant and the free use of the Xerox machine, the Archives' contribution was less than five hundred dollars. The costs of the project were minute, however, in comparison to the benefits which began to multiply as soon as the ten sets of finding aids were distributed. The six "outside" sets have been highly praised by the recipient institutions and, judging by the doubling of the number of photograph orders and the letters we continue to receive, they are utilized frequently by researchers. Most important, however, people throughout the Yukon have become acquainted with and are able to utilize their Archives as easily as the Sears' Catalogue Order Service. The regional library system sends books by truck, plane, boat and backpack to community branch libraries, schools, Indian Band Offices and bush families. Along with the books goes our finding aid. Teachers use them in classrooms since the quality of reproduction is adequate for instruction. The various museum and historical societies have utilized the finding aids to identify photographs in their collections and to assemble information for display themes. As well, archivists on the road now have a portable means to illustrate the wide range of subjects pursued by the Yukon Archives. We can select volumes to appeal to specific age and ethnic groups, or to show a community what visual documentation exists for their village. As new collections of photos are brought to our attention, we can assess and identify them more easily using the finding aid. Because of the ease with which these aids are used, many people have overcome an initial uncertainty about how or why to approach their Archives. With their interest and memories aroused by photographs, these individuals have gone on to utilize the other sources we have.

Researchers at the Archives now make their initial investigations visually with the finding aid, and are more precise and moderate in their requests to view the photographs, thus reducing considerably the amount of staff time for retrieval and return of unsuitable items. Naturally, with reduced need for handling, our collections are better conserved too. In answer to written requests we are able to send specific volumes to researchers since the alphabetical arrangement groups photographs depicting particular subjects, for example, Dawson — Celebrations, or Indian — Gravehouses.

The volumes are compact, comprehensive, simple to explain, easily transportable and usable anywhere. Other systems such as fiche or aperture cards work well where the clientele can visit the institution, but these systems require special equipment for both production and use. At the time our finding aid was developed, the Yukon Government was operating under severe financial restraints and no money for new equipment was available. Although the

course we followed was our only option at the time, it has resulted in an extremely versatile system, since no specialized equipment is required.

It is in considering the prospect of adding the five thousand photographs acquired since 1975 that several disadvantages of this system become apparent. The first six thousand photographs constitute thirty-eight volumes with approximately two hundred pages each and occupy two standard filing drawers. To add our new collections would double the number of volumes and storage space required and, in the long term, this could become a problem for us. A larger institution with hundreds of thousands of photographs would not likely find our system practical. Another factor we have not considered seriously yet is the potential longevity of the finding aid. Already some of the volumes are



Researcher G. Dawson using the Yukon Archives' finding aids to select photographs of Yukon River sternwheelers. (Wayne Towris, Yukon Territorial Government)

showing signs of wear and their life expectancy is probably about ten years. The paper used was not acid-free bond.

In considering the future, we also must assess the need for a finding aid system compatible with outside institutions. When automated information exchange systems extend to all archival media, our finding aid will probably not be appropriate. A microformat will likely be a suitable means to diffuse our finding aid in the future, with reader/printers able to provide users with copies. Reproductions from the present finding aid are unsatisfactory due to a lack of clarity. Of course the more sophisticated the system, the less versatile it will be for users in all areas of the Territory. Some of the community libraries in the Yukon will soon be equipped with microform readers, but it is doubtful that there will be propane fiche readers on the market for home use.

Yet the Visual Photograph Finding Aid fulfils both the spirit and the practical needs of the Yukon Archives. From the time of its opening the Archives staff have sought to make this a repository to document every aspect of the Yukon's past and developing cultures, and most of all to provide access by all Yukoners to its resources. The success of the photograph finding aid is due to the creative combination of government grants, a supportive voluntary organization (The Yukon Historical Society), the generosity of Xerox Corporation, and the dedicated perseverance of temporary and regular Archives staff. Most important of all, the whole Yukon community, which has cooperated with the Archives to ensure that the photographic records were available for preservation and the long-term benefit of all interested persons, has been given the access they deserve to their photographic heritage.



Vogee's Photograph Gallery, Atlin, ca. 1900. Anton Vogee. *This is one of the several Vogee Photograph Galleries in the Vogee Collection of 370 negatives donated by Arthur Vogee, the photographer's son. Anton Vogee photographed activities at Dyea, Skagway, Bennett, Whitehorse, Dawson and Atlin during and after the gold rush. (Yukon Archives, Vogee Collection, 37)*



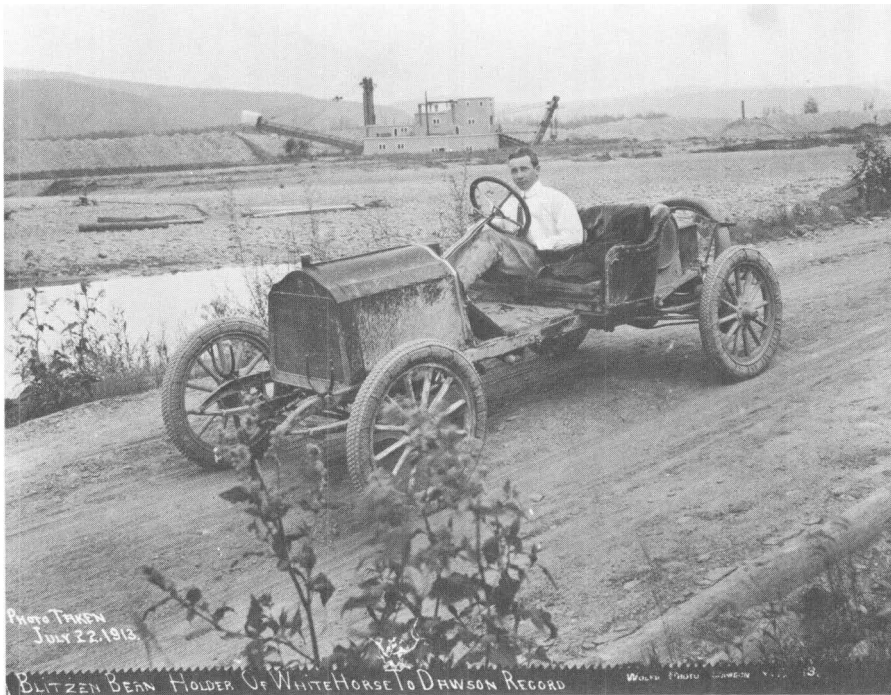
A Placer Gold Claim on Spruce Creek, Atlin Mining District, British Columbia, ca. 1899. Anton Vogee. *The Atlin Gold Rush occurred in 1899 a few miles south of the Yukon boundary and resulted in the same boom town activities as occurred in the Klondike, only on a smaller scale.* (Yukon Archives, Vogee Collection, 159)

W.P. & Y.R. Depot, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, ca. 1901. Harrie C. Barley. *Barley was the official photographer for the White Pass and Yukon Route from 1898 to 1900. He documented the construction and early operation of the Company's 110-mile narrow-gauge railway between Skagway, Alaska and Whitehorse.* (Yukon Archives, Pucket Collection)



The Eldorado Bottling and Steam Laundry Co., Dawson, Yukon, Summer 1899. Harrie C. Barley. (Yukon Archives, Barley Collection, 4712)

Early NWMP Post, Tantalus, on the Yukon River near the Present Community of Carmacks, ca. 1899. Photographer unknown. (Yukon Archives, Dawson Branch, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Collection, 21)



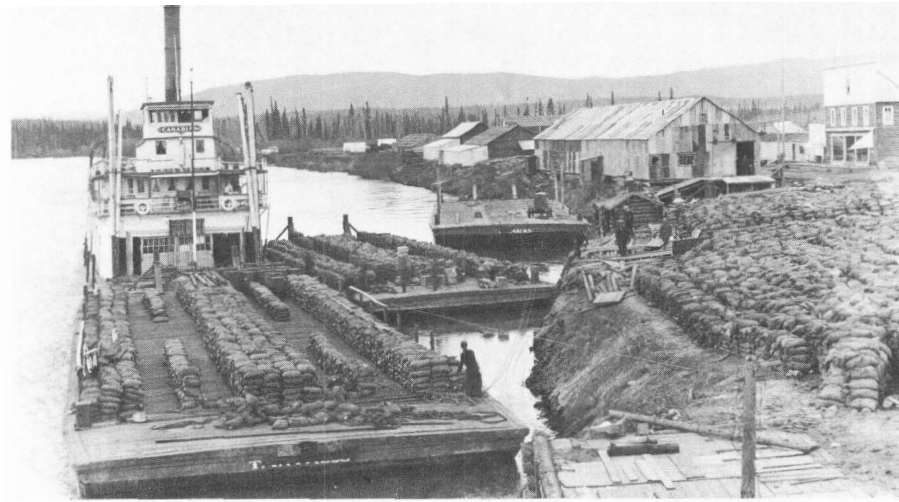
Blitzen Bean, Holder of Whitehorse to Dawson Record, 22 July 1913. Wolfe Studio, Dawson. (Yukon Archives, Victoria Faulkner Collection, 52)

Commercial & Academic Class, St. Mary's School, Dawson, Y.T., April 1916. Misumi, a part-time Dawson photographer. (Yukon Archives, Victoria Faulkner Collection, 9)



First Airplane to Land at Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River, ca. 1921. Photographer unknown. *Shi, or Old Abraham, a well-known Tutchone man, and John McMartin, the Selkirk Postmaster and his wife in front of an American Army bi-plane enroute to Alaska.* (Yukon Archives, Van Bibber Collection, 62)

Inhabitants at Teslin, Yukon Territory, ca. 1928. George Johnston. *Johnston, a Teslin Indian, photographed the Inland Tlingit people at Teslin and Atlin between 1910 and 1940, the years when southern technology was being adapted to, or replacing, many aspects of traditional lifestyles.* (Yukon Archives, George Johnston Collection)



Sternwheel Steamer *Canadian* and Barges Being Loaded with Silver Ore at Mayo Landing on the Stewart River, 1923. William S. Hare. *Hare documented the activities of Mayo Landing between 1922 and 1940. Photography was a sideline for this drayman, later catskinner and truck driver. He was also an agent for the Kodak Company and operated a darkroom to develop his own and others' film at Elsa. He produced more than a thousand photographs of the Mayo area and several 8mm motion picture films.* (Yukon Archives, William S. Hare Collection, 50)

Art and Colin Yeulet on the New Cement Sidewalks of Whitehorse, ca. 1930. Photographer unknown. (Yukon Archives, Harbottle Collection, 32)



Mr. and Mrs. Van Bibber at Champagne, Yukon, 1960. Photographed by one of their daughters. *Several of the Van Bibber children owned cameras and their photographs provide an intimate glimpse of the many families and individuals who once inhabited the Yukon's river areas and back country.* (Yukon Archives, Van Bibber Collection, 154)

Building a Canvas Boat on a Willow Frame, the Way Moose-Skin Boats were Once Built. Photographer unknown. (Yukon Archives, Connolly Collection, 6)