

Toronto's Public Health Photography

by JANICE R. SANDOMIRSKY

Dr. Charles J. Hastings, Toronto's Medical Health Officer between 1911 and 1930, created an innovative and ambitious public health program and inaugurated a reliable system of record-keeping. Beside the usual statistics on births, deaths and disease rates, Hastings initiated a programme of photographic records. To carry out the photographic project, Hastings was fortunate to have the services of Arthur S. Goss, chief photographer for the City of Toronto, and one of the city's leading pictorialist photographers.¹ Goss' talent, combined with Hastings' vision as a public health reformer, produced a photographic collection of unique quality both as medical records and as photographs. Under Hastings' direction, the Toronto Health Department expanded from a staff of twenty-seven with one public health nurse in 1910, to a staff of 500 with 114 public health nurses in 1920. Toronto became a model of public health administration in Canada and around the world.² The key to this reputation was accurate records. Hastings believed that records were the "bookkeeping of public health administration", supplying both the direction and justification for radical health programs.³

Charles Hastings and his ideas on public health exemplified the philosophy of a larger reform movement that was rooted in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to the problems attending rapid urbanization and industrialization. The public health dimension of this movement began with attempts to improve urban sanitation and water supplies, and gained momentum when bacteriological discoveries advanced techniques for disease prevention. Hastings' goal for Toronto was to create a Health Department which would "reduce in every possible way unnecessary and preventable disease with its attending suffering and premature death, and thereby to increase the sum total of health and happiness of the community".⁴ Like most reformers of this period, Hastings believed in

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- 1 Pictorialism was a photographic movement that began in England in the late 1880s. Pictorialists believed that photography should imitate the natural way of seeing as closely as possible and advocated the use of soft focus lenses. Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography; 1839-1920* (Toronto, 1979), p. 127.
 - 2 Paul Adolphus Bator, "Saving Lives on Wholesale Plan": *Public Health Reform in the City of Toronto, 1900 to 1930*, Ph.D. diss., Toronto, 1979, pp. 32 and 336.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
 - 4 Toronto Department of Health, *Health Bulletin* (September 1911).

man's capacity for unlimited progress and ability to solve human problems with rational analysis. The process of reform was seen as threefold: first, a close examination of the problem was required; second, a solution was to be rationally derived from the evidence; and third, a rigorous program of public education was to be implemented to encourage community help to rectify the problem. The first two steps, analysis and synthesis, were the work of knowledgeable experts; the third step, community education, was the key to the success of reform. Or, as one Canadian reformer phrased it: "All reformers, sooner or later, come knocking at the school room door".⁵

Hastings was very conscious of the power of education. He believed that it was "often only necessary to suggest improvements or changes to have them cheerfully carried out".⁶ On this assumption, Hastings utilized his extensive system of records to initiate a high profile public education campaign using every form of documentation and publication to spread the public health message. To make way for acceptance of the public health bureaucracy's unprecedented intrusion into the private life of the family, a "vast array of pamphlets and posters on health questions ranging from the control of small pox to the disposal of garbage" were distributed and displayed across a rapidly growing city of over 370 thousand people.⁷ Behind Hastings' view of education as "nine-tenths" of the Health Department's work, was his desire to win autonomy from the political considerations of civic aldermen. Reformers were incensed by the power the "uninformed" electorate had on decisions of complex social issues. The struggle for clean water, for example, demonstrated how the partisanship of City Hall frustrated attempts to build a water treatment plant and sewage system. From the time the campaign began in the 1880s to the time it was resolved in the 1920s, aldermen were fond of using the issue "as if it was something of interest only to those who were concerned in getting the public to vote at certain periods and serving a sort of quasi-political purpose".⁸ Rather than waste his time lobbying at City Hall, Hastings preferred to take a high public profile and use education to win approval for his programs.

Photographs played a unique role in this educational program. The power of photographic imagery to portray "reality" with intimate detail gave reformers a medium that was the perfect extension of their rationalist philosophy. If careful observation was the key to discovering solutions to urban problems, the camera was the mechanical tool that could produce a format for detailed investigation. In addition, it was believed that photographs, unlike written records, could not be disputed. After Hastings was appointed as Medical Health Officer in 1911, he began commissioning Goss to take photographs for the Health Department records. The timing of his appointment coincided exactly with Goss' promotion to chief photographer, allowing the Health Department for the first time to generate extensive photographic records. Before Goss' appointment and the creation of an independent Photographic and Blueprinting Section in the city's

5 Helen MacMurchy, "Dr. Osler's Thursday Clinic at John Hopkins Hospital in 1902," *Canadian Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 34, no. 6 (July 1927): 216-23.

6 *Health Bulletin* (September 1911).

7 Bator, "Saving Lives on the Wholesale Plan", p. 60.

8 Charles Sheard, "City of Toronto Disposal of Sewage and Water Filtration," *Empire Club Speeches, 1907-8*, (Toronto, 1910), p. 66.

Department of Public Works, photographic work was done on a limited scale in the Works Department or contracted out to commercial photographers.⁹

Although it is not clear where Goss learnt his trade as a photographer, it is clear that photography was his abiding passion. As a professional photographer, Goss was commissioned to make straight documentary photographs of government projects. As a hobbyist, he advocated the establishment of photography as a fine art. At times the two styles coincided: Goss' portraits taken in 1916 for the Health Department of children ready for adoption bear a striking resemblance to the 1906 portrait *Child and Nurse* shown in photographic art galleries in Toronto and London.¹⁰ Goss' photography was also influenced by his close friendship with members of the Group of Seven. This relationship encouraged Goss to try to direct Canadian photography toward "something worthwhile and characteristic of our climate and country".¹¹ Goss attempted to set an example and won a reputation as "undoubtedly one of the most successful pictorialists in Toronto" because of his "characteristic style, simple and dignified yet full of poetic feeling".¹² While making the photographs commissioned by the Health Department under the general heading of "Records of Unsanitary Conditions of all Kinds", Goss was able to exercise some of his aesthetic tastes. The visual quality and intimacy of many of the Health photographs made them more than just straightforward records. By addressing his subject in a direct frontal manner, Goss forced the viewer to participate momentarily in the lives and circumstances of his subjects. Although the conscious intent may have been for the photographs to be records, not artistic expressions, the sensitivity of Goss' presentation demanded that the human element not be ignored.

Most of the photographs Goss produced for the Health Department were simply kept on file as records. Some were used in various reports put out by the Department or other investigative agencies on the problems of decaying urban conditions. For example, in 1913, the New York Bureau of Municipal Research produced a report for the Toronto Civic Survey Committee that was illustrated with Goss photographs. The report was a survey of conditions in Toronto that:

cause people inconvenience, endanger their health and lives, affect real estate values, detract from the city's reputation as a place of residence or business or lower citizen's pride.¹³

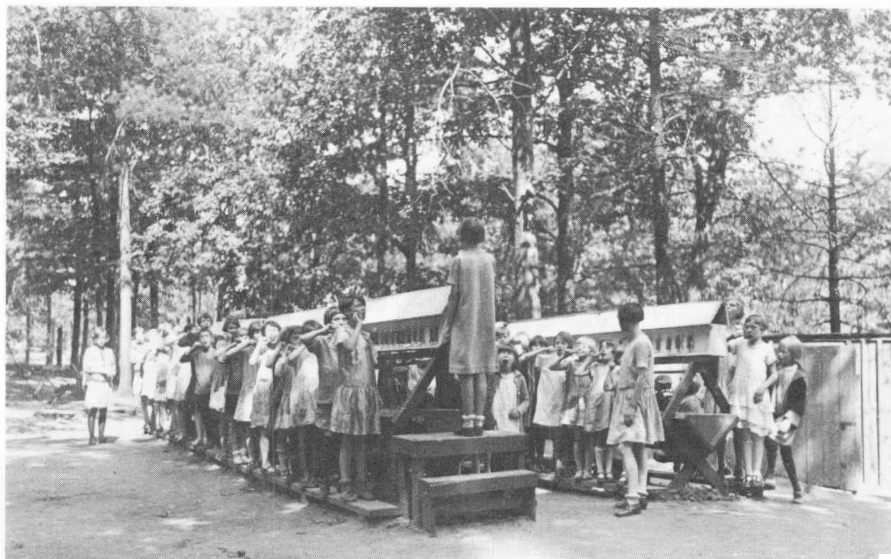
⁹ City of Toronto Archives, Arthur S. Goss file.

¹⁰ The photograph *Nurse and Child* was included in the 1906 *Photograms of the Year* publication of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, (p. 141). It was accompanied by an article from H. Mortimer-Lamb, "Pictorial Photography in Canada", which described Goss' photograph as "a most successful exercise in delicate well-graded greys, . . . quite the most pleasing and satisfying of any work of his. . . ." (p. 11).

¹¹ Goss often joined members of the Group of Seven on their canoeing sketching trips and tried his hand at sketching. A.J. Casson recalled Goss "always had a camera along, but very seldom used it." But, Casson noted, Goss "had a good eye and could select excellent subjects . . . his painting was a great help to him in his work as a photographer." A.J. Casson, *Introduction to the Arthur S. Goss Catalogue* for the City of Toronto Archives' Market Gallery Exhibition, March 1980.

¹² *Photograms of the Year 1915*, p. 22, and Sidney Carter, "Pictorial Work in Canada," *Photograms of the Year 1907*, p. 79. Sidney Carter was the leader of the pictorialist movement in Canada and a member of the Photo-Secession founded by Alfred Stieglitz in the United States to win recognition of pictorial photography as a fine art. Greenhill and Birrell, *Canadian Photography*, p. 127.

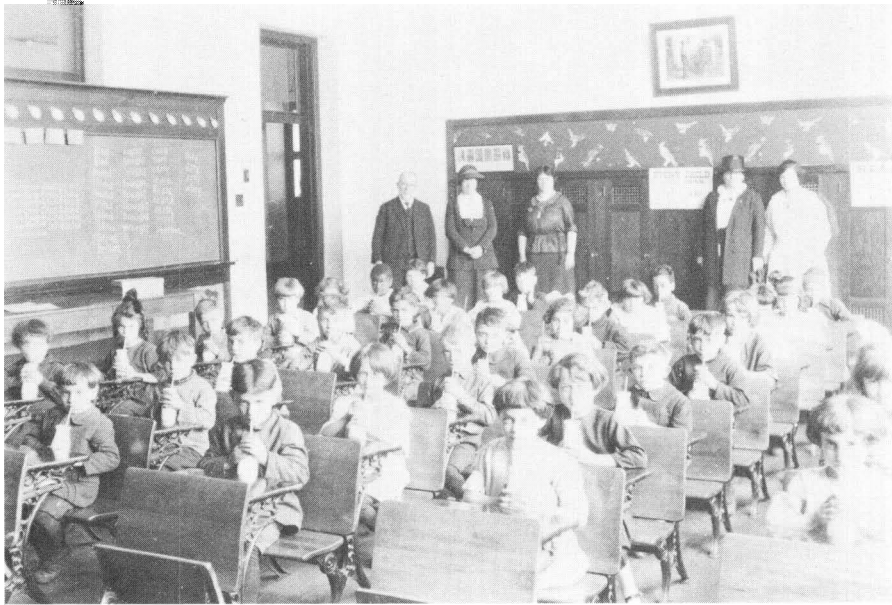
¹³ Civic Survey Committee, "Report and Physical Survey," (October-November 1913): Appendix E, p. 1.



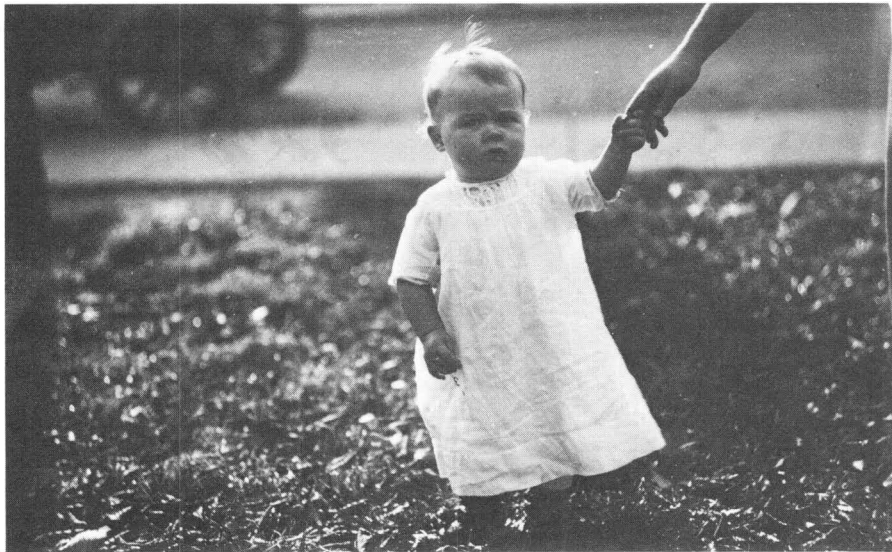
High Park School for Tubercular Children—Brushing Teeth, Health Department Photograph #798, 6 September 1928. Arthur S. Goss. *Improving the lives and health of children was a primary focus of Toronto's public health programs. Opportunities for fresh air and exercise, denied by the slums, were provided by the Department through outdoor schools and summer camps for the sickly and underprivileged.* (City of Toronto Archives)



Dental Clinic at Brown School, Health Department Photograph #864, 8 April 1936. Arthur S. Goss. *Hastings initiated a system of medical and dental inspections in the school, despite opposition to government intrusion into the private life of the family. This type of program exemplified the reformers' belief that a good school environment would help children overcome a poor home environment.* (City of Toronto Archives)



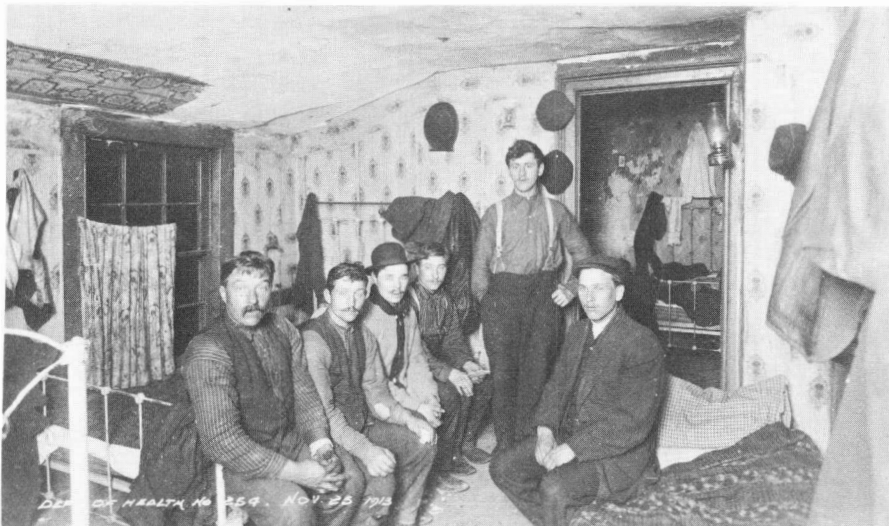
Milk Program—Manning Avenue School, Health Department Photograph #711, 27 April 1923. Arthur S. Goss. *Milk was a major breeding ground of disease and establishing a healthy supply for all children was one of Hastings' greatest achievements.* (City of Toronto Archives)



Baby Ronald Stewart—97 Bond Street, Health Department Photograph #392, 26 October 1915. Arthur S. Goss. *This photograph is very similar in style to some of Goss' pictorial portraits.* (City of Toronto Archives)



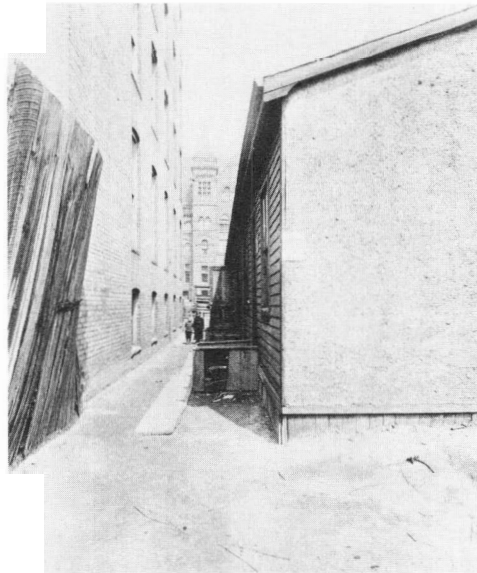
Slum Interior, Health Department Photograph #243, 29 October 1913. Arthur S. Goss. *Goss' sensitivity to his subjects is shown by the relaxed intimacy of this scene.* (City of Toronto Archives)



"Need for a Remedy to Eliminate Overcrowding"—50 Teraulle Street, Health Department Photograph #254, 25 November 1913. Arthur S. Goss. *This photograph was used in the report of the Civic Survey Committee, Oct.-Nov. 1913, App. E which noted that: "In the second floor, rear, two small rooms were providing shelter for six men. The health department had inspected these premises and had allowed, according to the cubical contents of the rooms, two men to sleep in the first room and one in the rear. Four men were found in the first room and two in the rear—making six in all as against allowance of three."* (City of Toronto Archives)



Slum Courtyard—142 Agnes Street, Health Department Photograph #259, 26 November 1913. Arthur S. Goss. *This photograph from the report of the Civic Survey Committee was to show the “filth and disorder” that existed in many backyards. The report noted that: Similar conditions were seen in many properties in The Ward and in other localities throughout the city. It was learned that four months ago two children were removed, owing to scarlet fever, to the isolation hospital from 128 Chestnut Street, the rear of which abuts this yard, and another child had just returned from the hospital, having had the same disease. In this yard a very unsanitary toilet was found.* (City of Toronto Archives)



“The Ward” Rear of 21 Elizabeth Street, Health Department Photograph #186, 15 May 1913. Arthur S. Goss. *This scene was taken from where Toronto’s new City Hall now stands. “The Ward” was considered to be an acute problem area because it was in such close proximity to Toronto’s expanding business center. Note the “Unsanitary” poster on the foreground house put up by Health Department sanitation inspectors.* (City of Toronto Archives)



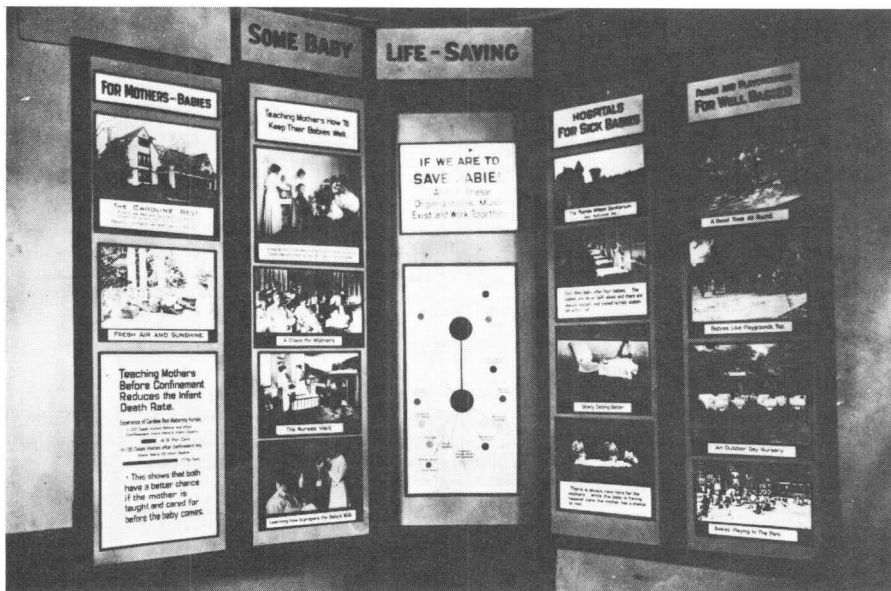
Slum—Prices Lane, Health Department Photograph #321, 23 August 1914. Arthur S. Goss. *The public health program for better housing emphasized that economic conditions, not the cultural habits of immigrants, forced newcomers to live in crowded unsanitary conditions.* (City of Toronto Archives)



Riverdale Settlement—Infant Clinic. Health Department Photograph #345, 18 September 1914. Arthur S. Goss. *This photograph was used in the Maclean's article, "Saving Lives on Wholesale Plan." Hastings' goal was to monitor the health of every baby in Toronto through baby clinics and home visits by public health nurses.* (City of Toronto Archives)



Tent for Tuberculosis Patient, Health Department Photograph #153, 6 September 1912. Arthur S. Goss. *This photograph also illustrated the Maclean's article. Tents were provided by the Health Department for tuberculosis patients that refused sanatorium care.* (City of Toronto Archives)



"Care of Babies Exhibition" Health Department Photograph #301, 5 August 1914. Arthur S. Goss. *Photographs and charts provided graphic examples of proper health care.* (City of Toronto Archives)

To present the facts “concretely in evidence” the authors presented “photographs showing many of the defects that are made the basis for comment.”¹⁴ The report further stated that the “dangers of continuing such conditions . . . are revealed in the accompanying photographs”.¹⁵ Two other reports, *The Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto, 1911* researched and written by Hastings, and *What is ‘The Ward’ Going to do with Toronto?* produced by the Bureau of Municipal Research in 1918, used photographic evidence to strengthen their argument. Although it is not certain that Goss took the photographs for these two reports, their content and the manner in which they were used was similar.¹⁶ Hastings’ *Report* was carefully documented with statistics and photographs to emphasize the extent “unsanitary houses, overcrowded, insufficiently lighted, badly ventilated, with unsanitary, and in many cases filthy yards” existed in Toronto.¹⁷ Photographs in the pamphlet on “‘The Ward’,” an area of Toronto notorious for its slum conditions, were specifically used to help “bring home to the citizens the real meaning of ‘the Ward’”.¹⁸

The statistics collected for these reports, everything from the number of unsanitary houses to the number of outdoor privy pits, were presented as hard cold evidence. They demonstrated that unhealthy conditions were widespread, a threat to public health, “a danger to public morals and an offence against public decency”.¹⁹ The photographs in the reports were to provide a ‘walking tour’ through the conditions described by the statistics. They were to *show* what the statistics could only *describe*. The Health Department photographs were also used by the popular media. An article by K.M. York in *Macleans Magazine*, “Saving Lives on Wholesale Plan: How Toronto has been made the Healthiest of Large Cities”, was designed to publicize the relationship between Toronto’s low death rate and the “application of scientific principles to the civic regulation of public health”.²⁰ This article gave the highest praise to Hastings as the man responsible for Toronto’s excellent health record and supported the claim with statistics and photographs. The objective of this type of publicity was to make Toronto citizens proud of their progressive health system and to encourage support for the ever expanding program. The Health Department used displays and presentations, as well, in its education campaign. Booths were set up at various civic events such as the Canadian National Exhibition, with photographs and statistical charts and were a favorite form of public education because they

14 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16 The negatives for the photographs in the two reports are not with the Health Department collection held at the City of Toronto Archives. Many of Goss’ prints and negatives were lost or damaged when they were neglected in the attic of the Old City Hall until the City Archivist was appointed in 1960. Both reports are at the City of Toronto Archives.

17 Charles J. Hastings, *Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto, 1911*, p. 3.

18 Bureau of Municipal Research, *What is ‘The Ward’ Going to do with Toronto?* (Toronto, 1918), p. 6. The Ward was bordered by College Street and Queen Street on the north and south, and Yonge Street and University Avenue on the east and west.

19 *Report of the Medical Health Officer*, p. 4.

20 K.M. York, “Saving Lives on Wholesale Plan: How Toronto has been made the Healthiest of Large Cities”, *Macleans Magazine* 28, no. 12, (July 1915), p. 20.

were “much more impressive than any amount of reading or studying of columns of figures”.²¹

Hastings’ public health program also created some backlash. The muckraking newspaper *Jack Canuck* was extremely critical of the Medical Health Officer’s extensive power to force the community to comply with inspection and disease prevention programs. Because the health programmes were primarily directed at slum neighbourhoods, the newspaper considered them to be just another form of government harassment of the poor. *Jack Canuck* published some of its own photographs of garbage filled yards and dilapidated conditions with the caption “Pictures for the Medical Health Officer’s Art Gallery” to support its claim that the Health Department programs were not successful and were simply designed to assault the poor.²² Evidently, Hastings’ use of photographs was effective; it produced a counter-campaign using the same medium.

Not all the Health Department photographs were on subjects of such high public interest; most were simply filed as records. For example, one group of photographs shows examples of diseased dairy cows, diseased animal cells under a microscope and the interiors of sanitary dairies. Another series shows the interior of the new City Health Laboratory, the chlorination plant and sewage disposal stations. These photographs, while rather mundane, confirm that the collection did play an important part in the Health Department’s record-keeping system. The concept of photographic record-keeping was certainly not unique to the Health Department. All departments of Toronto’s municipal government that were involved in community projects used Goss’ services after the Photographic and Blueprinting Section was established. What was interesting about the Health photographs was the comfortable meshing of Hastings’ aspirations as a reformer and Goss’ particular talent as a photographer. The power of the photograph to show with accuracy physical conditions made them a perfect analytical and educational tool for Hastings’ public health crusade. The ability of Goss to produce photographs rich with feeling and detail made the Health Department records a collection of rare value. And, most important, the result of the Health Department’s innovative programme was that Toronto did become a healthier place to live.

21 J.G. Adami, “Child Welfare Exhibitions and Their Value”, *Journal of Public Health* 3, no. 7, (July 1912), p. 372.

22 R. Rogers (ed.), *Jack Canuck* 1, no. 37 (Toronto, 20 July 1912), p. 15.

Résumé

Le ministère de la Santé publique de Toronto engagea un photographe officiel, Arthur Gosse, pour préserver dans les annales de l’histoire les conditions sociales des victimes de la pauvreté, de la maladie et du chômage, durant les deux guerres mondiales. L’auteur a inséré douze photographies afin de démontrer comment elles furent utilisées pour améliorer les conditions de vie existantes.