

The William Steele Louson Fonds

by **MARY LEDWELL**

Too often, photographs are acquired by archives as discrete items. They are regarded as visual records of people, places or events and are used primarily to illustrate text. Despite the validity of this use, the end result is a very restricted use of photographs. The creator of the photographs and the photographic fonds is rarely considered important. Any fonds, regardless of its medium, reveals a great deal about its creator and the photographic fonds is no exception. By examining the fonds in its entirety, archivists can learn a great deal about the photographer's life and artistic sensibility. For this reason, the integrity of the fonds must be retained.

In 1973, a group of more than 350 cellulose negatives was donated to the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation by the estate of the late Mac Irwin. Information regarding the acquisition was sparse. When questioned almost twenty years later, the executor of the Irwin estate who donated the material in 1973 remembered nothing of the provenance or custodial history of the photographs. Judging from the automobiles and style of dress revealed in the photographs, they were believed to have been taken as early as 1900, but before 1920. Mr. Irwin, who would have been a very young man when most of the photographs were taken, was ruled out as the creator of the images. Given the consistency of artistic and technical quality and subject matter, moreover, the possibility of the negatives having been the work of several different photographers was also eliminated. There being no other available evidence, the group of photographs were known as the "Irwin Collection"; the provenance and identity of the photographs remained a mystery for the next twenty years.

In 1984, the photographs were transferred from the Prince Edward Island Museum to the Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office. In the autumn of 1990, twenty-four photographs were selected from the Irwin Collection to be exhibited in its reading room. Compelled by a desire to know more about the photographs and a reluctance to mount an exhibition of unidentified photographs by an unknown photographer, a concerted effort was made to identify the creator of the images.

Fortunately, the majority of the negatives had previously been contact-printed, making the process of identification far easier than if the images had been in negative form

only. An examination of the unit as a whole revealed a number of patterns. There were numerous images of rural landscape, some easily identified as Prince Edward Island locations. The same four children—two boys and two girls—appeared repeatedly in the photographs. Among the images of identified Charlottetown buildings were several photographs of a house located at 35 Ambrose Street. Many of the shots of this house included the children, who appeared in other photographs. A series of images of rural stores, all with a horse and cart, laden with trunks and packages, parked in front was a curious addition to a unit comprised mainly of images of rural countryside and family picnics. Perhaps the most puzzling photograph however, was an image of a gravestone inscribed with the names and death dates of Elizabeth Sclater and Caroline Swayze, neither of which surnames are commonly found on Prince Edward Island.

By looking through provincial and city directories, it was possible to trace the residents of 35 Ambrose Street. Prior to 1914, this location was a vacant lot. The first known occupant of a dwelling at this site was William Steele Louson, a commercial traveller for Greenshields Limited, a Montreal-based dry goods company. Even though it could be said with fair certainty that Louson lived in the house at 35 Ambrose Street and that his occupation as commercial traveller might account for the images of rural stores, this circumstantial evidence was not strong enough to attribute the photographs to Louson. Searches in the subject catalogue and the birth, death and marriage records at the Public Archives and Records office revealed no trace of the Louson name. A search in the Master Name Index at the Prince Edward Island Museum, however, revealed a gravestone inscription for one W. S. Louson, who died on 29 October 1921 and was buried alongside his first wife, Elizabeth Sclater, and his mother, Caroline Swayze, at the People's Cemetery in Charlottetown. This explained the presence of the photograph of a gravestone bearing these two women's names. Louson's will, located at the Court House in Charlottetown, provided his death date and listed the names of both his second wife and his four children: Will, Caroline, Jean and Jack.

Having obtained Louson's death date, it was then possible to search the local newspapers for the days following 29 October for an obituary. There, a wealth of information about his life and activities was discovered. Even though obituaries can be somewhat over-zealous in their praise of the deceased, it was apparent that Louson was a very active and highly respected member of the community. Born in Montreal in 1860, Louson moved to Prince Edward Island around the turn of the century as a representative for Greenshields Limited. He settled in Charlottetown with his wife, their four children, and his mother. Among his many activities, he served as president of the local chapter of the Canadian Bible Association, captain of the Civilian Rifle Club, a member of the newly-chartered Rotary Club and a close associate of the Young Men's Christian Association.

Louson's participation in local organizations contributed to his widespread recognition, but it was through his skill as an amateur photographer that he earned his greatest accolades. According to the 29 October 1921 edition of the *Prince Edward Island Patriot*, Louson's images were among the most beautiful and sylvan of farmsteadings scenes on this side of the ocean. The pages of magazines and publications, as well as the homes of the people and public buildings, have been enriched with the masterpieces of photography taken by his skilled hand. His work in this direction has been of untold value to our beloved Province.¹

In addition to the bits and pieces of information located in various directories and in the Museum's Master Name Index, the substantial amount of biographical information gleaned from Louson's obituaries served to confirm what was already evident from the images. The fact that so many of the photographs depicted the activities and interests of Louson could no longer be explained as a mere coincidence. It was then possible to positively attribute the uncredited photographs to William Steele Louson.

The photographs which Louson left behind attest to the fact that he was a superb technician and a versatile photographer, whose work exhibits a clarity and an attention to detail uncharacteristic of the early twentieth-century amateur. Louson was especially fond of the natural beauty of Prince Edward Island, and many of his photographs reflect this interest. Long before others perceived its value, he recognized that Prince Edward Island's rural scenery was commercially exploitable. In addition to hundreds of postcards in the holdings of the Public Archives and the Prince Edward Island Museum that bear his name, many of Louson's images were supplied to local and international publications, often free of charge, in order to advertise the Island's attractions. For a whole generation of people, many of whom would never visit the province, W.S. Louson's photos defined their image of Prince Edward Island.

Historic photographs elicit a high level of public interest, and the response received from the Louson exhibit was overwhelming. A press release in the local newspaper notifying the public that a set of uncredited photographs had been identified and were on display at the Archives led to coverage on both CBC Radio and the evening television news programme. The television report was later rebroadcast on the CBC programmes "Mid-day" and "CBC Newsworld." After each broadcast, a surprising number of telephone calls and letters were received from people offering information about the photographer and the identity of some of the people in the photographs. In addition, an article was prepared for *The Island Magazine*, the historical journal published by the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation. The publicity attracted far more people than were ever expected into the Archives to see the exhibition, many having their first visit. A binder holding the remaining contact prints was placed in the reading room, and patrons were encouraged to help identify people and places; this exercise met with a high degree of success.

Perhaps the most gratifying result of the unexpected publicity surrounding the exhibition was a visit from Louson's granddaughter, who happened to be in Prince Edward Island during the summer of 1991 and noticed *The Island Magazine* article at a local shop. She knew that her grandfather had been an amateur photographer of sorts, but had no idea of his importance and that so much of his work still survived. She shared some of her mother's memories of growing up in Prince Edward Island and, being orphaned as a young girl as well, her own recollections of Will, Caroline, Jean and Jack. Drawing on this information, it was possible to learn more about the personalities of the Louson family and fill in many of the missing details about what happened to the children after their father's death.

Other records held by the Public Archives provided additional information about Louson and his photographs. For instance, the records of the Charlottetown YMCA helped establish a chronology for Louson's involvement in that organization. The original plans for "The Birches," a dwelling constructed for W.S. Louson at 35 Ambrose Street in 1910, were discovered in the fonds of local architect, C.B. Chappell. It was even possible

to determine ownership of some of the automobiles depicted in the photographs, by searching motor vehicle registration ledgers found in the City of Charlottetown fonds.

For someone whose memory languished in relative obscurity after his death, Louson's name appeared frequently in the local press and in many publications during his lifetime. Many of the regular researchers at the Public Archives assisted in adding to the growing Louson file by noting occurrences of his name while conducting their own research.

Louson's photographs are of great informational value to Prince Edward Island. They constitute an important visual record of life in the province between 1900 and 1920, and provide a rare glimpse of places and events on the Island that have changed considerably over the years. Louson's work is also important in that he was in many respects a self-appointed tourism promoter of Prince Edward Island. Not only did his images appear in numerous tourism booklets and on many postcards, but he also wrote extensively in the local press and *The Prince Edward Island Magazine* about the special beauty of his adopted home. For many people, their first and only impression of Prince Edward Island was shaped by Louson's vision.

As much as is now known about Louson and his family, we will probably never know who retrieved the negatives after the Louson family left Prince Edward Island in 1921, or how they were acquired by Mac Irwin. We also have no way of knowing what percentage of Louson's total output these photographs represent. A surprisingly small number of negatives remain of Louson's images that appeared in publications or as postcards. We are fortunate, nevertheless, in that so many of his negatives survived and remained intact for so many years. It is questionable whether a similar unit would be retained in its entirety if it were offered to the Public Archives today. Given the high cost of copying, processing and providing access to hundreds of photographic negatives, it becomes increasingly hard to justify retaining a large number of negatives of unidentified people and places created by an unknown photographer.

Given the recently recognized importance of Louson's *oeuvre*, it would have been unfortunate if only a selection of the identified images had been retained. The real value of his photographs lies, not in the individual identified images, but in the fonds as a whole. The Louson negatives form the complex of documents that represent the work and activities of their creator and, as such, possess considerable evidential value.

The value of a unit of this kind is limited until its provenance and identity can be ascertained. However, few archivists have the time and resources to conduct the detailed research required in order to identify photographs. In the case of the Louson images, many nights spent perusing records at the Archives, the assistance of the public and serendipity combined to make identification of many of the images possible. The positive identification of the Louson photographs has resulted in a valuable visual record of turn-of-the-century Prince Edward Island and a lasting record of the photographer and his family.

In any *fonds d'archives*, the records that are generated in the course of a person or agency's activities reveal information about its creator. The photographic fonds is no exception. The real value of Louson's photographs lies, not in the individual identified images, but in the whole of the documents generated in the course of his work — his fonds. A great deal can be learned about his life and interests, his relationship with his

family, his impressions of Prince Edward Island and his artistic style, by looking at his fonds in its entirety. In the case of the Louson graphic materials, the internal evidence supplied by the photographs themselves was confirmed by the survival of so many of the images. As archivists, we must move beyond regarding photographs as discrete items and learn, rather, to trust the photographs as documents that can provide evidence of the creator of the fonds.

Notes

- 1 *The Prince Edward Island Patriot* (Charlottetown), 29 October 1921



Figure 1: *Horatio Graham's Grocery, Hardware and Dry Goods Store, Gaspercaux*, is one of a group of photographs of stores which Louson probably visited as a travelling salesman. All photographs include his horse and cart laden with trunks, while the store employees and Louson's travelling companions pose in front of the building: courtesy PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation Collection, Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office, 3466/73.373.88.



Figure 2: *Clamdigging.* The tendency of many amateur photographers at the turn of the century might have been to photograph these clamdiggers smiling broadly and displaying their catch. Louson's relaxed composition, diffused lighting and deliberately obscured faces are in sharp contrast to the staid and formal postures that characterize earlier photographs: courtesy P.E.I. Museum and Heritage Foundation Collection Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office, 3466/73.373.214.



Figure 3: W.S. Louison's children appeared frequently as subjects in his photographs. Clockwise from top are Caroline, Will, Jack and Jean: courtesy PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation Collection, Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office. 3466/73.373.141.



Figure 4: Louson's signature as a photographer was his practice of framing distant subjects with grass and trees. This composition resembles many other images created by Louson and presents a pastoral, tranquil image of Prince Edward Island; courtesy PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation Collection, Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office, 3466/70. 1778.3.12.18.



Figure 5: *Halliday's Wharf, near Belfast, Prince Edward Island.* courtesy PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation Collection, Prince Edward Island Public Archives and records Office. 3466/73.373.209.