



### Mattie Gunterman

**Film Summary:** The life and images of early photographer Mattie Gunterman, both capture the lives as lived by ordinary and pioneering peoples in British Columbia. Her extraordinary life turns on its head the preconceived notions of woman's work of that time.

#### Curriculum Application

Social Studies 9/10

#### The Essential Question:

How effective is photographic evidence as sources of historical information and perspective?

### Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. This lesson package examines the portrayals and the perceptions of "ordinary lives" in turn of the century British Columbia through the eye of this remarkable photographer.
3. Lesson includes: Backgrounder and discussion questions
4. Small group activity on photographic analysis and interpretation.

### Learning Standards

1. To assess Gunterman's portrayals of ordinary working and pioneering peoples in early British Columbia and to evaluate the **historical significance** of her work.
2. Explain and infer different perspectives on the historical past in regards to prevailing norms, values and beliefs of the present. **Perspective**
3. To examine the gender roles and prevailing conditions that are reflected in the work of pioneer photographer Mattie Gunterman. **Cause and consequence**
4. Compare and contrast continuities and changes for women in the time period of Mattie Gunterman and in the present day. **Continuity and Change.**

### Materials and Resources Provided

- [Mattie Gunterman Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- *Lesson Activity 1: Mattie Gunterman*
- *Extension Activity 1: Mattie Gunterman*
- *Document 1: Biography of Mattie Gunterman*
- *Document 2: Mattie Gunterman Photographs*
- *Document 3: Photographic Analysis*

### Additional Suggested Materials

- [Mattie Gunterman | Creators | Arrow Lakes Historical Society \(alhs-archives.com\)](#)
- [Vancouver Public Library collection on Mattie Gunterman](#)
- [Framing Identity: Mattie Gunterman, Geraldine Moodie and the Social Practice of Photography in Canada \(1880 - 1920\). Ottawa: Carleton University \(M.A. thesis\), 1995](#)

## Vignette Questions

1. Why was the Bull's Eye Camera an important development?
2. How did Mattie and her family get to their new home in Thompson's Landing BC?
3. Who did Mattie take pictures of with her new camera?
4. Why would the candid nature of her photographs be significant sources of historical information?
5. Why is Mattie's work as a photographer noteworthy?
6. Are there modern examples that parallel the significance of the Bull's Eye camera in today's society? How might these examples be used by future historians?

## Lesson Activities

1. Students should have some previous teaching on the subject of Victorian social norms, and the influence upon them of class and gender. Ask them to recall some of this teaching, and also any movies, books, and other media portrayals of Victorian Life.
2. Brainstorm a list of common themes, words, and images under headings such as:
  - "Class: Upper, Middle, Lower";
  - "Men's work & Women's work"
  - "Society Do's & Don'ts"
  - "Public & Private Lives"
3. Show the vignette "Mattie Gunterman".
4. Use the discussion questions in *Learning Activity 1* to guide post-video discussion.
5. Distribute the handout Document 1 "Mattie Gunterman: Biography" and read it to the class, or have them read it individually, or in groups.
6. If this is the first photo analysis activity for your class, review the guidelines for interpreting historical photographs (Document 3)
7. Proceed to Extension Activity 1 where groups of 3 students study and interpret one of the 10 photographic samples provided in Document 2. Each group can report their findings to their assigned photograph to the class reflecting on the essential question; "How effective is photographic evidence as sources of historical information and perspective?"
8. For further study: How has the development of digital photography and social media changed the way in which the recent historical past has been recorded. What challenges will future historians have in using these resources to write the history of "our times"?

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Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Gavin Hainsworth

## Lesson: Mattie Gunterman

### Lesson Activity 1: Discussion Questions

1. The film acknowledges the Bulls-Eye Camera as a technology that made photography more acceptable. How did it do so? What sort of things could be easily photographed that could not be before? List examples from the film.
2. Mattie Gunterman is not a well-known historic figure, nor are the people or events she photographed. Yet, they represent very personal and important histories to have a more complete view of life in early British Columbia. Why do you think these images and their creator, Mattie Gunterman, are not well-known? What role did class and social standing play in this?
3. Mattie Gunterman's life could be described as extra-ordinary and different from that of a traditional Victorian woman. Do you agree with this statement? If so, in what ways was she different? What ways was her life limited by the class and gender barriers of the time?
4. Mattie Gunterman's photographs are examples of **Primary Sources** in the study of history. These sources are created at the specific time in history for reasons that need to be considered when analyzing them. Mattie Gunterman took these images for her own purposes -- without an eye to future historians or generations. What were the reasons for her photography? What could be the reasons they would be useful to current historians wanting a window to study the past?

## Lesson: Mattie Gunterman

### Extension Activity 1: Photographic Interpretation

*(If students have not undertaken similar activities, it is recommended that you review document 3, Photographic analysis with them prior to this activity)*

Distribute one of the ten photographs contained in Document 2 to a group of three students. If class size permits one pair of photographs can be distributed to each group of students.

*(If the resources are available, it is suggested that you use digital images of the photographs)*

Questions to consider:

1. Why did the photographer take a picture of this image? What was the photographer's point of view and what message was being conveyed?
2. Was it 'staged' for effect or was this a spontaneous (candid) shot?
3. What is missing, or was omitted? What lies outside the frame of the photograph?
4. Is there an event taking place? Describe, but do not interpret, what you see.
5. How does the visual make you feel? Describe your personal feelings and judgments about the image, based on what you have seen.
6. What is your knowledge of the snapshot, based on your background knowledge, studies, and experiences?
7. Can you speculate as to the geographical location of the image or the date or era in which it was created?
8. What do the images provide that is useful to the study of history?

### Document 1: Mattie Gunterman Biography



VPL-2215 Mattie Gunterman c.1900

**Ida Madeline Warner (Mattie) Gunterman** was born sometime during the spring of 1872 in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Mattie is described by her friend Kathleen Goldsmith as "delicate" suggesting that she was often sick as a child but from her earliest days she exhibited an extremely strong sense of self-identity choosing to be known as Mattie as opposed to Ida or Madeline. The most convincing evidence of her sense of self appears through her photographs; she appears in more than half of them. When, in the late 1880s, Mattie left her home town and headed west for the booming city of Seattle, and she took her snapshot camera with her.

### From Seattle to Beaton

Mattie developed trouble with her lungs (TB) which worsened in the damp climate and constant rain of Seattle. Mattie wanted leave the wet autumns and winters of Seattle behind for a drier home, so in the spring of 1897 Mattie, her husband William, and their 6 year-old son Henry, headed for the semi-arid climes of eastern Washington. The family eventually decided to visit Mattie's cousin Hattie Needman in the small British Columbia mining community of Thomson's Landing, later known as Beaton. Mattie had written Hattie to enquire whether Bill might be able to find work there.

The three, including her horse Nellie and their dog Nero, walked a total of 600 miles, with Will looking for work in sawmills along the way. As they travelled, Bill worked in sawmills and Mattie took in laundry.

It was during this trek to better health that Mattie took the first photographs attributed to her using the Bull's Eye camera.

### Mattie's First Camera (No.2 Bull's Eye) & Early Pictures



Kodak Bulls Eye Camera, c. 1897

The Kodak Bulls Eye was one of the very early Kodak cameras, and Mattie was one of its very early users. First produced in 1896 (and made until 1913). The top of the camera box would pull up to a beautiful wooden interior containing two rollers designed to take 3.5 x 3.5 inch images on a 12 exposure roll of film. It had a simple spring controlled rotary disc shutter and rotating disc stops controlled by pulling up a lever on top of the camera. It also contained a built-in mask that offered the option of taking round or square photos.

With her Bull's Eye camera, commonly known as a box camera, she snapped pictures of friends, her family's campsites, trappers; prospectors; miners; packers; pioneer dreamers; and wilderness activities along backwoods trails.

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## **Beaton: A New Beginning**

The Gunterman family arrived in Beaton, BC in June of 1898 to find that the discovery of many rich silver-lead deposits in the West Kootenay District provided much opportunity for prosperity, not just getting by.

Bill had not originally been too pleased to be relocating to the isolated community of Beaton instead of the excitement of the growing city of Seattle, but he had done so knowing that Mattie would be delighted with the semi-wilderness of the area. Bill easily found work, and Mattie's health improved greatly in the new environment.



*VPL-2222-Gunterman's homestead in Beaton c.1900*

## **Mattie's Second Camera (Glass-Plate) & Later Pictures**

By early 1898, Mattie's interest in photography had expanded. With the family now financially secure, she could now afford a 4"x5" plate camera that offered ground glass focusing, and a multispeed shutter.

This allowed her to keep a more detailed photographic journal of her new life. Mattie usually spent winter months developing her plates and making prints. She kept two albums: one for herself and one for Henry, a practice which she continued until he was a grown man. It is partly thanks to Henry's album that examples of Mattie's early work exist today, because Mattie's own copies were destroyed in a fire when the Gunterman family home burned down in 1927.

Curiously, Mattie appears in many of her own photographs. She made this possible by using a long piece of rubber tubing which was attached to her camera's pneumatic shutter at one end with a rubber bulb at the other. Squeezing or stepping on the bulb released the shutter and made an exposure. Many of her Beaton photographs record pioneers and camp workers and their lives in interior British Columbia.

## **Significance of Mattie's Pictures**

Her photos provide a visual history of working peoples, not only in the camps and the Nettie-L Mine, but also the social aspects of community: the results of hunting expeditions; women and children skating on frozen ponds; family picnics; masquerade parties; and humorous activities in the cookhouse. She had no pretensions about creating art, she wanted to record the people and places that had meaning for her.

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In 1927, a rancorous neighbour burned down Mattie's house, causing her to lose all her photographs, apart from the ones in Henry's keeping. She lived on, past Will's death in 1937, until the end of the war (in which her grandson, Avery, was serving), She died suddenly at the age of 73 in 1945.

### **The Re-Discovery of Mattie's Photos**

Incredibly, what was left of Mattie's photograph collection was found buried under a rat's nest! In the summer of 1961, Ron D'Altroy, former historical photograph curator at the Vancouver Public Library, drove into the Lardeau River Valley with two associates to conduct research into the ghost towns of British Columbia. Ron took a side trip to the deserted town of Camborne then drove on to a local bar at the Beaton Hotel.

Following is a quote from Ron *(From: Flapjacks & Photographs: a History of Mattie Gunterman, Camp Cook and Photographer by Henri Robideau, p. 194)*

“I think I heard about Henry Gunterman the first time in the beer parlour, having a couple glasses of beer at Beaton, and somebody in there said, "Ahhhhh-boy, you guys should talk to old Henry Gunterman... his mother took a lot of old pictures on glass"...Well boy, my heart stopped beating right there. So we started to look for them... I went up a ladder, it was about sixty percent broken, up into a hole, into a loft, in the back, in the shed, and found this box of glass plates...refuse from the packrats had fallen and put a dome on it...great many of the plates were stuck together...And OHBOY! I took one look and I knew exactly what I had.”

*(From: Flapjacks & Photographs: a History of Mattie Gunterman, Camp Cook and Photographer p. 194)*

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VPL 2225 Three women on horseback, c.1900

An aging Henry Gunterman felt that his mother's photographs would be safer in the Vancouver Public Library than in his loft where they could become the booty of thieves, and the bed for rodents. As a result, he donated the entire collection of plates to Ron to bring back to safety in Vancouver to preserve and eventually make available to the public. There are almost 300 images in the Ida Madeline Warner (Mattie) Gunterman Photograph Collection, one hundred and fifty of which have been digitized to date.

*Written by Gavin Hainsworth*

### **SOURCES:**

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Neering, Rosemary. *Wild West Women: Travelers, Adventurers and Rebels*. Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 2000.

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<http://revelstokemuseum.blogspot.ca/2010/01/mattie-gunterman.html>

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## Lesson: Mattie Gunterman

Document 2: Photograph Analysis Assignment (photo sources: [Vancouver Public Library](#))



Figure 1 Group in front of Prospector's Exchange Hotel: VPL Accession Number: 103

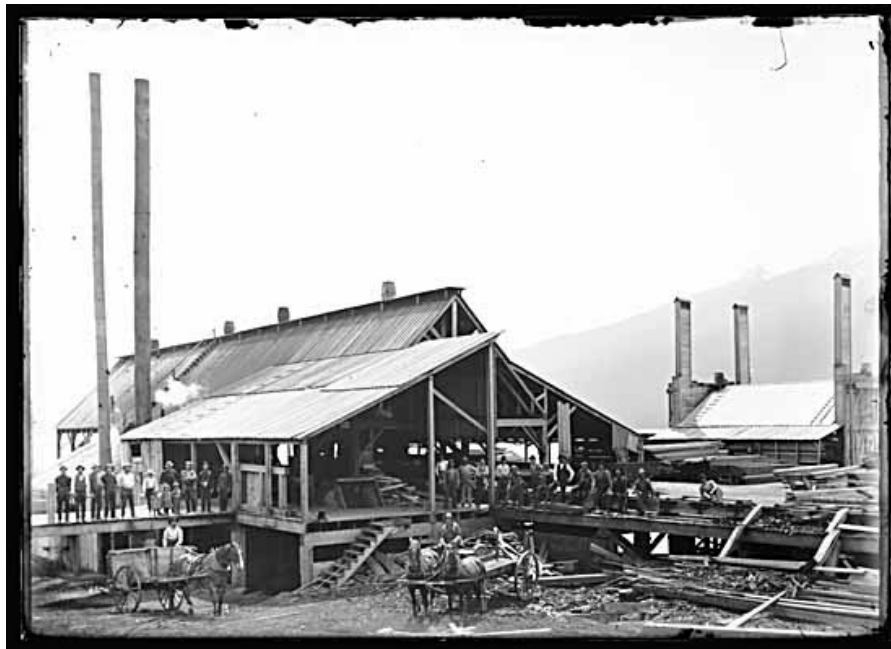


Figure 2 Yale-Columbia Lumber Co. Ltd. Mill: VPL Accession Number: 1804



**Figure 3** Loggers with logging equipment: VPL Accession Number: 1803



**Figure 4** Mattie Gunterman and family on Dewdney Trail: VPL Accession Number: 2213



Figure 5 Mattie Gunterman with a rifle and holding a grouse: VPL Accession Number: 2215



Fig.6 Women and hunters with mountain goat: VPL Accession Number: 2216



Figure 6 Gunterman's homestead in Beaton: VPL Accession Number: 2222



Figure 7 View of Beaton: VPL Accession Number: 2224



**Figure 8** Miners inside the Nettie L. Mine: VPL Accession Number: 2231



**Figure 9** Two boys with fish: VPL Accession Number: 2218

## Lesson: Mattie Gunterman

### Document 3: Photographic Analysis

#### Interpreting Photographs

Like political cartoons, photographs must be carefully analyzed. Many people think that photographs have no bias because the image is a snapshot of an exact moment in time. However, there are many factors to consider when analyzing photographs. The photographer has bias, and can influence the outcome of the snapshot. It is important to remember that a photographer can influence, mislead, misrepresent, or dramatize; just as other artists can, using their distinct medium.

#### General questions to consider

- Who took the picture?
- What was the purpose of the photograph?
- Why did the photographer take a picture of this image?
- What were the photographer's point of view and what message was being conveyed?
- Was it 'staged' for effect or was this a spontaneous (candid) shot?
- Was there an interest group who paid to have the image taken?
- Was it created for propaganda, as a record of family history, or even as a joke?
- What is missing, or was omitted?
- What lies outside the frame of the photograph?
- Is there a caption, and, if so, does this influence your reaction to and meaning of the photograph?

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## **Part 2: Detailed Observation**

Now that you have thought about the photographer and the purpose of the photograph, it is time to observe the images themselves. This may be organized into four main categories: background knowledge, objective observations, subjective reactions, and inferences.

### **b. Background Knowledge:**

To obtain a deeper understanding of a photograph, the observer must have some background knowledge of the historical context of the times. This is to be able to understand the political, social, and economic issues within the image.

- **What is your knowledge of the snapshot, based on your background knowledge, studies, and experiences?**
- **Can you surmise the geographical location of the image or the date or era in which it was created?**

Note: 'Grounding' the photograph in a place and space can aid in the understanding of the picture.

### **c. Objective Observations:**

Next, describe your 'objective observations' of the images. Avoid personal feelings, and instead concentrate on the objects, structures, people, facial expressions, clothing, etc.

- **Is there an event taking place? Describe, but do not interpret, what you see.**

### **c. Subjective Reactions:**

After this step, it is time to interpret your objective observations.

- **How does the visual make you feel? Describe your personal feelings and judgments about the image, based on what you have seen.**

### **d. Inferences:**

Lastly, once you have studied the historical context of the image, and analyzed it objectively and subjectively, it is time to write down your conclusions.

- **What can you infer about the photograph now that you have analyzed it?**

*Provided with permission by Elizabeth Byrne Lo- Burnaby School District*