

All the Latest Improvements: Vancouver Photographic Studios of the Nineteenth Century

While portrait photographs reveal much about dress, social customs, and the degree of assimilation of immigrant groups, the circumstances under which such carefully staged images were constructed have not been sufficiently explored. The photographic studio of the nineteenth century was often an elaborate stage, yet few glimpses have been offered behind the scenes. Three detailed newspaper descriptions of Vancouver studio interiors provide a better understanding of this carefully fabricated milieu. Comparative and cooperative studies between photographic archivists and material history researchers are needed to broaden our knowledge of Canadian photographic portraiture.

The photographic studios of nineteenth-century Vancouver were located in a variety of structures, from tents to specifically commissioned photographic studios. Two photographic firms, Milross & Wren and J.A. Brock & Co., had opened studios in frame buildings within a week of each other and two weeks before the major fire of 13 June 1886 which almost completely destroyed the city.¹ Milross & Wren operated as a portrait studio but no surviving work has been identified. The other company, a partnership of J.A. Brock and H.T. Devine, both for-

merly of Brandon, Manitoba, specialized in outdoor photographs but did take interior portraits. No studio portraits by Brock & Co. before the fire have been discovered. Following the fire, only J.A. Brock & Co. carried on business, at first in a tent on Cordova Street, and subsequently in the first brick building erected after the fire, the Horne Block on the south side of Cordova Street between Seymour and Richards.

As happened with other studios in Vancouver, Victoria and elsewhere, the Brock & Co. studio was utilized by two further photographers. James Deakin Hall (1854-1936), senior partner in Hall & Lowe, formerly of Winnipeg and by 1885 established in Victoria, located in the same building in October 1887. He called his portrait studio the Vancouver Photo Company. His portrait setting is distinctive (fig. 1) and featured a patterned curtain, a Japanese folding screen, and a fur rug. When David Wadds bought out the Vancouver Photo Co. from Hall in May or June 1892, Wadds retained the studio decor for a period. This was probably not an uncommon practice as a new photographer probably did not have money to invest on fresh backdrops.



Fig. 1. Typical elements of 1880s and 1890s Vancouver photo studios included a painted backdrop, fur rug, a folding screen, a drape, usually with a horizontal pattern, and various pieces of furniture. These items could be quickly rearranged for different effects. J.D. Hall, the photographer in whose studio this portrait was taken, is standing second from left in a dark suit and cap. He was treasurer of the Vancouver Lacrosse Club and a founding member. (City of Vancouver Archives, SPORTS P. 48)

Robert W. Anderson, likely the first itinerant photographer to visit the new city, appears to have operated out of a room in the White Swan Hotel, but probably did outdoor work. His ad read "Views and groups taken to order."² Other itinerant photographers, such as the stylishly titled Great Eastern Photographic and Advertising Company, established themselves in tents, but as time went on other itinerants gained in respectability by renting space in vacant rooms. The Rocky Mountain Portrait Co., for example, in Vancouver for one day, March 15, 1894, occupied a store on the ground floor of the Metropolitan Block at the corner of Hastings and Homer streets.³

Railway cars were also outfitted as photographic darkrooms. William McFarlane Notman (1857-1913) was provided with such a car on his trips west in the 1880s. Alexander Henderson (1831-1913), a Montreal contemporary of Notman's, was officially employed as a CPR photographer beginning in 1892. He made a trip west in the same car used by Notman. A Vancouver newspaper described it as "The C.P.R.'s Shadow Catcher. The funny car with the three dark windows that has been in Vancouver for the past ten days...is the travelling home and workshop of Mr. Henderson, photographer for the C.P.R., who has been taking a number of views in Vancouver and vicinity...."⁴ Another paper commented that "Mr. Henderson is travelling in a car that has been specially fitted up for him, and many people who saw it on the side track wondered what it was, as some of the windows are darkened in order that he may develop the photographs."⁵ These travelling darkrooms were used to provide nearly instantaneous results so a photographer could check the quality of his work and rephotograph if necessary.

As with other municipalities, the Vancouver City Council regulated construction activity through a council committee known as the Board of Works and through the city fire inspector. A recent arrival in the city, John E. Thompson, complained to council in November 1888 that the fire inspector "has ordered me to remove some boards constituting part of the roof of my photographic canvas tent at the back of the premises No. 76 Cordova Street.... I have lately arrived from the East and the boards are intended to afford only a temporary shelter during the winter, when the risks of fire as regards roofs are at a minimum." The boards, he stated, were necessary as they were "laid over a tent roof for water shelter."⁶

In June 1898, I.B. Snell wrote to City Council requesting permission to operate a portable studio (he probably meant a tent) until such time as he could open a permanent studio in a building. He complained to Vancouver City Council that there were simply not enough buildings of a suitable nature.⁷ His request appears not to have been granted, for he next surfaces as a photographer in Rossland.

Both the fire inspector and the Board of Works were involved in approving plans for the erection of a roof-top

photographic studio by the Stanley Brothers in 1889. The brothers sought permission in July and must have received it by September when a newspaper stated "Messrs. Stanley Bros. will commence today the erection of a photographic studio in the Chamberlain building, corner of Carrall and Powell streets."⁸ The studio was opened in mid-October 1889.⁹ A November 1889 fire insurance map refers to the Stanley Bros. studio as a tin-clad photo gallery on roof; "lodgings and photo" were shown on the second floor.

John White's "photo tent" is also shown on the same map, while John Thompson's studio and apartment appear on the second floor of a building at the corner of Cordova and Carrall streets. James Deakin Hall (1854-1936), who established a photo studio in October 1887, also appears on the map as "Photos & Dwelling" at 416 Cordova Street. Bailey & Neelands, who did not, so far as is known, operate as a portrait studio, are shown on the map in a first floor location at 127 Hastings Street as "Books & Photos & Picture Frames."



Fig. 2. This half-tone reproduction represents the only known example of what the inside of a late nineteenth-century Vancouver portrait studio looked like. Although flash photography was in use, most photographers preferred the quality of natural light which they controlled with overhead curtains strung on wires. This is the interior of the Wadds Brothers studio photographed especially for the 1898 special issue of the *Province*. Two large studio cameras can be seen on the right and left. (City of Vancouver Archives)

The first Vancouver photographer to commission a portrait studio design was John M. White. He called upon the talents of Vancouver architect R. McKay Frupp in 1891 who "specially arranged for Mr. White the photographer" six rooms on the second story (called the first floor) of a new building which would include "a dark-room, studio, reception room, waiting room, etc.... The entrance [to the second story on Oppenheimer Street, now E. Cordova] will be surrounded by a balcony, and will be heavily arched with rock-faced stone. One of the chief features of the building will be a handsome circular bow window on the corner."¹⁰

The building, jointly owned by the real estate firm of Graveley and Spinks, was known for a while as the Graveley-Spinks Block. It stood on the southeast corner of Oppenheimer and Carrall streets. After White moved to 14 W. Cordova about 1897, his studio was used by the photographer H.D. McKay between about 1897 and 1899, and then by Alphonse E. Savard (1864-1934) from about 1899 to 1915. The building no longer exists. A half-tone illustration of the Graveley-Spinks block under H.D. McKay's tenancy appears in a souvenir edition of the *Province* newspaper published in the spring of 1898 (fig. 2). Also in this issue were half-tones of the exteriors of S.J. Thompson's Vancouver and New Westminster studios and the interior of the Wadds Bros. studio.

Upon White's move into his custom-built quarters, a complete description of the interior was published in November 1891. A portrait taken in 1892 (fig. 3) conveys something of the contrived elegance of White's studio and confirms this first detailed portrayal of the interior of a photo studio in Vancouver:

He has taken the whole of the [upper] floor, and the various apartments have all been fitted up and furnished in an elegant and handsome manner. He has provided a comfortable reception room for his patrons, and leading out from this is a convenient little dressing room. Adjoining the reception room is the studio. This has been fitted with special windows and skylights so that photographs can be taken in any kind of light or weather. The windows are made of ground glass so that the light does not affect the eyes. In addition to the ordinary camera, Mr. White has just purchased one made in London at a cost of £350. This is fitted with all the latest improvements and can take photographs, life size, without any enlarging. He has a most complete set of scenery, nearly all of which is entirely new. At the rear of the studio is a dark room, while on this floor there is also a work room. A printing room completes this establishment, which is first-class in every respect.¹¹

Competition within the Vancouver photographic community was fairly stiff. Most photographers did not advertise and therefore relied on word-of-mouth or physical presence in a central business location for customers. One newspaper, the *News-Advertiser*, often provided free advertising in the form of long notices such as that given White. Thomas Bell Straiton (1869-1955), a contemporary of White's, had his studio described in 1893 in much the same detail. No interior portraits by Straiton from this studio have been located:

The reception room is in the front of the block overlooking Cordova street. It is elegantly furnished, one of the chief features being a very unique card table made out of polished buffalo horns. From this room the visitor is taken to the studio proper, which is at the back of the building. The roof is entirely constructed of glass, and by means of spring blinds the light can be easily adjusted. For a back ground Mr. Straiton has several well painted

scenes, which are on a roller, so that he can let any one down just like a drop curtain. He has two of the latest improved cameras and is able to take pictures of any size, while he can also take them by flash light.

Adjoining the studio is a work room, and also a stock room. By a private stairway leading from the studio the reporter was taken up to the printing room, which is located on the roof. Its position enables pictures to be printed in any time. This is the most important portion of the business and Mr. Straiton will thus be able to have his photographs completed in a short time. There is also a dark room adjoining the printing room. From the roof a splendid view of the City and harbor can be obtained, and for landscape scenes it is a splendid spot.¹²

One of the last Vancouver portrait studios to open in the nineteenth century was designed for Stephen Joseph Thompson (1864-1929), a prolific and brilliant photographer originally based in New Westminster. Within three months of relocating to Vancouver from New Westminster, or by early March 1898, he had opened an opulent photographic centre as seen by the eyes of yet another *News-Advertiser* reporter:



Fig. 3. This 1892 Labour Day portrait of Vancouver bakers illustrates the de rigueur elegance of John White's architect-designed studio space. The screen and curtain on the left conceal an amateurishly painted double Moorish arch. (City of Vancouver Archives, PORTRAITS P. 1653)

It is no good being in a hurry to pass Mr. Thompson's doorway. It can't be done. You have got to stop and look at the charming views, artistic photographs, and delicate water-colors that are displayed in the broad window at 610 Granville street. When you do enter the front part of the studio, the first impression is that a vast amount of care and pains has been bestowed on it, especially in the rare arrangement of pictures, engravings,

etchings and photographs. These pictures, etc., are so placed on easels as to be displayed to the best advantage. At the end of this room – picture gallery it might almost be called – are two archways, nicely curtained. The one on the right enters upon the reception room, while on the left is the finishing room. As the visitor passes on the way to the reception room, he passes by the dark room, which has been built especially for amateurs. Here the amateur, who purchases his outfit at the store, will be provided with the means of developing his photographs. Everything is handy. By the way it may be remarked, that in the store is everything an amateur desires, materials, outfits, etc., and the use of the dark room is given free, gratis and for nothing. That this dark room is thoroughly up-to-date is shown by the fact that it is lighted with electricity, the light being, of course, ruby shade.

Going into the room where portraits are taken – the actual studio itself – one finds it fitted up in a splendid manner. The doorway is to have coloured cathedral glass which will be supplied by Mr. Bloomfield, of New Westminster, who furnished the same kind of glass to the new Parliament Buildings. The new studio itself is a brick addition, specially put up by Mr. Thompson, and is supplied with all the latest and most artistic backgrounds, including views of Stanley Park and the City.

Down in the basement the manufacture of picture frames goes on. This basement has been so well arranged that it forms, also, a first-class show room. Returning upstairs one notices on passing the printing room, the mouldings for picture frames of all sorts and conditions, and one is really forced to the conclusion that here at 610 Granville Street is the most modern and finest studio on the Pacific slope. Vancouver's new photographer need fear no rival even in the cities to the south. Before passing into the street again, attention has to be directed to the collection of C.P.R. views and the photographs of Canadian scenery from Atlantic to Pacific.¹³

Vancouver photographers were as progressive but not necessarily as innovative as their counterparts in other North American cities and towns. They sought to maintain competitive advantages through continual modernization of their equipment and redecoration of their

interiors. The city's notorious wet weather was even exploited by some photographers through newspaper advertisements such as this one – "Never Mind the Weather. Brock & Co. can take photos in all kinds of weather."¹⁴ Other photographers were more cautious – "Before the Rainy Season Sets Regularly in Have Your Photo Taken at the New Vancouver Photo Co'y."¹⁵ Flash photography was not extensively practised inside the studio, but was used in a variety of other interiors beginning in the mid-1890s.

NOTES

1. W.T. Milrose (Vancouver) & J. Wren (San Francisco) announced the opening of their studio for May 24; *Vancouver Weekly Herald*, 21 May 1886, p. 2; *Vancouver News*, 10 June 1886, p. 2. Brock and Devine erected a frame building at the corner of Cordova and Abbott streets at the end of May and were open by June 1; *Vancouver Weekly Herald*, 28 May 1886, p. 3; *Vancouver Daily Advertiser*, 28 May 1886, p. 4; *Vancouver News*, 1 June 1886, p. 2. Devine recalled in 1932 that the building was on lot 6, but depending on whether the 1870 townsite plan of Granville was being followed or the newer survey by L.A. Hamilton, he may have meant either lot 6, block III (south side Cordova, third lot east of Abbott) or lot 16, block V (northwest corner, Cordova and Abbott); J.S. Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, v. 1 (Vancouver: J.S. Matthews, 1932), p. 159. Further details on Brock & Co. can be found in David Mattison, "... A Very Superior Style of Art: The Vancouver Photographs of J.A. Brock & Co.," *Photo Communique* (November-December 1979): 16-21.
2. *News-Advertiser*, 24 August 1887, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 27 February 1894, p. 8.
4. (*Vancouver World*), 5 October 1892, p. 8.
5. *News-Advertiser*, 6 October 1892, p. 8.
6. City of Vancouver Archives, City Clerk, Inward Correspondence, Q-Z 1888, pp. 1043-44, John Thompson to City Council, 10 November 1888.
7. City of Vancouver Archives, City Clerk, Inward Correspondence, 1898, I.B. Snell to City Council, 27 June 1898, p. 9791.
8. City of Vancouver Archives, City Council Minutes, 29 April - 4 August 1889, v. 3, pp. 53 and 65 [15 July]; *News-Advertiser*, 12 September 1889, p. 8.
9. *News-Advertiser*, 17 October 1889, p. 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 15 March 1891, p. 8.
11. *Ibid.*, 21 November 1891, p. 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 3 December 1893, p. 8.
13. *Ibid.*, 6 March 1898, p. 7.
14. *Vancouver News*, 22 October 1886, p. 4.
15. *News-Advertiser*, 27 October 1887, p. 1.

David Mattison