

Susan F female]

By Brock V. Silversides

The role of woman in the history of Canadian photography continues to be an overlooked area of study. Very few entered the field at a professional level (as opposed to a hobby) in the 19th century and of those who did, few actually managed their own establishments. And even when those very few did, many conducted the business under their husband's or father's name.

One of the earliest female photographers to operate a studio in Cobourg was Susan Roberts. While much can be reconstructed about her personal life, the details of her career are very sketchy. No studio records remain (if they ever existed) and she does not appear to have placed any advertisements in the local newspaper. It is a very faint trail indeed.

Susan Ann Roberts was born Sept. 21, 1850 in Cobourg, the eldest daughter of John Dab Roberts and Jane Dawe. Susan's father, originally from Mevagissey, Cornwall (England) emigrated to Canada in 1847. A man of many talents, he started his working life in his new home as a shoe salesman.

In January 1869, he switched occupations and established a retail and wholesale seed business for the predominantly agricultural community of Northumberland County. As an afterthought he offered another service: photography. It was, admittedly an odd combination — seeds and photography — but at the same time he seems to have been quite successful. A mercantile reference book from this year gives his firm a value of between \$2,000-\$5,000 with a good credit rating.

Much of that success was due to the personality and talents of his photographer, Susan, who, for all intents and purposes ran the studio part of the business from 1870 on as her father was usually too



**Susan Roberts,
seen in two 1870
self-portraits**



**Her studio
logo**

Saturday 10

Roberts was one of earliest photographers in Cobourg

busy with the seed trade.

She grew up in a heavily photographic-oriented circle. Charles Lawes, Cobourg's best known photographer of the 19th Century, was a neighbor of the Roberts. The children of each family were close friends and Lawes' eldest daughter, Charlotte, was also listed as a photographic artist in 1871.

The Dominion Census for that same year gives a simple financial breakdown of "Miss S.A. Roberts' Photographic Establishment." In total her fixed capital was evaluated at \$500 while her floating capital was \$20. One female employee was engaged at a yearly wage of \$150. Her raw materials (consisting of paper, glass and chemicals) totalled \$50, while her product output was set at \$250. Thus her net profit for that year (\$250 "output" - \$150 "wages" - \$50 "raw materials") was a grand total of \$50.

Susan ran the studio for a mere five years, but developed an admirable local reputation. Throughout the early 1870s her financial ratings were consistently higher than Charles Lawes'. By January 1872, the establishment's value had risen to between \$2000-\$5000.

Very few examples of her work are known to exist and those that do are all self-portraits that have survived in her family. In accordance with Victorian customs she produced mainly cartes-de-visite and cabinet card photographs on albumen paper.

Susan folded the studio upon her marriage to Matthew Henderson, a Cobourg store clerk on Sept. 16, 1874. She then switched her emphasis to running her home and raising her seven children.

With the advent of the 1880s came the opening of the Northwest Territories for settlement. The Henderson family eagerly digested the Federal Government and Canadian Pacific Railway advertising brochures. The idea of a free homestead and the lure of the

pioneering experience were both powerful incentives.

In May 1882 Matthew joined an exploratory group of six other Cobourg and Grafton area men to journey out to the Assinibola District, now in the province of Saskatchewan. He applied for a quarter-section farm at the Wascana settlement, 12 miles northwest of Pile-of-Bones, the new capital of the Territories.

He returned to Cobourg in September of 1882, stayed the winter and returned with Susan (again pregnant) and two children the following spring.

After a long, tiring rail journey, they arrived in the "muddy desolate looking port called Regina" (as Pile-of-Bones had been re-christened). Consisting chiefly of shacks and tents, the town did not bring out Susan's natural enthusiasm:

"Small wonder that a great wave of homesickness came over those who saw it for the first time, and that Mrs. Henderson, used to the comforts and beauty of the old Ontario town, did not go near it again for over two years."

They then moved out to their homestead and started building their new life. In July 1883 they built a house 18 by 24 feet and throughout the summer broke five acres of land.

In September, Susan gave birth to their fourth child who had the distinction of being the first white child born in that part of the Territories.

The winter of 1883-84 seems to have been a cruel introduction for Susan to the prairie seasons. She remembered it as:

"... a very hard winter — intense cold — no coal — an unfinished house and for fuel only the small wood that could be procured in the ravines. At night the nails cracking with the frost was like musketry fire, and doors, windows and walls were often thickly covered with white frost. There were, as yet, no storm doors, nor windows..."

In a psychological sense, the

new environment was also rough on Susan:

"To a woman used to the cultured advantages of a college town, possibly the utter lack of anything of the sort was as much the cause of loneliness of those early days as was the absence of the loved ones in the East. No music, no lectures, no parties, just the steady grind of hard work and the care of little children."

Adding to her uneasiness were the frequent absences of Matthew, such as his spell on transport duty for the Canadian army for six weeks in the early spring of 1885 during the Northwest Rebellion, or his three-month stay in Regina when he was hired as a carpenter for the new Northwest Mounted Police barracks.

There is no evidence that Susan did any photography after emigrating to the Prairies. She did, however, instruct her husband in the rudiments of the art. In the 1906 Regina Industrial Fair, Matthew's photographs received first prize in the category "Views of the Northwest-Amateur Photography." (It is of course possible that these images were hers, but being a former professional she may have been prohibited from entering).

In 1907, the Hendersons moved into Regina where Matthew operated a real estate venture called the Henderson Land Co. They then relocated to Victoria, B.C. in 1913 for their retirement years. Matthew died in October 1926 and four years later Susan went to live with her youngest daughter, Agnes, in Winnipeg. She died Nov. 17, 1931 at the age of 81.

While Susan Roberts photographed for a relatively short period of time, she still deserves recognition as one of the handful of professional females who not only worked, but prospered in a heavily male-dominated business in the second half of the nineteenth century. Hopefully further examples of her photography will surface, and an assessment made in due time.

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