MATTIE GUNTERMAN

British Columbia

En 1899, Mattie Gunterman a fait à pied, avec sa famille, les 650 milles de Washington à Thompson's Landing en Colombie Britannique. Ses photos sont un document de la vie des pionniers sur la route et dans la communauté de bûcherons et de mineurs où elle devait s'établir. Mattie Gunterman a capté la vie des pionniers de Thompson's Landing: ses mines d'or, ses camps de bûcherons, sa vie sociale et familiale.

Mattie was born in Wisconsin in the year 1872, and other than the fact that she was brought up by her grandmother in the Mississippi River town of La Crosse, Wisconsin little is known of her childhood. Around 1889 she left La Crosse and headed west to Seattle, Washington, where she met and married candymaker William Gunterman. In October of 1892 she gave birth to their only child, Henry. By the mid-1890s Mattie's health began to fail in Seattle's damp coastal climate and she was diagnosed as having a severe case of tuberculosis. She was advised to move to a dryer climate if she wanted to survive.

It was in the spring of 1897 that the Guntermans set out on foot for the drier climes of eastern Washington state in search of jobs and a new place to live. As they travelled from place to place they worked as cooks in the logging, mining, and railroad camps along the way. When winter came they returned to Seattle because of Mattie's health, staying with Will's family. This was to be the pattern of the Guntermans' lives for the next few years—going off in the spring and returning to Seattle for the winters.

It was during this time that Mattie began photographing her family as they travelled along. At first she used a snapshot roll film camera (few of these images have survived) but by 1898 she was using a small portable 4″ x 5″ glass plate camera. During the winters in Seattle she quickly picked up the basics of photography from her brother-in-law, Frank Smith, who taught her how to develop and print her own pictures as well as how to use magnesium light for indoor exposures.

The year 1899 was a significant one for the Guntermans. They had purchased a piece of property in Thompson's Landing, British Columbia, where Mattie's cousin Hattie Needham was living, and they were going off to settle down at last. This was a momentus move for Mattie, so she bought a 5″ x 7″ plate camera to record her family's activities as pioneers in the wilderness. The year 1899 was also propitious for Thompson's Landing, which was the gateway to the Lardeau mining country. The excitement generated by the discovery of gold in the Klondike reverberated throughout the Lardeau as prospectors scoured every inch of every mountain. The Lardeau boom differed from that of the Klondike, however, in one very important way; Lardeau was closer to civilization and was the kind of place families were drawn to as settlers, while the Klondike for the most part attracted men wanting to 'get rich quick.'

Mattie's photographs from 1899 to 1902 document her family's life on the trail as they walked the 650 miles from Seattle to Thompson's Landing, her explorations of the local countryside around Thompson's Landing, and the people who were becoming her new friends. In the winter of 1902-3 she produced what is probably her best single body of work, a series of photographs taken at the Nettie-L mine where she worked as bull-cook. From the snow-covered mine entrance, into the underground mine cavern and the cookhouse piled high with dishes, she photographed the people at work. After the day's work was through she finished off the series with pictures of people playing such games as 'kick the plate' and 'sweeping the rafters.' During 1903-4 she took photographs in the logging camp where she worked. In 1905 the Guntermans made a trip to San Francisco to visit Will's relatives, so Mattie took along her camera and made one of her most remarkable photographs—a surrealistic family portrait with the family members distanced from each other rather than grouped together in the more common pose.
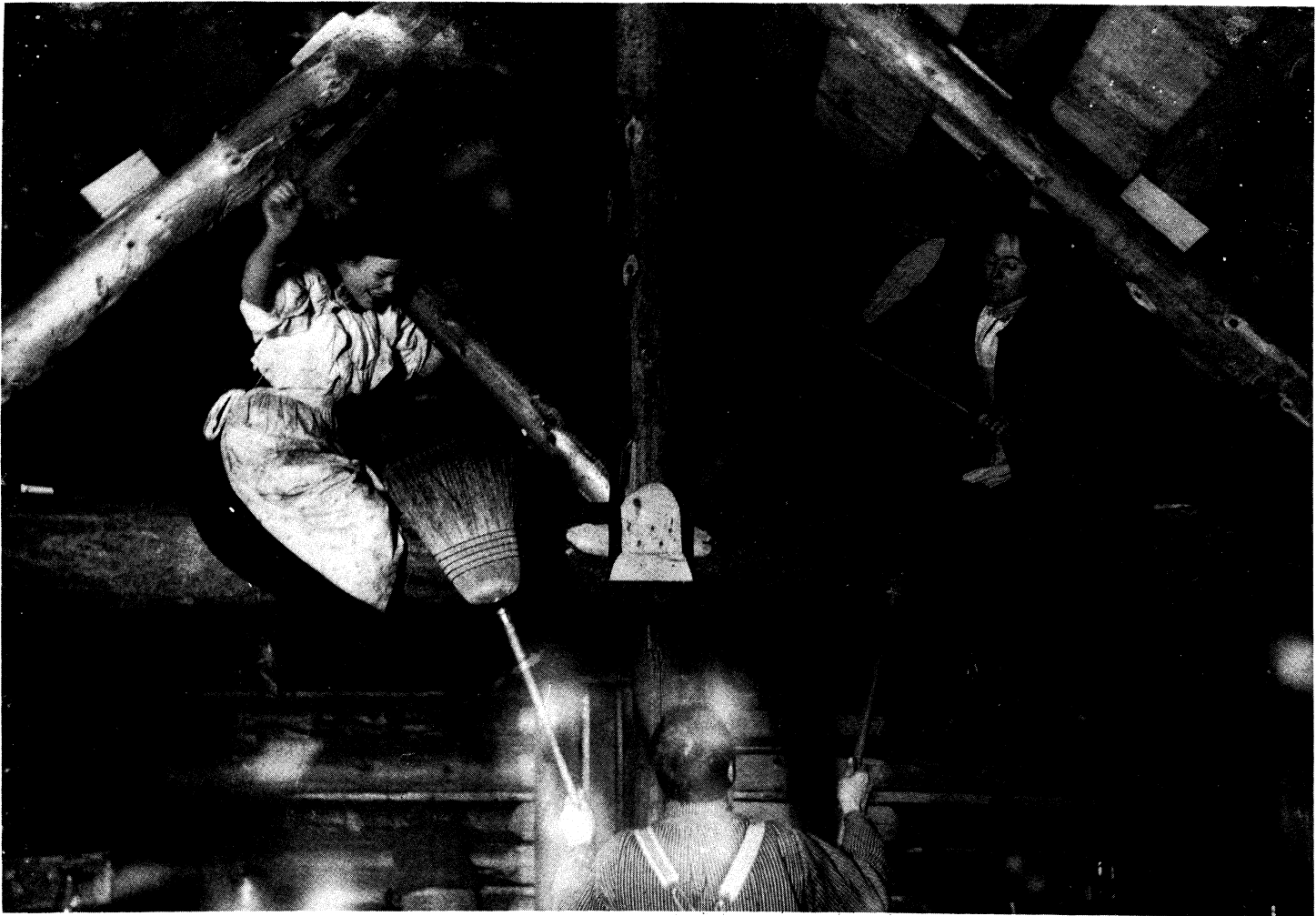
When the Guntermans returned to Beaton (the name 'Thompson's Landing' was changed in 1901) they found the mining boom dying down. The mines were closing and people were moving away. By 1907 the only work to be had was in logging. A few people managed to run small farms but the population continued to dwindle. During this period, Mattie's photography dealt almost exclusively with community social events: picnics, boating parties, group swims, ice skating, and masquerades. By 1910 Mattie was taking very few photos. This was for several reasons. Her son Henry was grown up and it was for him that she had taken many of her pictures; she and Will now had to travel away from home to find work, sometimes as far as Alberta; and she started using smaller, lighter cameras for occasional snaps and got away from the carefully composed pictures she had practised taking with the plate camera.

The importance of Mattie's photographs lies in their portrayal of pioneer life by a participant rather than a detached observer of that lifestyle. They are intensely personal statements about the presence and role of a woman as a family person in a frontier environment at the turn of the century. The personal nature of Mattie's photographs is emphasized by the fact that she frequently photographed herself, or included herself with the other people she was photographing. (She did this by means of a thirty-foot-long air bulb shutter release.)

Mattie and Will lived in Beaton the rest of their lives, supporting themselves with a trap line, a vegetable garden, and occasional cooking jobs or hand logging. In 1929 their house burned down, along with all of Mattie's photography equipment and photographs. Only the glass plate negatives and a couple of albums stored elsewhere survived. Will Gunterman died in 1936, and Mattie in 1945. Mattie's negatives were discovered in 1961 by Ron D'Altroy of the Vancouver Public Library Historical Photograph Collection and were given to him by Mattie's son Henry. ◑

Henri Robideau

19