

ELSIE HOLLOWAY

Newfoundland

Elsie Holloway's death in 1971 passed unnoticed in the St. John's newspapers. She had been retired for twenty-five years, and her studio on Bates Hill and Henry Street had been converted into a tavern.

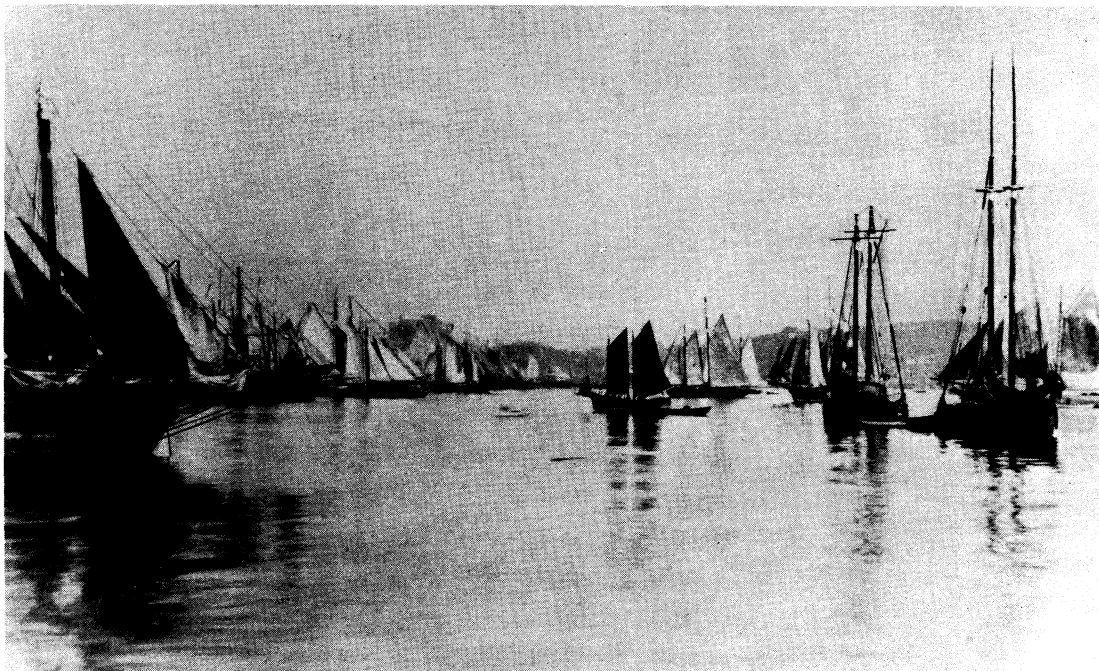
A friend of mine, an underemployed photographer, was working there as a waiter when it burned to the ground in the rash of fires that plague St. John's every winter. He hadn't realized where he was at the time; now he stands on the empty lot, seeking inspiration.

Elsie was born in St. John's on May 21, 1882. Her mother, Henrietta Palfry, originally from a small



Self-portrait

fishing community outside St. John's, was just seventeen years old when she married Robert O. E. Holloway. Professor Holloway had come out from England to be the President of the Methodist College and was an enthusiastic amateur photographer. He suffered from tuberculosis, and each summer when the school year drew to a close he would take his camera and his family to what he considered a more healthy environment, away from St. John's. Elsie and her brother Bert spent the summers of their childhood travelling across the island, while their father collected



Drying Sails, St. John's Newfoundland

Antonia McGrath



Laura Jones Collection

Northern Labrador

the images which would eventually be compiled into a book. One year they would live on a railway car, moving from 'spur to spur' along the Dildo Run; the next year they would take a boat up the Labrador coast.

Elsie and Bert were barely adults when their father died. With Henrietta they published his book, *Through Newfoundland with a Camera*, a photographic chronicle of his rambles across Newfoundland and Labrador. Since its publication in 1906 it has become recognized as a significant historical document.

Two years later, in 1908, Elsie and Bert opened the Holloway Studio. Built to their specifications, it was enviable by today's standards:

The building is 60 x 40, having two stories and a furnace basement. The place is heated by steam and lighted by electricity. The first floor contains two rooms, one that will be used as a reception room and show room, with entrance at the corner of Henry Street and Bates Hill. The other will be a general work room and a department for keeping stock.

Each of these rooms is about 40 x 30 feet and finished in substantial and superb style, especially the reception room with its large plate glass windows, hardwood floor and elegant inlaid panelling of green burlap on the walnut finishing along the base of the wall. The ceiling is substantial and handsome in design and gives a rich effect to the apartment. A unique mantel piece of the finest pressed brick

adds an artistic 17th century effect. Ascending to the second story by richly finished stairs, the visitor reaches the operating room, or the place where one goes to sit for a photograph. This is a spacious apartment measuring 40 x 25 feet.

The skylight is on the east side of the roof and sets of shades running horizontally on wires overhead can regulate the light to the desired strength and make it darker or lighter at a moment's notice. Off this room on the west side are the printing room, the enlarging room, a neat and cosy sitting room, and toilet rooms and lavatories for ladies and gentlemen. The developing room and dark room are on the same flat in the rear, and ruby coloured lights are installed in the latter, giving a semi darkness that is necessary for the work to be done here. The whole building and its appointments give one an idea of what an up to date studio is. . . .

When the war broke out, Bert went to fight in Europe with the Newfoundland Regiment and Elsie was left to mind the shop. Bert was killed in 1917.

By 1930, Elsie Holloway had established a reputation for portraiture and was the employer of eight people. Although she occasionally took her camera into the field to record such events as Amelia Earhart's departure from Harbour Grace Airfield, the majority of her work was done in the studio.

She developed an innovative approach to children's photography, producing photographs that are still cherished

by their owners. A lucky papa once received a delightful handmade book showing the events of his five-year-old daughter's day. Occasionally a frame could be turned around to reveal, not the back of a picture, but a child in an opposite mood or dress. Most coveted were Elsie's cutouts or full length portraits, mounted on a piece of thin board and 'cut out' to stand in a piece of picture molding. Her portraiture was distinctive in spirit as well as in style, because it captured the moment of spontaneity that eludes so much studio work.

In 1946, when Elsie was sixty-five years old, she sold her studio and its contents and retired. In her later years she spent many hours playing bridge with a large circle of friends. She outlived most of them, and some of their children too. When she died in 1971, she was eighty-nine years old.

The contents of Elsie Holloway's studio were widely dispersed. A few plates found their way into the Newfoundland Museum's collection, but most of the relevant information was lost. Unfortunately it is not possible to distinguish Elsie's earlier work from that of her brother Bert, as all of these photographs bear the impression of Holloway Studio. Various stories are told about the thousands of plates that were once in the studio, including the classical end to many glass plate negatives—the recycling of the glass in a greenhouse or cloche. There have been enough sheepish admissions to this charge to suspect its truth. ☺