

This exhibition, The Indigenous Archival Photo Project, comes from three sources: regional Indigenous photographs from the archives of Touchstones Nelson and the Royal BC Archives and photographs selected from the work of photojournalist Rosemary (Gilliat) Eaton (1919 - 2004) that are with Library and Archives Canada.

Technology, the digitization of archival photographs, the internet and social media, have made archival photographs of Indigenous peoples accessible, in a sense liberating the photograph from the museum. On the positive side, this has enabled the reclamation of Indigenous photographs by family, kin and community. Archives, historical societies and museums have been able to reach out and work collaboratively with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities to ‘name’ the photographs, to place them in an historical and social context, and enable an interpretation that is more than just an outsider’s lens.

Rosemary (Gilliat) Eaton emigrated to Canada in 1952. She was a rarity in her time, a working female photojournalist, and in that context she travelled much of Canada, east to west to north, on photo assignments and sparked by her own natural curiosity. Selling her work to the National Film Board, Weekend Magazine and Beaver Magazine, among others, her portfolio often included Indigenous people and communities. Beyond their considerable aesthetic quality, what makes Eaton’s photos of interest is her ability to capture her subjects in a relaxed state, sometimes laughing, sometimes working, going about day-to-day things. She was an outside eye but one it seems with not only a keen perception for a good photograph but also an ability to be unobtrusive.

An important part of The Indigenous Archival Photo Project has been its online component and through social media increase understanding and appreciation of the strength and resilience of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in the face of difficult times and when residential schools and colonial institutional laws were firmly entrenched, such as The Indian Act, forced relocations, the pass system and numbered identification tags for Inuit. Rosemary Gilliat Eaton was taking her photos in such times yet the images we see reflect functioning, hard-working people and communities, mirroring the integrity of previous Indigenous generations. These are not victims.

Nelson, British Columbia, is in the traditional territories of the Sinixt (or Lakes) and Ktunaxa (Kutenai) peoples, a traditional territory that covers the entire lands of the Kootenay (east and west Kootenay) in southeastern British Columbia and extends into what is now the United States. The regional photos can be read on several levels: as a historical and cultural record; as an introduction to understanding Sinixt and Ktunaxa lifestyles of the past; as a statement of survivance; and as testament to an intrinsic relationship to the rivers, lakes and mountains of the territory.

The act of bringing this photographic exhibition together invites a dialogue. Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers may see these photographs differently but there is also inherent the possibility of dialogue, exchange and mutual appreciation and understanding. In the act of reclamation and of naming of both people and locales, there comes a liberation from the dominant gaze. These photographs are not framed as an Edward Curtis-like “vanishing race”

trope but as an opportunity to discard previous perceptions and view the photographs themselves as a visual testament to the strength of Indigenous individuals and communities.