

In Search of Geraldine Moodie

by Donny White

Published by the Canadian Plains Research Center,
University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4S 0A2,
December 1998, 11 x 8.5 inches, 182 pages, approx. 200 photographs,
ISBN 0-88977-109-X (cloth \$39.95),
ISBN 0-88977-110-3 (paper \$24.95).



A young Cree woman and boy, taken in the Maple Creek Studios, c. 1897 (Southwestern Saskatchewan Old Timers' Museum, Maple Creek, P.1.10)

We will surely hear more of Geraldine Moodie in the future as her importance to Canadian history during the 1880s and '90s is brought to the fore.

Married to an officer of the North-West Mounted Police she accompanied him on his postings throughout Western Canada and the Hudson's Bay district of the Eastern Arctic. An ardent painter of Canadian wild flowers she switched to photography, and with maturing prowess operated three successive photographic galleries. When the family moved she took her camera equipment to record scenery, people, events and snippets of western and arctic life.

Author Donny White explains, "I first discovered Geraldine Moodie in the late 1970s while working with some wonderful frontier photographs... Intrigued with the images, I was curious as to the photographer whose skill and insight into the subject matter was obvious. My only clue was a simple stamp below the photographs that read: G. Moodie, Maple Creek... Imagine my delight to discover that *she* was the wife of the Mounted Policeman, John Douglas Moodie." Donny began a 17-year odyssey to find her.



Inuit men landing a white whale, Hudson Bay, near Churchill, 1908 (National Archives of Canada / RCMP Headquarters Collection #8199)

Born in Toronto in 1854, Geraldine Moodie was the granddaughter of the well-known Upper Canadian writer, Susanna Strickland Moodie, and grandniece of Catharine Parr Traill. To survive, after the death of her father in 1865, Geraldine and her mother applied their painting skills to create illustrations for, and sell subscriptions to Catharine Parr Traill's book *Canadian Wild Flowers*. Visiting England in 1878 she met and married a distant relative, John Douglas

Moodie. The couple tried farming in Brandon, Manitoba but, unsuccessful, they returned east where in 1885 John accepted a Commission with the North-West Mounted Police to undertake recruitment duties. Late that year the Moodies headed west to Calgary and Medicine Hat and began a 32-year adventure.

A thread of uncertainty concerning the harmony within the Moodie family runs throughout the story. Geraldine returned to Lakefield, Ontario in 1889 and it wasn't until '91 that the family was re-united at a new posting in Battleford. It is during the Lakefield stay that it is believed she took up photography. On April 25, 1895 the *Saskatchewan Herald* reported "Mrs. Moodie is having a photographic gallery built near the Presbyterian Church." The opening of the studio distinguishes Geraldine as the first woman photographer to operate on the Canadian prairies (Mrs. Rossetta E. Carr, 1883+ in Winnipeg does not count).

Considering the male-dominated society in which she lived, Geraldine prospered as a photographer and was even commissioned by Prime Minister Sir Mackenzie Bowell in 1895 to photograph some of the major historic sites between Edmonton and Battleford. This was a period of tremendous change in western Canada, and Moodie realized the historical significance of her photographs, capturing as they did images of a society which was rapidly vanishing.

J.D.'s subsequent moves saw Mrs. Moodie establish a more enduring gallery at Maple Creek and at nearby Medicine Hat to which she commuted to operate the second gallery. Photographing the Indians and their ceremonies was included in her records. JD's assignment to map a trail to the Yukon saw him perilously lost for some 15 months. While recuperating he volunteered for the Boer War, was wounded and volunteered for a second stint. Geraldine stayed home.

In 1903 JD was appointed superintendent of the NWMP to establish Canadian authority over the coast and islands of the Hudson Bay and Eastern Arctic. Geraldine followed and in 1904 started photographing the Inuit families, outclassing the official photographer. In 1906 it was to Fort Churchill then in 1912 to Dawson City in the Yukon. The camera was always there taking views and people. Retirement in 1917 saw the couple settle again in Maple Creek then move in 1936 to Duncan, B.C. In the move Geraldine's prized collection of negatives was lost.

Nearly forgotten since her death in 1945, Moodie's fascinating story provides insights not only into the vanishing lifestyles of the pre-settlement Cree and Inuit, and the nascent western ranching industry, but also makes us more aware of the significant and frequently ignored role played by women in Canadian history.

Unfortunately, the reproduction of the photographs is erratic in quality, possibly due to the age of the original prints. Hopefully some day we may see a revised volume raised to the standard of a Notman book. ♣

R.L.

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