

'Amazing' coincidence solves archive mystery

Joanne Hatherly, Times Colonist

Published: Sunday, November 23, 2008

A Saanich resident's strongly worded letter to the editor has turned into the missing puzzle piece to a photo collection that was recently donated to the Saanich Municipal Archives.

When Richard Mackenzie's letter was published in the Times Colonist's Remembrance Day edition, protesting the B.C. government's decision to take a pass on a project to honour the fallen from the First World War, he included in it a snippet of family history written by his wife's uncle, a veteran of that conflict.

What Mackenzie didn't know was that Lindsay Lambert, an Ontario man visiting Victoria, read that letter and realized that Mackenzie was writing about the family of Annie Girling, a Saanich photographer whose early 19th-century glass-plate photo negatives Lambert had been packing around for a quarter-century.



Caroline Duncan of the Saanich Municipal Archives and Maureen Mackenzie, great-niece of photographer Annie Girling, look over some of Girling's photographs donated to the archives. A recent letter to the editor helped provide the background to the images.

Debra Brash, Times Colonist

It happened that on this particular visit to the Island, Lambert had brought the collection with him to donate to the Saanich Municipal Archives.

"It's amazing," archives spokeswoman Caroline Duncan said of the serendipitous turn of fate that brought all these people together to answer the question that had been hanging over the Girling collection since Lambert first took possession of it: What and who is in these photographs?

None of the glass plates had any reference notes, dates or names. Lambert had tried to donate the collection to museums several times, but without any identifications, the museums were reluctant to accept them.

Still, Duncan decided to accept them.

"We knew they were of Saanich, and it's unusual to have such a large collection from a single photographer, and so we thought we'd be able to identify some," Duncan said, "but we expected it would take us years."

Now that Girling's Island family has surfaced, that task will be much easier. Richard Mackenzie's wife, Maureen Mackenzie, is Girling's great-niece. She and the family have copies of the photos, complete with the missing information, names and places on the back of the sheets.

Girling was born in Suffolk, England, on April 20, 1880, and migrated to Saanich with her parents and 10 siblings in 1912. They settled first at Swan Lake, then Thetis Lake and finally at Finnerty, all in search of a location that wouldn't aggravate Girling's asthma condition.

She was only four feet seven inches tall and never married. She lived with several of her unmarried siblings, and apparently didn't work except sometimes cooking for her brothers when they took logging jobs. She died in Victoria on July 29, 1953.

The University of Victoria had purchased the family's Finnerty home in the 1950s, and was set to demolish the house when the photos were discovered by a UVic employee who rescued them. He passed them on to Lambert, a UVic theatre student with an interest in photography.

Maureen Mackenzie said Girling was a lifelong amateur photographer.

While happy to see her family and community's history so thoroughly documented in the glass-plate negatives, she is happy to see them go to the archives.

"It gives us a very good feeling that they will be well taken care of," she said.

Duncan said donations of photographs usually come in only a few at a time, or occasionally in a whole album. Usually the photographer is anonymous.

"This is the largest collection we've ever seen, and it's significant because she was so thorough in her nature photography, climbing into trees to get a photo of a bird's nest," she said.

Girling's 1901 Instantograph camera of mahogany wood and brass fittings comes with the collection. The archives will be scanning the images over the next few months to add to their online photographic journal, which currently displays 2,800 images.

Lambert, an antiques restorer, says, "It's very hard to let them go. It's been part of my life for nearly 30 years. But with this confluence of events, that letter being in the paper, the Saanich Archives now having the right facility to store them, I'm ready to pass them over."

jhatherly@tc.canwest.com