

R. H. Trueman, Artist and Documentarian

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In November 1885 the last spike was driven in Canada's first transcontinental railway providing, at long last, the eastern link promised British Columbia upon her entry into Confederation in 1871. For British Columbia the event marked the beginning of a new era — one of settlement, resource exploitation and tourism. While the province had less to offer the settler than did the Prairies, the Canadian Pacific Railway Company was quick to recognize the great tourist potential of the rugged landscape. In the hope of recovering some of the losses accrued during costly construction through the mountainous terrain, it came to view British Columbia as a wilderness which could be packaged and sold to the affluent and adventurous.

Photography played an important role in the promotion of British Columbia from the very beginning. Landscape consciousness, which had reached its peak mid-century in Europe and America, was by this time also influencing public attitude in Canada. The CPR sought to capitalize on this awareness; thus it was towards this enlightened public that its promotional campaign was aimed. Well-known eastern photographers and painters were commissioned to present the imposing British Columbia landscape to the prospective tourist. To independent artists the new railway offered accessibility, convenience and business potential.¹ These attractions, coupled with the lure of a vast, unphotographed frontier, were responsible for an influx of photographers into British Columbia in the late 1880s. By the turn of the century, photography in the province had reached a high level of sophistication, not perhaps by European or eastern American standards, but certainly in terms of the western North American scene. In addition to numerous photographers established in the coastal centres of Vancouver and Victoria, others visited from Calgary, Winnipeg and Montreal.

¹ Photographers commissioned by the CPR, like William McFarlane Notman and Alexander Henderson, were provided with special cars. Independent photographers often received support in the form of travel passes.

Richard H. Trueman first arrived in British Columbia in 1889. He had begun his career as a photographer in Brampton, Ontario, in the early 1880s at about the time replacement of the cumbersome wet-plate process by faster, commercially available dry-plates was revolutionizing photography, making outdoor photography an economic and practical reality. After working along the Canadian Pacific Railway main line for a year, Trueman and his partner, Norman Caple, set up headquarters in Vancouver. For the next four years the firm of Trueman & Caple worked between Winnipeg and the coast, specializing in mountain and railway views, ranch scenes and Indians.² This specialty continued for Trueman even after the partnership dissolved and R. H. Trueman & Company of Vancouver was established in 1894. Although the company was primarily a portraiture business, the landscape and documentary sidelines remained Trueman's avocation. For the next sixteen years, until his death in 1911, he travelled the rails throughout the province, skilfully recording life and landscape.

For discussion purposes, R. H. Trueman's work in British Columbia can best be considered in two units, although it should be understood that they form a continuum. The first is his work along the CPR main line, that region which the railway itself sought to promote and which was travelled frequently by photographers, both commissioned and independent. The second is that work resulting from his travels into the province's southeast. Following branch lines installed primarily for the purpose of mineral extraction, he was one of only a very few photographers to visit the area. While his attention was directed to the entire region, discussion here will mainly concern work in the West Kootenay district because of its special documentary value.

The section of CPR main line which Trueman most frequently travelled lay between the prairie community of Maple Creek, at the southwest corner of what is now Saskatchewan, and Vancouver. Proceeding northwest through Calgary, the line then headed west to the Rocky Mountains and the popular resorts of Banff and Lake Louise, where the CPR had built elegant hotels. From Lake Louise the line ascended Kicking Horse Pass to the summit of the Rockies at 5,329 feet, the eastern boundary of British Columbia, and descended the other side via the steep and treacherous "Big Hill." (The Spiral Tunnels eliminated this section

² *Catalogue of Views Along the Line of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and British Columbia*, photographed and published by Trueman & Caple, Vancouver, CPR Archives, Montreal.

in 1908.) Below, in the valley of the Kicking Horse River, lay the town of Field and another of the CPR's hotels, Mount Stephen House.

Passing out of the Rocky Mountains the line entered the Selkirk Range and there encountered one of the most difficult sections of track in Canada. Huge trestles bridged deep, narrow canyons along the sides of the Beaver River Valley as the line slowly gained the land height necessary to take it over the 4,500-foot Rogers Pass. The pass, named for Major A. B. Rogers who discovered it in 1882, was, and still is, renowned for avalanches, a problem so serious to the railway as to have necessitated the construction of a series of thirty-one snowsheds.³ (Thirty years later, this entire section was eliminated by the five-mile Connaught Tunnel.) On the western side of Rogers Pass, not far below the summit and situated at the toe of a spectacular glacier, was a fourth hotel. Glacier House was originally built to provide the trains with meal service, eliminating the hauling of heavy dining cars over the pass. Quickly though, it expanded to provide complete resort service, including qualified Swiss alpine guides.

After leaving the hotel, the line continued its descent to the Illecillewaet Valley floor, a feat made possible by a special configuration called "the Loop," a four-mile section of track in the shape of an S. From there the line proceeded to Revelstoke, a major rail town which served as distribution point for the Kootenay mining district to the south. From Revelstoke to the coast the grade was more relaxed, the only obstacle being the narrow Fraser Canyon. As in the Selkirks, the Fraser Canyon section had been costly to construct. Winding along the steep canyon walls, the line passed the last of the CPR's wilderness hotels.

These impressive features, natural and man-made, past which the railway travelled were the subjects which Trueman and his contemporaries chose to photograph and the tourist public chose to buy. Mount Stephen and the Kicking Horse Valley, Rogers Pass, Beaver Canyon, Mount Sir Donald and the Great Glacier (Illecillewaet), the Fraser Canyon, the hotels of Mount Stephen House, Glacier House and North Bend, "the Loop" and the "Big Hill," bridges, canyons and towns too numerous to mention — views of these appeared in every photographer's collection. Virtually every feature of interest was captured. For the promotion of its western wilderness, the CPR focused largely on the Rocky and Selkirk Mountains and this emphasis is evident in the photographic record. Trueman himself spent considerable time between Banff and Glacier House.

³ Omer Lavallée, *Van Horne's Road* (Montreal: Railfare Enterprises, 1974), p. 240.

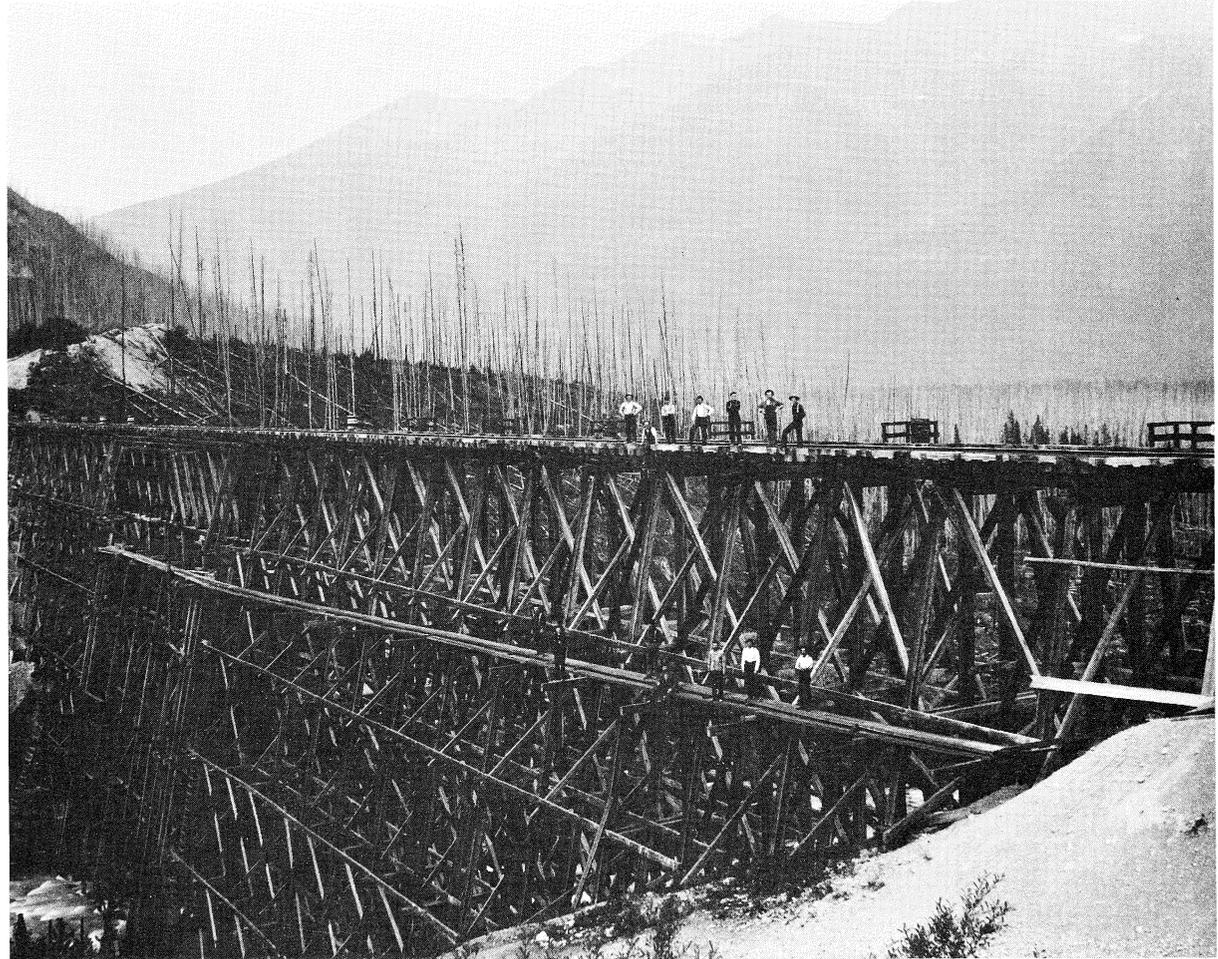


PLATE I. *Ottertail Bridge, C.P.R.* [Kicking Horse Valley], R. H. Trueman, c. 1897 (s-31075).

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PLATE II. *Mount Stephen House and Mountain, C.P.R., Field, B.C.*, R. H. Trueman, c. 1897 (s-31073).
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Among Trueman's contemporaries were S. J. Thompson and C. S. Bailey of Vancouver, W. Hanson Boorne of Calgary, A. B. Thom of Winnipeg and the prestigious Notman firm of Montreal. While many of these published more views and had a more extensive range of formats than Trueman, none surpassed his work in excellence. Trueman was at home in the mountain environment and his views show a sensitivity uncommon in the works of others. For example, a view of Mount Stephen House shows the hotel to its best advantage by placing it substantially in the photograph, while maintaining the integrity of the mountain landscape by capturing the imposing presence of Mount Stephen in the background. Trueman also had the ability to seek out and present, in carefully executed compositions, features of the human landscape which escaped the eye of others. Small towns, sprawling along the tracks or tucked into narrow valleys, had a fleeting existence at best. Perhaps because he purposefully stopped at such communities to offer portrait service, he was more aware of them. Fortunately, he considered them sufficiently interesting to photograph, thus providing us with a record of great historical value.

By the mid-1890s, the extent of mineral wealth in British Columbia's southeast was widely recognized and new railway lines opened the area to exploitation. Beginning in 1896, following the completion of the CPR's Nakusp & Slocan branch line into Sandon, Trueman began to travel frequently into the West Kootenay district. In October 1898, the Crow's-nest Pass line came into operation, followed one year later by the Columbia & Western Railway, providing access to the southern mining towns of Greenwood and Grand Forks.⁴ Over the next several years, Trueman photographed in all these regions.

Trueman's main interest in the entire southeastern district lay in the "Silvery Slocan," the rich mining area between Slocan and Kootenay Lakes. Here he visited often between 1896 and 1905, travelling the lakes by steamship and overland by rail, between New Denver on Slocan Lake and Kaslo on Kootenay Lake. Midway between, in a narrow valley high in the mountains, lay the city of Sandon. Sandon was at the very heart of the Kootenay silver-lead boom and in true boomtown style was populated by prospectors, miners and entrepreneurs. By 1898, the year of its incorporation as a city, Sandon boasted a population of 2,000 (with another 1,250 miners in the immediate area), two railways, two chartered banks, two newspapers, sawmill, factory, waterworks, electricity,

⁴ W. Kaye Lamb, *History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 205-13.



PLATE III. *Sandon, B.C.*, R. H. Trueman, 1898 or 1899 (CVA-2-33).

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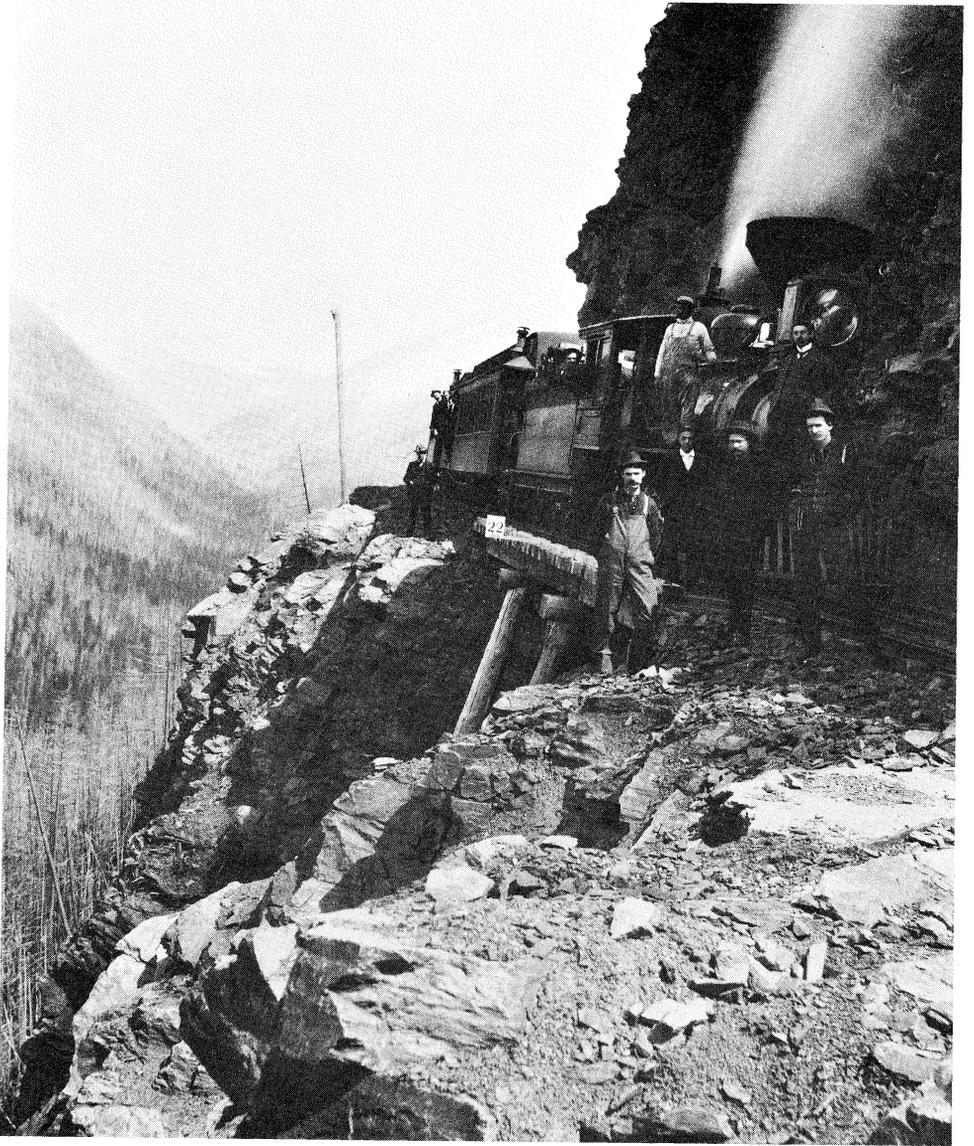


PLATE IV. *Payne Bluff, K. & S. Ry, near Sandon, B.C., R. H. Trueman, 1900*
(CVA-2-99).
COURTESY OF THE CITY OF VANCOUVER ARCHIVES

post office, telegraph and express along with numerous hotels and saloons.⁵

To Richard Trueman, Sandon became a second home. Certainly the portrait market was a major reason for his interest in the community. Setting up his travelling studio in a tent or leased quarters on the main street, he did a brisk business. The *Paystreak*, one of the local papers, announced his arrivals: "R. H. Trueman, of Vancouver, will be in Sandon for the next ten days and will be glad to see all his old friends and any number of new ones at his tent near the K. & S. depot. This is positively the only visit of this season with the studio tent."⁶ So successful was the operation that in 1900 R. H. Trueman & Company opened a permanent studio in the city, followed two years later by another at Kaslo.⁷ Trueman's customers were the kind of adventurers a community like Sandon attracted, anxious to tell family and friends back home of frontier life. For this reason, he also did a busy trade in views of the city and area. "Get a view of the great McGuigan snowslide to send to your friends," an advertisement urged.⁸ In May 1900 he was present when a disastrous fire destroyed much of the city. Several weeks later his photographs of the event were available to eager buyers.

The Kaslo & Slocan Railway, a project of the American-based Great Northern Railway, began operations on its narrow gauge line between Kaslo and Sandon in October 1895.⁹ Trueman's photograph of a Kaslo & Slocan train on Payne Bluff, where the line curved around into Sandon, best shows the precipitous character of the landscape. Train men and passengers pose about the locomotive, only feet from where the cliff edge drops away to the valley far below. The Kaslo & Slocan did a thriving business through the height of the boom, carrying ore to steamships waiting on Kootenay Lake.

The CPR branch line, the Nakusp & Slocan, arrived in Sandon right on the heels of the Great Northern, initiating a competition between the two lines which was to continue through many years. It was via the CPR line that Trueman made his visits to the city. Setting out from Revelstoke, he travelled down the Upper Arrow Lake by steamer to the branch line terminus at Nakusp. The CPR's steamship fleet on the Arrow

⁵ *Henderson's British Columbia Directory*, 1898.

⁶ *Sandon Paystreak*, 28 May 1898, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1900, p. 1 and 17 May 1902, p. 8. [First mentions of the studios].

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 May 1902, p. 8.

⁹ E. L. Affleck, *Sternwheelers, Sandbars and Switchbacks* (Vancouver: Alexander Nicolls Press, 1973), p. 44.

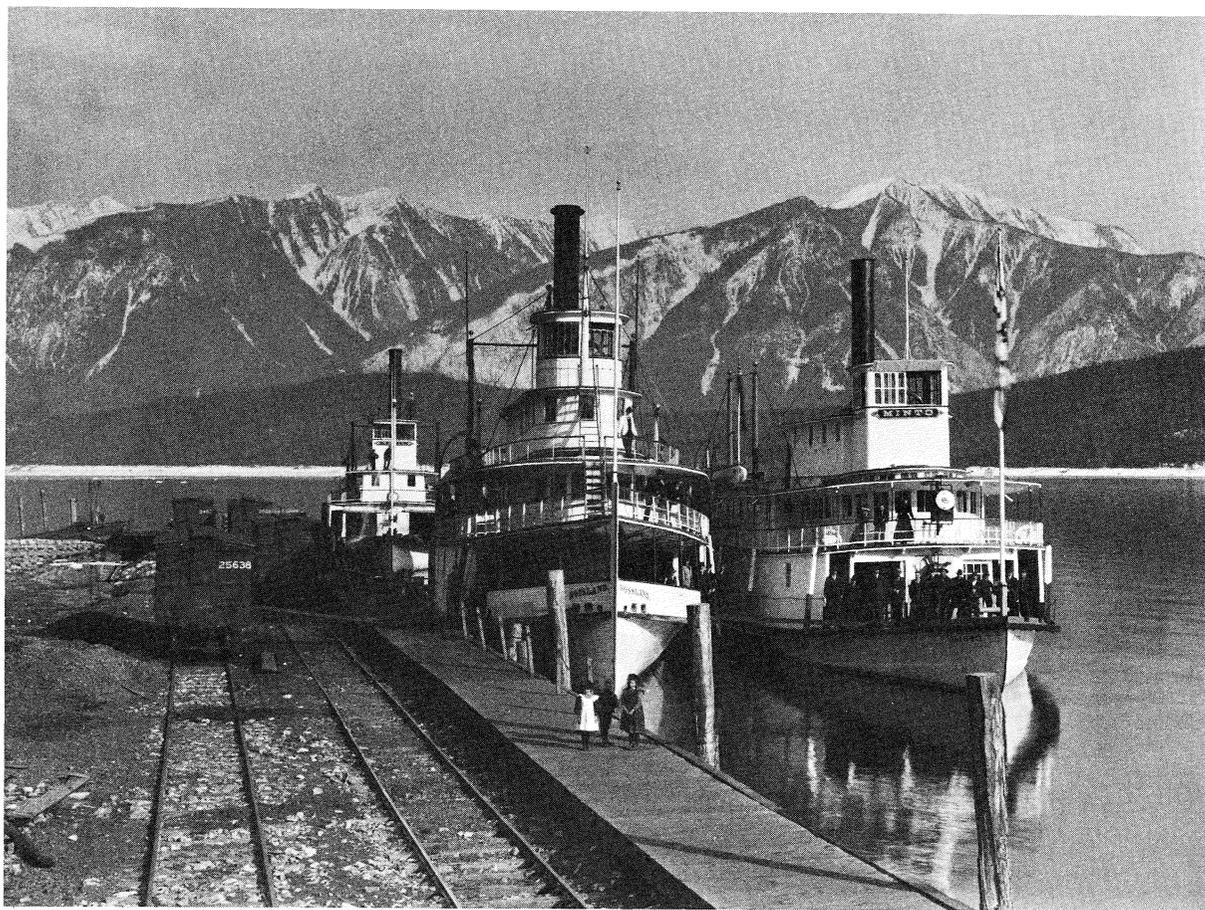


PLATE V. C.P.R. Co.'s S.S. Rosland, Minto and Trail at Arrowhead, B.C., R. H. Trueman, 1899 (CVA-2-38).
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and Slocan Lakes was the subject of many R. H. Trueman photographs. Launched between 1896 and 1898, the steamships *Trail*, *Kootenay*, *Slocan*, *Rossland* and *Minto*¹⁰ were all photographed during their first months of operation.

By the late 1890s there were about forty mines operating around Sandon. Trueman's camera captured sites, buildings, equipment and workers at mines with names like Last Chance, Slocan Star, Payne, Ruth and Idaho. Mining views were popular with customers in Sandon; the activity was, after all, the area's very *raison d'être*. Like all booms, that of the Slocan was destined to wane. Although Sandon was quickly rebuilt after the fire of 1900, it never again reached the prominence of 1898. By 1905, R. H. Trueman & Company had closed its studios in Sandon and Kaslo. Trueman's involvement with the Kootenays ended, but his photographs preserve it to this day.

As a landscape photographer, R. H. Trueman was a skilled artist. His approach was straightforward and unsentimental, with no pretence to romanticism. His compositions are carefully controlled, attempting to balance both symbolically and visually the rugged elements of wilderness and the delicate order of classical landscape. In its purest form, landscape art depicts nature for its own sake. Landscape, in Trueman's interpretation, can also involve a blending of natural and human elements. As such, his photographs are accurate statements of the human place in the British Columbian landscape at the turn of the century. Views along the CPR main line show man's involvement — tracks, bridges, snowsheds, hotels, towns — in the imposing mountain environment. Respect for the power of the mountain landscape is inherent in each photograph. By contrast, views of the Kootenay area often show the human presence as overshadowing the natural environment, in spite of its ruggedness. Here a city defies the narrow confines of its valley, and a railway perches triumphantly on the mountainside. Yet, looking out beyond the boom, in a photograph entitled *Looking North-east from Idaho Mines, Slocan, B.C.* (illustrated next page), Trueman manages to capture a pristine landscape: distant, snowy slopes covered with thousands of tiny, silver trees and their soft, echoing shadows.

In addition to the strength of its imagery, Trueman's work excels for its technical quality. Foremost in this consideration is his production of platinum prints, or platinotypes. The platinotype was a print made in contact with the original negative using more durable platinum instead

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-49.



PLATE VI. *Looking North-East from Idaho Mines, Slocan, B.C., R. H. Trueman, 1898 or 1899 (CVA-2-34).*

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of silver as the light-sensitive agent. The platinum print was famed for its rich, long tonal ranges and its permanence, qualities which have had a profound influence on R. H. Trueman's work. His platinum prints are exquisitely executed, embodying a full range of tones from black to the palest of grey, and they have survived the eighty years since their publication, in excellent condition. Trueman's use of the platinum medium is indicative of the high regard with which he held his own work. Platinum was in vogue with "art" photographers in Europe and eastern America at the turn of the century; its use on the west coast of Canada was indeed rare.

The two most significant collections of work by R. H. Trueman extant today are held by the City of Vancouver Archives and the Vancouver Public Library. Both were preserved through the foresight of Walter Calder, Trueman's successor, who donated them over thirty years ago. Most impressive is the City Archives' collection of 164 8-x-10-inch platinum prints. Originally contained in large studio presentation albums entitled *Views Along the CPR*, *British Columbia Views* and *Mountain Views*, they represent what the photographer felt to be his most saleable works. The Vancouver Public Library collection consists of over 200 glass-plate negatives. Further Trueman material is in the Canadian Pacific's Corporate Archives in Montreal, the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa and the Provincial Archives of British Columbia in Victoria. The latter has two folios published by R. H. Trueman & Company entitled *Views of the Sandon District* and *Views of Nelson, Kootenay River and Lake District*.

The historical value of Trueman's photographs has long been recognized. They have been used to illustrate numerous books on British Columbia's history — in particular, railway history. They are also displayed in museums throughout the West Kootenay area and elsewhere, serving to interpret local and regional history. As works of art they have recently come into recognition with the organization, by the Peter and Catharine Whyte Foundation in Banff, of a major exhibition of original prints from the City of Vancouver Archives and the Vancouver Public Library. *Along the Line: 1890-1905, Plainotypes by R. H. Trueman* recently toured art galleries in western Canada.