

George Buchanan Sproule: Peterborough Photographer

Gina Martin, assisted by Diane Robnik

Recently, the Trent Valley Archives successfully aided an Australian researcher in pursuit of his elusive ancestor, shedding a much-welcomed light on a years-old genealogical brick wall. But success proved to be two-fold as the endeavour also helped to uncover the life and career of a seemingly lost member of Peterborough's artistic and professional community. "We've always wondered what happened to George", the researcher stated in his request for help. He was referring to George Buchanan Sproule, a talented and extremely prolific studio photographer whose work in Peterborough spanned more than a quarter century. From the late 1860s until his departure from the city in 1895, his work documented some of Peterborough's most prominent citizens and displayed the most modern and advanced photographic techniques of the time. While his personal life seemed, at times, a bit unsure, his lifelong career as a photographer was no less than brilliant with samples of his work on file today in many archives across North America.



The young Frederick Haultain, (later Sir) as taken by George Sproule (Gina Martin collection)

The third of six children born to Joseph Sproule and the former Matilda Ann Robinson, George Buchanan Sproule

was born on 1 December 1848 in Carrickamulkin, near Omagh, County Tyrone, Ireland. In May 1860, the family left Ireland bound for Canada, sailing into New York harbour and travelling by land to Peterborough where a number of Tyrone immigrants had already settled. They moved to a small farm in North Monaghan Township located at the western end of present day Lansdowne Street where George and Matilda Sproule remained until their respective deaths. Young George attended school for several years before beginning an apprenticeship with a druggist where he began learning the intricacies of the chemistry required for the development of photographs. He made trips to both Chicago and New York City where he took courses to further enhance his voracious interest in the field, along the way learning the craft of photography as well as development. The *Peterborough Examiner*, 25 August 1881, recorded, "Mr. Geo B. Sproule of this town, leaves town on Monday for Chicago to attend the Photograph College Examinations at Chicago where he is one of the examiners on a new process of dry plate, and will read a paper on the advantages of "Nitric Acid in the Silver Bath." Throughout his career, he was known as an expert in all technical aspects of the photography business, often invited as a guest speaker at various events.

At a mere twenty years of age, he opened his first studio and gallery in the Charlotte Street premises vacated by photographers Ewing and Hall and placed his first business advertisement in the *Peterborough Examiner* 19 November 1868. Here, he extensively outlined his new "Photographic and Fine Art Gallery" and boasted that, "No expense has been spared to make it one of the finest galleries in the Dominion". At his gallery, he had a full stock of photographic chemicals, nitrate silver, various forms of paper and frames of all styles and sizes. He advertised the various studio backdrops and sceneries available for fine photographs as well as his knowledge of style from both America and England. Perhaps one of the more interesting services offered, he could produce pictures of all dimensions ranging from wall size to those for lockets and rings.

For a while, his older brother, Alex "Harpur" Robinson Sproule, also appeared to be engaged in the photography business. Family lore says that he and George worked together. But none of the almost weekly advertisements that George placed in the *Peterborough Examiner* ever mentioned his brother even though local directories listed him as a photographer. Whatever the situation, it was short-lived as, in 1880, Harpur Sproule moved his wife and children to Ireland after a childless maternal uncle bequeathed to them the family estate in Fintona, County Tyrone. This was the end of any

photography career held by Harpur Sproule in Peterborough.

On 12 October 1871, George Buchanan Sproule married Miss Maria "Josephine" Thirkell, a young woman of United Empire Loyalist stock born in Prince Edward County in 1850. They married in Lindsay, Canada West (now Ontario) where her family had relocated during the mid 1860s and immediately returned to Peterborough where two daughters were later born, Annie on January 12, 1873 and Daisy in April 1875. While still in his twenties, he had a thriving photography business, a delightful young family and was becoming a member of Peterborough's "well-to-do" circle, having befriended members of the Bradburn, Rogers and Calcutt families. He had an active recreational life playing on local cricket teams and, in 1872, was a member of the "Red Stockings", Peterborough's first official lacrosse team. He was also an avid hunter and outdoorsman, spending time at various area hunt clubs, particularly in the area of Stony Lake. During his thirties, he photographed the likes of Peterborough benefactress Charlotte Jane Nicholls, Stony Lake artist John Clague, future North West Territories premier Frederick W. G. Hanlton, Bishop John Francis Jamot and, in 1873, he produced an impressive series of Stony Lake photographs that were later turned into a post card series that can today be found in the National Archives in Ottawa. He won a multitude of photography contests and judged many more. Life seemed good for George Buchanan Sproule. It seems shocking then that, in 1895...he seemed to give it all up.

In the early part of 1895, Sproule closed his studio which had moved some years earlier from the original Charlotte Street location to a larger one at 158 Hunter Street, overlooking Chambers Street. While his wife and daughters remained in the family home at 196 Aylmer Street, George Sproule relocated to the United States town of Helena, Montana where he remained the rest of his life. The family never reconciled and, save for the funeral of his mother in 1902, there is little evidence that he ever returned to Peterborough.

Helena seemed a far cry from well-established Peterborough. As with many Montana communities, it started as a mining town during the great gold rushes of the 1860s. In 1864, gold was discovered in a nearby creek and, within a few years, rough and tumble Helena was booming with more than three thousand people in search of fortune. In 1875, Helena was named the capital of Montana and, in 1883, the Northern Pacific railroad extended through the town. Both factors, along with the growth of agriculture in the surrounding valleys, allowed Helena to survive once the gold supply dried up. By the time of George Sproule's arrival in 1895, Helena had a population of 13, 834 people and many established businesses. Upon arriving in Helena, he went into partnership with local photographer Emil D. Keller who had an active studio on West Sixth Avenue in the

business district. In 1898, Sproule bought Keller's interest in the partnership and established an even bigger studio at 141-2 S. Main Street. He was, it seems, attempting to build in Helena what he had left behind in Peterborough.

Further research proves that the town of Helena, Montana could hardly have been unknown to George Sproule. In the early 1880s, a nephew of his wife travelled to Helena from his home in Lindsay where he opened the "Thomas C. Patrick & Co." general store. Thomas Chase Patrick was the son of Josephine Thirkell Sproule's sister



Lizzie Hamilton (Gina Martin collection)

Marion and her husband, Thomas Chase Patrick Sr. In 1887, Thomas the younger married Sylvia Roseffie Lyman, a Helena girl who, born in 1865 was the first white child born in that area of Montana. Her father was the enigmatic Lorenzo Branch Lyman, a lawyer from New York who, in 1864, helped turn Montana into a territory of the United States. Shortly after the marriage, Mr. Patrick sold his

business and the couple moved to Seattle, Washington where their son, Thomas Chase Patrick III, was born in 1890. Thomas C. Patrick may have visited family in Lindsay and given George Sproule opportunities to hear about Helena. Or perhaps his many travels surrounding the photography business had, on occasion, taken George to Seattle or even to the little Montana town where he eventually settled. Given the instant partnership with Emil D. Keller, it would seem that plans had indeed been made before he left Peterborough. Whatever the case, events of the next few years were interesting to say the least.

Sometime between 1892 and 1895, Thomas Chase Patrick and Sylvia Lyman Patrick appear to have gone their separate ways with the return of Sylvia and her young son to Helena and Thomas to Lindsay where he died at age 35 on 6 April 1896. They last appeared together in a district census taken in Seattle in 1892. The Helena directory of 1894 named Sylvia as the head of her household on Main Street where she lived with her son and widowed father. But the directory for 1895 began to tell a new story. While still the head of her household with her father and son, Sylvia was now listed as an "artist" working for newly arrived photographer, George Buchanan Sproule who is also listed as a resident in Sylvia's home. The directories for 1896-7 showed the same living arrangement with Sylvia now working for Sproule as a "retoucher". All the directories between 1898 and 1910 showed her in his employ as a photographer and the 1900 census recorded Sylvia once again as the head of her household with her son, father and "uncle" George. B. Sproule in her home. Sylvia and George were both listed as "married" even though Sylvia, at that point, had been a widow for four years. Technically, George was still married to his wife Josephine even though they had been apart the last five years. The census listed Sylvia married for twelve years and George for twenty-seven.

Over the next number of years, the Sproule studio was as feverishly active in Helena as it had been in Peterborough. George photographed many of Montana's most important sites and residents while further building his now very national reputation as a skilled photographer. Sylvia's work as an "artist" involved painting the many types of scenery offered as backdrops for photographs and colouring the black and white stiffs for framing.

Although no samples of her photography have been identified, Sylvia remained listed as a photographer at the studio until 1910. Early that year, she and her son took an extended trip to Salt Lake City and stayed with her brother who had relocated there some years earlier. In early spring, George B. Sproule travelled to meet her and the two were married there on May 17th. They returned to Helena where George continued his work, moving the studio in 1919 to a very large facility further up Main Street where he remained working almost until his death on May 26, 1927. His obituary praised him for his outstanding photography career in both Canada and the United States while mentioning his widow, a stepson with a wife and two grandchildren and two daughters by "a former wife".

What became of the family that George Buchanan Sproule left behind in Peterborough? In 1899, Josephine Sproule and her daughters moved from Peterborough to Everett, Massachusetts where Josephine's brother, William Thirkell, had taken his family twenty years earlier to work in the railway system. Josephine took in borders and her daughters worked as curtain makers. No doubt to save herself and her daughters from any embarrassment, she listed herself in all the directories as "widow of George". In 1902, Annie and Daisy went to Boston where they took clerical jobs and Josephine moved to a house in nearby Dorechester where she died in early 1910, leaving George and Sylvia free to marry in Salt Lake City.

In July 1910, Annie and Daisy Sproule moved to Regina, Saskatchewan where they lived at 2035 Hamilton Street and worked at office jobs until 1925 when Annie secured a job in San Francisco as a dietician at a nursing home. Passenger records show that she had gone there for an extended work assignment in 1921 and again in 1923 before making the final move. In 1928, both girls became naturalized citizens of the United States and, by the time of the 1930 census, Annie had become superintendent of the "Protestant Episcopal Old Ladies Home" in San Francisco. Later, both girls moved to Portland, Oregon where Annie died on March 18, 1942 and Daisy on September 21, 1956. They never married.

After the death of her second husband, Sylvia Lyman Patrick Sproule continued to live in Helena where she remained a highly respected member of the historical community. In her later years she became interested in Montana history and was very proud of her unique place within it. As the first white child born in the Gallatin Valley surrounding Helena and the daughter of the man for whom the town of Lyman was named, she was a revered member of the "Sons and Daughters of Montana Pioneers", an organization she often represented at speaking engagements throughout the region. When she died in Helena on 14 July 1948, the president of the club placed a notice in the *Helena Independent* asking that members attend her funeral. She and George are buried in Forestvale Cemetery.

It is very unfortunate that there is no central archival collection of George B. Sproule's photographs. Instead they are scattered sporadically in various archives throughout North America. We have a few at Trent Valley Archives and some are on file at the Peterborough Museum and Archives. Still others may be found at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, the Trent University Archives, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary and various archives and galleries in Chicago and New York. One wonders what happened to the many prints and negatives that existed at the time that Sproule closed his Peterborough studio. Wherever they ended up, they are a testament to a local pioneer in photography who was talented enough to leave one thriving career in Peterborough only to pick it up and take it to even further heights in Helena, Montana.

G. B. Sproule and early Peterborough photography

Elwood Jones

Peterborough had photographers almost from the dawn of photography. Daguerrotypes were invented in 1839 or 1840. There was considerable competition to try new methods, and to stretch the limits. I have seen references to daguerrotypists visiting in the 1850s. At the Peterborough Exhibition for 1860, the judge commended George A. Cox "for unquestionably the best photographs ever shown at the fair." George A. Cox went on to great fame as he built a business empire around insurance, banks, railroads and real estate. The comment, however, suggests that photographs had appeared at the fair in earlier years.

The photography exhibit became quite competitive at subsequent local fairs. G. B. Sproule and James Little were the stars of the 1870s. One local paper commented that "Peterborough can boast of the best artists in this line, at least outside of the large cities, and perhaps, equal to some of the celebrities." James Little bought the office of Robert Thompson in February 1875, and he dominated the photographic exhibits at the fair in 1878, 1879 and 1880. This office was upstairs in the two-storey building still standing on the east side of George Street, above Simcoe Street. Thomas Esterbrook had a reputation for first-rate portraits even before coming to town, and at the 1881 fair both Little and Esterbrook had stunning photographic displays. George B. Sproule won over Esterbrook in 1882, and remained the dominant local photographer throughout the 1880s. In 1886, when the Peterborough Exhibition was in its second year at Morrow Park, Sproule's pictures were described as "noted for the delicate shading, excellent pose, elegant accessories - of drapery and scenery - artistic finish and generally fine effect." He won diplomas at the 1886 fair for a collection of landscapes; a collection of portraits in duplicate, one set coloured; a collection of portraits plain; and for a portrait finished in oil."

When the fair was reorganized in 1903 as the Peterborough Industrial Exhibition, local businesses were invited to set up exhibits, and the Roy Studio was one of the early supporters of the initiative. However, the Roys were competitive and also looked for prizes for their photography, often at American photographic exhibitions. In 1908, Roy Studio faced the talented work of Louis Mendel, and walked off with the top prize for photography for the tenth time.

However, in the years before there was a Roy Studio, Peterborough had several leading photographic studios. The Heritage Gazette of the Trent Valley in August 2001 published Fraser Dunford's list of nearly sixty local photographers who were known to have been in Peterborough at least for a while. Of these, those that stayed for more than three years included R. Thompson &

Sun, from 1861 to 1900; R. D. Ewing in the 1860s; George B. Sproule, 1869-1897; Robert Smith, 1870-1885; James Little, 1875-1885; George J. and Thomas G. Early, 1885 to 1894; William McFadden, 1885-1893; Peter H. Green from 1888 to 1896; Harry J. Byers in the 1890s; Garnet Green, from 1897; R. M. and F. L. Roy, from 1896; and G. E. Whiten, from 1897. The list will need to be revised as we discover new evidence about local photographers. For example, we know that R. M. Roy was based in Peterborough as early as 1888, and had a professional studio by 1892, in the studio formerly run by P. H. Green. In 1896, R. M. Roy moved to Green's new studio, and through three generations the family remained in that Hunter Street building.

In the 1869 town assessment, George B. Sproule described himself as an artist, and his property was at west George 2 and 3, north side. This would be just west of Chambers Street. In 1873 he announced that he had two lenses and could do stereos of any local scenery. By 1881, George B. Sproule had built a terrific photo studio at the north-west corner of George and Hunter Streets, the bank

building that preceded the current Royal Bank building. Sproule ran an advertising campaign from March to the autumn of 1881 stressing that he, more than any other photographer in town, was keeping abreast with the rapid changes in photography. He claimed to be using chemicals and apparatus that were both labor-saving and time-saving. Apparently, before making big changes in late 1880, he traveled to the United States and visited the best photographic studios. There he learned different ways



to save time and labor, and this, he said allowed him to offer superior photographs at the same prices as other Peterborough studios. In September 1881, he was advertising a specialty for this month, "Large Photographic Portraits by a new method."

The *Peterborough Times* sent a reporter to check out these amazing claims. His report in the paper for March 5, 1881, concluded that Sproule had a "thorough knowledge of the profession he follows." While the reporter was visiting the "operating" room, two ladies and a gentleman came to the studio. Sproule welcomed the trio and then prepared a plate, arranged the sitters in position for the shot, removed and replaced the lens cap, allowing only three seconds between the last two actions. Sproule then took the negative to the dark room where it was developed using new processes, called the "short method," which he considered quite superior to the more commonly used developer. Sproule told the *Times* reporter that sitters were less likely to move and the negative was less likely to be a blur. People were less likely to smile if they had to keep still too long. Sproule also got more animated pictures because he was a conversationalist. The reporter thought that the sitters felt more confident about the photographer.

The reporter then visited the ladies dressing room, which he described as bright, comfortable and cheerful. The general waiting room was also well-lit with natural light through the windows. The business office was still incomplete, apparently "owing to the hurry in getting the establishment opened for the holiday trade." The spacious, clean, well-fitted room for printing and finishing the

photographs was 14 feet by 36 feet and had windows facing west, north and south. This meant that the light could be suitable for "any and every class of negatives."

While there is no Sproule photographic archives, there are prints in several local collections, including my personal one. I have some *carte de visites*, such as one could carry in a wallet, and some cabinet photos, about 4.25 inches by 6.5 inches (10.6 cm by 16.6 cm). My *carte de visites* date from about the 1870s, while the cabinet prints are from the 1880s and 1890s. If my prints were representative of Sproule's work, I would say he did

busts, moved to seated pictures in which the furnishings, poses and artifacts were chosen with some deliberation. Then the 1890s he was doing head and shoulder portraits in which the background seemed to vanish, much like the style I associate with the Osborne photography of the 1970s. The cabinet photographs have a very

shiny finish in bold sepia tones. The two cabinet photos that were done at George and Hunter were mounted on a dark brown card that simply said "Sproule Peterborough Canada." The later ones say "Sproule, 170 Charlotte St. Peterboro Ont." and have GBS in a fancy monogram. All of the pictures are alive with character, and only one has faded over the years.

Pictures on these pages are from the Walton family album and suggest generations of the family. (Elwood Jones collection)

