

Strangers in the Attic: The Era of CDVs and CCs

George Matheson looks at the once-popular Cartes de Visite and Cabinet Cards of a bygone era



*An array of CDVs of unidentifiable people
ED:AGAIN IN SEPIA TONE.*

what are known as Cartes de Visite (CDV) and Cabinet Cards (CC) which were the rage back in the last half of the 1800s and early 1900s.

An earlier type of photograph, the tintype, was already popular because the image could be developed and fixed in only a few minutes with no elaborate process. It was affordable and it allowed the photographer to seek a clientele beyond the studio at fairs, carnivals and boardwalks.

But the tintype had its drawback. Since it involved creating a direct positive image on a thin sheet of iron (not tin) coated with a light-sensitive emulsion, every image was unique, a one-of-a-kind, that could not be reproduced.

But a process developed in 1850's France, changed all that. It involved the creation of a glass negative which could then be repeatedly mounted on paper treated with albumen (egg whites) and a solution of light-sensitive silver nitrate to produce multiple copies of a picture, all with their distinctive sepia toning characteristic of the albumen process.

At first the negatives and resulting portraits, glued onto a

One afternoon, sitting at my desk, an antique roll-top that had once belonged to my great grandfather, I was focussed on sorting through 'family photographs'. There were piles of wedding photos, baby pictures, family portraits, travel snaps and more. Some were unspoiled while others were faded by time or crinkled by mishandling. Two piles caught my attention.

These piles, consisting of photos glued on to stiff card stock, seemed different from the others. Those in one pile were approximately 2 x 4 inches and

shared a yellowish sepia tone. The ones in the other pile were larger and varied slightly in size averaging about 5x7 inches. Some of these were in traditional sepia tone and some were black and white. What both piles shared in common was that they were all portraits, mostly of individuals but a few of couples or a family, and with two or three exceptions, I had no idea who the people were. They didn't seem in any way connected to my family.

Why, I wondered, were there so many "strangers" in the attic.

The answer is that they are



A one-of-a-kind gemtype calling card.

thin cardboard backing, were small and light enough to be carried in a pocket or mailed. They came to be called *Cartes de Visite* (CDV), because they resembled the visiting or calling cards Victorians often left when making social and business visits.

By the 1850s, some of the well-heeled had already come to inserting tintype images on their cards. Known as “gemtypes”, they were tiny tintypes, measuring a half an inch by an inch, and intended for miniature photograph albums.

But the new albumen printed cards, which could be produced at a greatly reduced cost, allowed the less wealthy to have their own mass produced CDVs with a full-sized image. So popular were these CDVs that people collected them, traded them, even bought them. Anybody who was somebody (or a ‘wannabe’ somebody) had to have theirs. Card albums and displays became a common feature in Victorian parlors. So widespread was this behaviour, nicknamed “cardomania,” that in 1863 Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: “Card portraits,

as everybody knows, have become the social currency, the ‘green-backs’ of civilization.”

However, by the early 1870s, CDVs were generally being displaced by larger “Cabinet Cards” (CCs). Also albumen prints but now mounted on more rigid cardboard backs and measuring 4.5 by 6.5 inches, they could be seen by anyone in the room when typically displayed, as typically they were, on a cabinet, hence the name. Not only could these CCs be produced in quantity, they had the added advantage that the introduction of a negative allowed the image to be “touched up” (akin to modern ‘Photo-shopping’,) before printing to hide facial defects revealed by the larger size. Some prints were even individually hand-tinted by brush with transparent watercolours, requiring considerable skill. And as time went on, the cardboard varied in size and the distinguishing sepia toning of the early albumen prints often gave way to an uncharacteristic black and white appearance due to the evolution in the emulsion on the paper in the 1890s.

With this information I sat back in my old oak chair to take a clearer look at the pile of smaller CDVs. Again none of them seemed to show any resemblance to my ancestors. Most had no studio name or location and remained a mystery. But one very old and worn card had a name printed on the back: **W. Marquand**. A search uncovered a William Isaac Marquand: photographer, Methodist preacher and ship’s chandler who had operated a studio in St Peter Port, Guernsey during the late 1860s and 1870s primarily producing

CDVs. I have been to Guernsey many times in search of my ancestral family who had lived there during the 1800s. (See the most recent article entitled “Why Guernsey?” in the March/April 2015 issue of *Your Genealogy Today*.) Could this actually be a relative? Or maybe just the friend of one?

One other caught my attention because it was signed W. S. Stephens. Some time ago, I had written an article for *Family Chronicle* (May/June 2011) entitled: *The Man in the Attic*, about a pioneer poet in Ontario, W. A. Stephens. Over time, some of his personal diaries and



A typical Cabinet Card (circa 1880).

1870 CDV of man in Guernsey.

possessions had come for safe keeping to my grandfather from his daughter-in-law, Mrs. W. S. Stephens. Now I had a face to go with the name of her husband and could be sure that there was no genealogical connection. The rest of the CDVs, and there are many, remain unidentified. But each of them has some uniqueness about it: a face, a dress, a pose, an expression or even a lack of one. For now I put them aside.

I shifted my attention to the other pile: the CCs with their slight variations in size, cardboard, colour and style. Many of these had elaborate logos and addresses on the back. While many of the studios could not be traced, one of a seated military man carried the name of the photographer: W. Notman of Montreal. Notman turned out to have been so prolific and prominent that the McCord Museum in Montreal now houses 600,000 photographs taken by his studio during its 78 years of existence. Hélène Samson, Curator in Photography at



General Bissett, taken by Notman circa 1868.

the museum, identified the 1868 print as one of a group of General J. J. Bissett, who, according to the *New York Times'* obituary of June 24, 1894: "had been selected in 1861 by the Government of Great Britain to command its military forces in pre-confederation Canada." Certain that there was no family connection, I am left wondering whether one of my ancestors crossed paths with this general.

I was also drawn to another card, one of an attractive young woman with a soft, almost smiling face; a contrast to the common sober faces of the time. It was also notable for its odd size (4x8 inches) which emphasized her elegant winter coat. On the back, by hand was written a short message: "With Love from Millie. March 84." A search of my family databases came up empty. No Millie. So who was her love for? A far off family member? A close friend? A beau? I will never know.

But, with a further draw of the cards, I hit it lucky. This one was a traditional CC of a young girl posing thoughtfully; her head resting on an arm, her eyes off in a dream. I recognized the face; it was my grandmother. A date added later suggested it was taken in 1894 when the family had been living in Dundas, Ontario where the photographer's studio was. She would have been nine years old; my earliest picture of her.

Sorting through the many remaining, none stood out. A few of young men mounted on similar card stock might have been college friends of my grandfather. A few of young women might have been friends of my grandmother. The ones of couples and families, no one knows.

What I reminded myself of as I



Cabinet Card of my grandmother. 1894.



"With love from Millie".

stored these two piles away was that these photos had belonged to my grandparents, intermingled with a number from the Stephens' estate. They would have received them as gifts or calling cards from people they knew — perhaps their friends or maybe just friends of friends.

In this modern era of social media, "friending" has become a popular social activity. Distinct from friendship it involves the collection of a group of "friends" on a social networking service intended in part to show the expanse of one's social world.

But in the world long before the Internet, when photography itself was a new technology, the friends and acquaintances displayed on the cabinet or kept in an album functioned as one's own 'primitive,' pre-Facebook form of friending.

While most of my CDVs and CCs are not of my family, all of them are still somehow connected to the family. Viewing them seems somewhat like meeting my ancestors' friends.

Tips on dating CDVs and CCs according to the card stock and colour, border and lettering, exist on the web, but the real puzzle remains: who is it? With most cards that question will remain unanswered, a mystery to be enjoyed and perhaps a way to sense some connection with the people who were part of my ancestors' social network. 



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An array of unidentified CCs.