Pictorial representation can be a useful resource to enhance our knowledge of native culture, lifestyle and technology in areas of limited contact. It can fill in gaps in our knowledge that are not provided in written documents or oral history, but, at the same time, one has to keep in mind its limitations. The Western Canada Pictorial Index (W.C.P.I.) at the University of Winnipeg has a collection of over 50,000 slides depicting the history of Western Canada. Among its collections is that of Rev. R.T. Chapin, a United Church missionary who was stationed at Island Lake from 1922 to 1930. This community is located 240 km east of Norway House; in terms of portages, there were 33 which made Island Lake one of the more remote posts in the Hudson's Bay Company network. During the stay of Chapin and his wife and partner, Etta, he took several hundred pictures, copies of which were eventually donated to the Index to preserve them for educational purposes and to make them available to researchers. They are an exceptionally good source of information about aspects of life there which are not described in written sources, such as the journals of the Hudson's Bay Company. The HBC records give data on seasonal cycles, types of furs hunted and country provisions traded, incidences of epidemics and periods of starvation. They indicate relations between the managers at the posts and the hunters at the camps. They describe relations between men, not women, and what information they give about life in the camps can be summed up as fishing in the summer and hunting in the winter. Chapin's camera shows us life in the Indian community and the interaction of the local people with the outsiders. Each winter, he would hire guides with dog teams to visit the winter camps for approximately two-week periods. These visits were welcomed by the people as an occasion for celebration to break the monotony of a long, Manitoba winter. We can see what the
camps looked like, some of the people he visited and the interior of their homes. He portrays fur trade practices and transportation methods which are older than the written record and which were used throughout the fur-bearing regions of Rupert’s Land in the fur trade. What sets these images apart as a source of historical information is that they do more to destroy stereotypes than to re-inforce them.

To establish the validity of these images as a source of historical information, we can compare the information in the pictures with four sources of written materials describing the period: 1) the HBC post journals (HBCA: 1921–21 and 1929–30); 2) the report of A.I. Hallowell (1938), the noted anthropologist who visited Island Lake in 1930; 3) Rev. Chapin’s memoirs dictated in 1972, and 4) the text of A.M. Lindsay, a classroom consultant with the Department of Indian Affairs, who published some of Chapin’s pictures in a textbook in 1975 (Lindsay 1975). These written sources are all by whites and give the different perspectives of these outsiders: economic, anthropological, religious and educational. We do not have the words and reactions of the Island Lake people themselves. These, however can be inferred, perhaps incompletely from the pictorial record, to give us an idea of the life in this community in the 1920s. It also helps us better understand fur trade conditions more generally.

At the same time, the limitations of the images must be kept in mind. Walter Hildebrandt (1985) pointed out in his critique of the “Official Images of 1885” that images are usually used uncritically and often re-inforce stereotypic myths of the past. In the case of 1885, he was particularly critical of the sketches by British and Canadian soldiers which were published in newspapers and which were effectively used for propaganda purposes to justify the military conquest of Western Canada and the subjugation of those native groups, both Indian and Métis, who stood in the way of the Canadian vision of progress. The Chapin pictures have their limitations too. They do not show some of the important on-going economic activities such as fishing, hunting or women’s work other than child care. If any of the Island Lakers were not disposed to participate in the activities of the United Church Mission, either because they were Catholic or they did not accept the United Church vision of reality, they probably were not included in the photographs. Of the people who did participate, the pictures show the positive interaction of the missionaries and the local people, so that we are not aware of possible conflicts. In general, it would seem that the Island Lakers appreciated the social aspects of the mission, particularly the music and singing of hymns in Cree. On one occasion, Chapin noted in his memoirs that he was chastised by the Chief for discussion of honesty in regard to fur debt in his Sunday sermon. Chapin wanted to deal with practical matters, but the Chief felt that criticism of trading practices was
not appropriate religious subject matter.

A secular subject which was not photographed by Chapin was dancing. The journal writer of the HBC, however, was interested in local social activities in 1921 and he wrote on July 29th:

Souter, Davidson over at John McDougall’s camp at a feast today again. There was quite a lot of dancing, but none of the women were allowed inside the dance hall, the reason for this, according to Souter, being that they knew by the look of him (Souter) that he was a bad sort of d— and therefore the men could not trust the women with him. (HBCA, B.93/a/15, July 29, 1921)

On August 12, he noted that an Indian elder had intervened and put a stop to this social activity:

It appears that Edward Harper B (the councillor) came over to the Men’s House last night and told the Indians to quit the dancing, or he would report them to the Indian agent, so they had to quit, and I expect the dances will be finished for good now. It seems a bit funny that they are so strict on dancing at this reserve as, at Norway House, God’s Lake, Oxford, etc. etc. they have dances almost every evening. (HBCA, B.93/a/15, August 12, 1921)

Community standards were thus divided about appropriate behaviour, possibly stemming from the missionaries’ questioning of traditional values. On the other hand, Chapin was probably atypical of his colleagues in that he admired the Indians’ spirituality and philosophy of life and was open to learning from them: “They could see the funny side and laugh at things almost in the face of calamity. We had lots to learn as well as give, as we made our home in their midst.” What this writer admired about Rev. Chapin was that, as a white man, he could admit his vulnerability and dependency on the local people. Life in the subarctic boreal forest was not an easy adaptation for white people from southern Ontario. These pictures show not what the Indians learned from the whites, but how the missionaries’ Indians friends helped them survive when isolated far from the white community where they felt at home.

SLIDE CAPTIONS:

#254–8130 — 1923: Pulling canoe by rope up rapids: “In this instance, it has not been necessary to completely unload the canoe and portage it over the white water in the background. Using a painter or “rope”, the canoe is pulled along the shore. The two men beside the canoe are holding the canoe so that it will not be damaged on the rocks. The third man is pulling the bow back toward the shore and around the bend above the rapids. . . Very skilled canoeists might elect to shoot a rapids rather than portage it.” (Lindsay 1975:11)
#255-8150 — 1924: In October, the HBC hired Indians to mix mud with their feet to plaster the log cabins. Mud plaster was used in Red River to insulate the houses for winter, such as the Riel House in St. Vital and the Brown House, Historical Museum of St. James-Assiniboia.

#250-8002 — 1923: Indians in canoe with Rev. Chapin in the middle. The ice is freezing on the lake; soon, large-scale fishing will be stopped for the winter.

#250-7992 — 1924: Pupils at Island Lake School with a sign saying “Merry Christmas” in Cree.

#251-8034 — 1927: “I have no dogs of my own. They are a big expense and I have not continuous work for them. Dogs are all right if you have enough work to keep them going steady all winter, but if not they cost too much. During the winter, it costs a dollar a day for fish food for one train. The people of course catch their own fish all winter under the ice. So I tell the people at the camps that I will visit them if they will take me there and back and see that there is an interpreter in camp. I provide the rations for whoever goes with me.” (Chapin 1972:54-55).

#250-7994 — 1927: Moses McDougall’s Log Teepee: “The structure is typical of the log cabin design. This home was constructed simply by erecting three or four main posts and lashing the tops together. The balance of logs on the outer wall are supported by the main posts. The logs were then chinked and packed with moss and mud. Extra insulation is provided by the winter harvest of hides and furs as well as old cloth materials. The diameter of the floor is probably between five to six meters. Four happy-looking children stand in the entrance.” (Lindsay 1975:36).

#250-7980 — 1927: Interior View of Albert Monias’s Winter Camp: “I was told that winter camps in the “bush” are rough log shacks and that they usually contain a peculiar type of chimney and fireplace about two feet wide, constructed of mud mixed with stones or sticks. The logs used for fuel are placed on end so that they lean towards each other at the top like a tipi.” (Hallowell 1938:134).

#252-8062 — 1925: East Deer Lake Camp: Women and children wearing rabbit robes. “Woven rabbit (hare) skin garments are still made. In winter, adults formerly wore almost a complete outfit of this material, except mocassins, but at present only caps are used. For children, the hare skin coat still survives and an excellent specimen, with hood attached, was obtained. Blankets are also made of the same material.” (Hallowell 1938:135).

#250-7979 — 1927: Henry Fiddler and his wife Nancy with family sitting before their supper on a cloth laid out on the floor: Lindsay: “Note that the interior logs have been trimmed, probably with a broad axe. Newspaper has been used to provide extra insulation.” (Lindsay 1975:43)
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