

A version of this article appeared in the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, Spring 2011, 103 (4), 38-41.

### **James Vey: photographic artist**

Newfoundland's rich oral/verbal tradition has been widely documented and analysed. The ballads, recitations, and folk tales have been collected, indexed, and, in many instances committed to print or sound. These oral representations serve as records of people, places, and events in the history of the province. Balladeers such as Johnny Burke (1851-1930) covered topics as diverse as the sealing strike of 1902, a wedding in Renew's, the annual St. John's regatta, cod liver oil, and even the shortage of water from Windsor Lake.<sup>1</sup>

This oral tradition has survived because the words, which were passed down from generation to generation, were captured by collectors. Unfortunately, much of the visual tradition created by the photographers of the mid and late 1800s has been lost through fire, neglect, and physical deterioration of the original negatives and prints.

### **Early photographers in Newfoundland**

In their article on photography for the *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Ann Devlin-Fischer and Tony Murphy speculated that photography was introduced to Newfoundland by itinerant photographers such as T.C. Doane and William Valentine who travelled here in 1843. Charles F. Toussaint is considered to have been the first resident photographer, called a daguerreotypist, having set up business in St. John's as early as 1850 (McGrath). David Adams, Sherburn T. McKenney, Colin and Duncan Chisholm, Robert Dicks, Edwin W. Lyon, and J. Page Wood appear in early business directories as photographers. At various times they worked individually or in ever changing partnerships, but few examples of their work have survived.

The names of Robert Edwards Holloway (1850-1904), Simeon Henry Parsons (1844-1908), and James Vey are better known because photographs by them are held in private collections as well as archives and libraries. While both Holloway and Parsons appear in the *Dictionary of Canadian biography*, there is no article on their contemporary Vey. In part this may be because much of Vey's work, especially the photographs which were reproduced in publications, was not credited to him. One example would be books which include photographs of Guglielmo Marconi's 1901 experiments on Signal Hill – the experiments which led to the first transatlantic radio signal. The photographs, including one showing Marconi with the apparatus used in the experiment and another which shows Marconi and his assistants launching the kite-supported aerial were taken by Vey. Although widely reproduced, they are seldom credited to Vey.<sup>2</sup>

Photographers in Vey's time, before point and shoot photography, had to be a combination of scientist and artist.<sup>3</sup> It was important that they understood chemical interactions as they would often have to prepare their own developing solutions. For instance, a technique, known as gold-toning was accomplished by using a gold chloride solution. However, as such a solution was not commercially available in St. John's Vey would have made it himself. This is verified by a story told by Vey's son George who recalled that his father used a gold sovereign in one of the solutions used during the developing process. By dissolving pure gold, the sovereign, in "Aqua Regia," a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acids, Vey would have produced gold chloride. On at least one occasion some of the acid got into his eyes blinding Vey for a month (Vey).

During the summers, Vey, and other photographers, would travel throughout the province photographing people in their homes or at work and capturing the picture of places beyond the boundaries of St. John's. While not replacing painters, photographers made it possible for a less affluent class of people to own family portraits, landscapes, and images of day to day events. This summer activity also explains why the majority of photographs showing the Fire of (July) 1892 are not of the fire, but the aftermath of the fire.

As if being a scientist/artist wasn't enough, a photographer would also have to be quite physically fit in order to lug around the 50 or so pounds of necessary equipment. When one looks at some of the photographs taken in the midst of the seal hunt or in the wilds of Labrador, or considers the dangers of dealing with highly volatile chemicals, one appreciates that they must have been a little crazy as well – and for this we should be grateful as these photographers have left a legacy for us to enjoy.

James Vey is an excellent example of a photographer who possessed all of the above characteristics.

### **James Vey (1852?-1922)<sup>4</sup>**

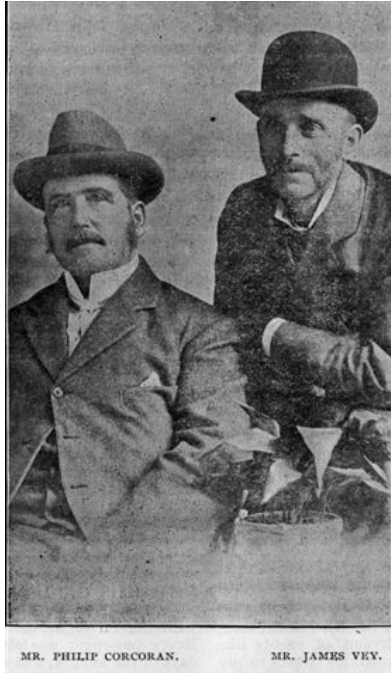
James Vey was born in St. John's to Samuel and Louisa (Pike) Vey. Samuel, a carpenter, passed some of his woodworking skill on to his son as James not only took photographs, but also framed them and may have done framing for Samuel E. Garland. Vey's obituary reported that he apprenticed with J. Page Wood, and worked for S.H. Parsons & Sons before going into partnership with Edwin Wilkes Lyon in 1886 ("James Vey").

On 21 May 1889, Vey married Louise Alice Whiteley (1869-1948), the daughter of William Henry and Louisa Ann (Thompson) Whiteley. Whiteley, a well known fish merchant and inventor of the cod trap, operated his business out of Bonne Espérance, Labrador. The Whiteley family spent their winters in Quebec City until 1881 when they established a home in St. John's (Whiteley, 61, 91). James and Louise Alice's youngest son, George, remembered that Alice, as she preferred to be called, didn't do much housework and she didn't do any cooking (Vey). The children, and the housework, were tended to by women who came from Labrador. It was supposed to be a holiday for these women, but it must have been an exhausting one as there were at least nine youngsters.<sup>5</sup>

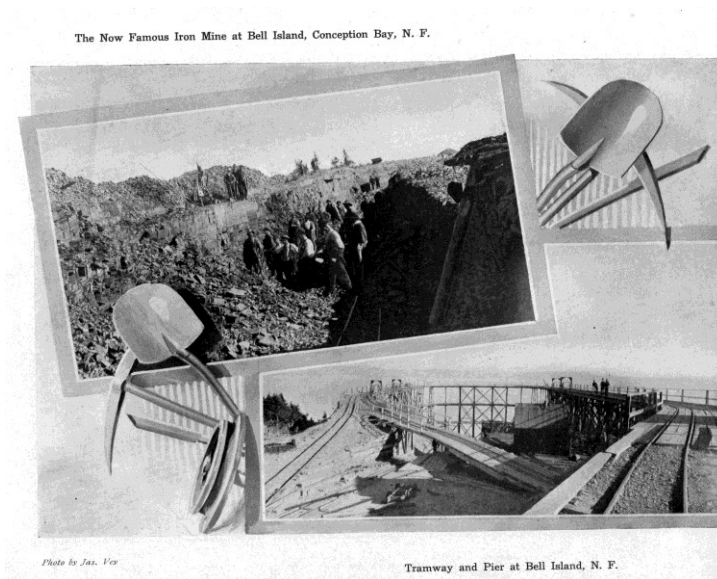
The affiliation of Lyon and Vey ended on 8 July 1892. They may have been planning this action for awhile as the notice of dissolution indicated that all outstanding debts owing to the partnership should be paid to Lyon which suggests that he had bought out Vey ("Dissolution of partnership"). Within the next two months Vey purchased a house and land on LeMarchant Road (now Patrick Street) (Deed of Sale, 7/108) and opened a photographic studio at 300 ½ Water Street. In the announcement for his studio, Vey stated that he would do photographs, tintypes, picture framing, the "celebrated" \$8.00 oil paintings in heavy gold frames, and that he had views of the late fire from all points of interest, and views of the principal harbours on the northern mail route to Battle Harbour ("New photographic studio). He would later move his studio a little way down the street to the Gazette (later Bank of Montreal) building at the foot of McBride's Hill where he would stay until 1917 when ill health forced him to close the studio. Vey continued to operate his business from his home until his death 14 December 1922. Sometime after this, Alice, and the children who were still living at home, moved to Vancouver where two of the Vey's sons, Stanley and William, had settled years before (Whiteley, 91).

### **Vey's Photographs**

Vey's work was printed in many issues of the annual publication *Christmas Review*, the *Newfoundland Gazette*, as well as in issues of the *Illustrated London News* and *McClure's Magazine*. In this photograph of Vey and his "first lieutenant" Philip Corcoran appeared in the *Christmas Review of 1902* (O'Mara, 4). The photographer of the image is not credited - could it have been Vey using a time exposure?



Some of Vey's work, including that done for Marconi and a series representing Reid Newfoundland Company's "alphabet fleet," was done under contract. Possibly this collage which appeared in *The Ancient Colony* ([6]) was originally done for the iron mine company.



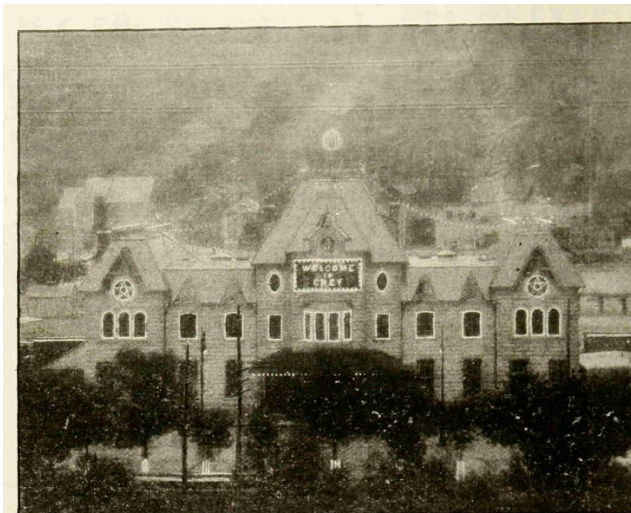
The seal fishery was a popular subject for Vey and his contemporaries. They photographed everything from the actual hunt to this image of the men removing fat from the skins (*The Ancient Colony*, [1]).



Photo by Jas. Vey  
The Seal Fishery, another of Newfoundland's Important Industries—Remcving Fat from Seal Skins

In addition to this photograph, Vey also took pictures of the 1902 sealers' strike. His office in the Gazette building gave him a perfect vantage point from which to take aerial shots of the strikers as they assembled at the foot of McBride's Hill.

Vey was one of the first photographers in St. John's to use flash photography as shown in this image published in the *Newfoundland Quarterly* (20). This process involved "exploding" flash powder to light up a night scene. This procedure could produce an interesting shot, but could just as easily do serious harm to the photographer if something went wrong.



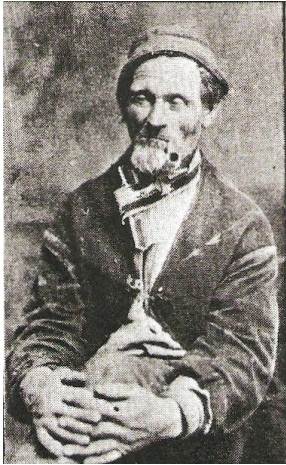
[Photo. by James Vey.]

REID-NEWFOUNDLAND COMPANY'S STATION ILLUMINATED IN HONOR OF  
EARL GREY'S VISIT.

### **James Vey and Johnny Burke – both storytellers**

James Vey and Johnny Burke had much in common and may well have known each other as they both worked on Water Street. More importantly, they shared the avocation of storytelling. Burke, in his ballad "Michael Power: the blind minstrel"<sup>6</sup> offers us an insight into the kind of man that Vey was. Power

had been blinded in a mining accident and tried to earn money by playing a portable organ on the downtown streets. The organ, squeaky and old, didn't produce a very good sound. Vey, along with fellow Water Street businessmen Albert Martin and Walter Clouston, raised money to buy a new organ for Power. This story is consistent with George Vey's recollections of Saturday nights when the family would entertain "disadvantaged" persons (Vey). The ballad and the reminiscence may also explain a series of photographs that Vey took of the "gypsy kings and exiled rebels" (Morris) who lived in the St. John's of his time. In the faces of Dickie Magee, Mattie Strong (shown here), Jimmy Mansfield, Count Decourcey, and others Vey saw something that made them more than characters of the street. They in turn must have respected Vey enough to come in off those streets and sit for a portrait in his studio.



When looking at an old photograph, it is important to put the image into the context of time and place – in effect, to put ourselves into the picture. Thanks to the imagination and dedication of Holloway, Parsons, and James Vey, this isn't hard to do.

*Suzanne Sexty, Honorary Research Librarian, Memorial University of Newfoundland Libraries, gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Manfred Buchheit.*

### Works Cited

- The Ancient Colony and Its Many and Varied Attractions*. 2nd ed. Improved. Grand Rapids, MI.: J. Bayne, [1905-1909?].
- Deed of sale from Michael Power to James Vey. 2 August 1892, Newfoundland Registry of Deeds, 7/108.
- Devlin-Fischer, Ann and Tony Murphy. "Photography." *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*. Accessed 29 January 2011 at [http://collections.mun.ca/u/?cns\\_enl.2180](http://collections.mun.ca/u/?cns_enl.2180)
- Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, 2011. Accessed 29 January 2011 at <http://www.biographi.ca/index-e.html>
- "Dissolution of partnership." *Morning Despatch*, 3 August 1892, 1.
- "James Vey." *Evening Telegram*, 14 December 1922, 6.
- McGrath, Antonia. *Museum Notes - Early Photography in Newfoundland*. Winter, 1980. Reprinted Fall, 1991. Accessed 29 January 2011 at <http://www.therooms.ca/museum/mnotes3.asp>
- Morris, Don. "Of Gypsy Kings..." *Sunday Express*, 13 September 1987, 25.
- "New photographic studio." *Evening Telegram*, 2 September 1892, 1.
- O'Mara, Michael J. *Christmas Review, 1902*. St. John's, NL.: M.A. Devine, M.J. O'Mara, 1902.
- Vey, George. Interview by Liz Runacres (James Vey's granddaughter and George Vey's niece). Undated.

White, John, comp. *Burke's Ballads* (St. John's, NL: [s.n.], 1960?). Accessed 20 March 2012 at <http://collections.mun.ca/u/?cns,39537>

Whiteley, Arthur S. *A century on Bonne Espérance [i.e. Espérance]: the saga of the Whiteley family*. Ottawa: [s.n.], 1977.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the ballads, such as “The Water Shortage from Windsor Lake,” (White, 50) are as timely today as they were in Burke’s time.

From Windsor Lake our water we take, but now it's goin' down,  
Right now there is a shortage and they can't supply the town;  
For washin' cars and rinsin' jars, the taps are all turned on,  
We now must turn on Windsor Lake, no water in the pond.

<sup>2</sup> The photographs are in the Provincial Archives’ photograph collection (B 1-89 through B 1-98) at The Rooms. Two of the photographs in this series were taken outside of Newfoundland and may not be Vey photographs.

<sup>3</sup> The descriptions of photography in the mid 1800s were provided by M. Buchheit in a series of e-mails and telephone conversations. The author is indebted to him for sharing not only his knowledge of the history of photography, but also his enthusiasm for the work of these early photographers. Any misinterpretations of his explanations are solely the responsibility of the author.

<sup>4</sup> The date of James Vey’s birth is a matter for speculation. His obituary in the *Evening Telegram* (14 December 1922, 6) said that he was 70 years old which would place his birth in 1852. In the registration of his marriage (Parish records, St. John’s, Congregational church, The Rooms, Public Archives, E-4-5, Reel 73) his age is given as 30 which means that he was born in 1859. The *1921 Newfoundland census* records his birth as December 1861.

<sup>5</sup> Information from primary sources, identifies that the following children were born to James and Alice Vey: Bertram (1890-1974), Stanley Arthur (1892-1966), William Whiteley (1894-1975), Dorothy Sybil (1896-1902), twins James (1899-1899) and Alice (1899-1964), Hilda (1902-1979), Christopher (1905-1906), Edward George (1910-1996).

<sup>6</sup> “For such an act shows kindly hearts of true and worthy men.../Such men as Albert Martin, Walter Clouston, and James Vey,” (White, 11-12).