

Thinking like a Historian

Reading Historical Photographs

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Getting Started

You can find a larger, clearer version of the photo below [here](#). One of the first things that a historian does is to look at the source of a photograph. Answering questions such as when and where the picture was taken and who the photographer was can help us understand the photograph. Often this information is given in a written caption at the bottom of the photograph, as it is with "Men posed on a flume, William's Creek; T.R. Pattullo standing in centre".



Men posed on a flume, William's Creek; T.R. Pattullo standing in centre, ca. 1868. Frederick Dally photograph; BC Archives F-08564.

From this caption, we learn that the picture was taken in Williams Creek around 1868 (*ca.* stands for *circa*, and in front of a year it means approximately that date). We could look up the location of this place and find that it is in the Cariboo region of BC. Together with the year and a little research we could infer that it was a photo of gold rush miners. Knowing a lot of background information is what historians call context, which is very important for reading a photo.

Looking Deeper

Continuing to think like a historian, we can learn more from the caption that will help us read the photo. If we look up the meaning of 'flume', we could guess the purpose of the long trough that sweeps through the photo. We can learn the name of the man in the centre and wonder why he is so important that he is in the centre of the photo and the only miner named. We also have the name of the photographer, Frederick Dally. We will look at him later.

Turn now to the photo: What do you see? First, take a few seconds to get a general impression but then take some time to look for details. Look slowly from the left to the right, bottom to top. Make a note of the people, objects, activities, and the environment in the foreground and in the background.

Let us again make some inferences, this time about what the image suggests about life during the Cariboo Gold Rush. For example, what might "Men posed on a flume" suggest about how gold was mined? About the life of a miner? About the effect on the environment? Just as important, what does it not tell us? Who or what has Frederick Dally not included in his photograph? (For example, women or different ethnic groups.)

Good Questions

Questions are the tools of writing history. What you learn from any source will depend on the questions that you ask. A historical photograph does not tell a story on its own. However, it can form the material for you to write your own story. That story will depend on the questions.

A good question

- comes from curiosity
- is open-ended; it can't be answered yes or no
- invites deep thinking
- leads to more good questions

Once you have decided on one or two good questions you need to find some other sources to build an answer. [BC's Gold Rush](#) in the Learning Portal has a good collection of paintings, objects, songs, clothing and written documents as well as photos. Try reading another photo by Frederick Dally, such as "[Shaft entrance of Neversweat Tunnel Co. Claim](#)", in the same way that we did with "Men posed on a flume".