

Gold Rush Photographer

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What was Fredrick Dally's Story

A gallery of Frederick Dally's photographs are included in the “[Look](#)” section of this pathway. This collection gives us a sense of his interests and his audience. Yet there are still many questions we could ask about him:

- Why did he take these photographs?
- What do they tell us about Dally, his values and view of the world?
- Why are his photos of the gold rush so well known?
- After four years of taking photos, why did he leave British Columbia forever to be a dentist in England?

Jot down your first answers to these questions and then read the background information below and see if your thinking changes.

Background Information

If you were on a hike into the forest or mountains today, you could hold your phone or digital camera in one hand and take a photograph with a click of the finger. You could post it and a dozen other pictures to your friends and family. Photography for Frederick Dally in the 1860s was very different.



The great bluff at the 80 mile post, the Fraser River, BC, ca. 1867. This shows the Cariboo Road to the gold rush. [Dally's title is incorrect - this is actually on the Thompson River.] Frederick Dally photograph; BC Archives A-00350.

Today a digital camera saves your picture on a memory card. In Dally's time the photographer opened a camera lens by hand to allow light to shine on a glass plate. The light reacted with chemicals on the glass to give a picture.

Because the camera lens had to stay open for several seconds, Dally could only photograph people standing still. Otherwise, the image on a glass plate would blur. (One of the horses in the Cariboo Road photo shown to the left moved slightly and is blurred.)

To take his gold rush pictures, Dally had to pack heavy equipment by horse on roads like the one in the photograph. The camera itself was bulky and had to be set up on a tripod. The equipment included the fragile glass plates, large quantities of water, a chest of chemicals and a darkroom tent—all for a single photograph. He also had to deal with the heat, cold, rain, wind and, worst of all for a photographer, dust. For a larger, clearer version of the image to the left, [click here](#).

Dally's photos were popular at the time and sold well. BC gold rushes were front-page news in much of North America and Dally knew what made a successful photograph. The Cariboo Road photo above shows the road's sharp cut through the dark rock, which contrasts with the light sky behind it and the river far below. The wagon and train of mules and horses sweep towards us.

In addition to the gold rush, Dally made a specialty of taking pictures of First Nations people, their canoes and memorial sites as you can see in the [gallery of his photos](#). In the nineteenth century, Europeans and North Americans were very curious about native peoples.

Dally's images were published as engravings in books and illustrated papers and in photograph albums of visitors and residents. According to Don Bourdon of the Royal BC Museum, "Photography was beyond the ability of all but a very few amateurs and professionals, so clients purchased these views for their collections."¹ He also suggests that T.R. Patullo in "Men posed on a flume, Williams Creek" commissioned Dally to take his photo. The photos were usually sold in the form of the popular *carte de visites*, photographs the size of a smart phone screen that were easy to mail or mount in specially designed photo albums.

At the end of his life in 1914, Dally gave several of these albums to the provincial archives. This meant his photos were carefully preserved by an archivist and available to the public.

- *What is your thinking now about the questions posed at the beginning?*
- *Did this second reading support your first thoughts or did they change your thinking in some way?*

¹ "Images and Intentions: Early British Columbia Gold Rushes Seen Through the Works of Painters and Photographers" in Bridge, K. (ed). 2015. *New Perspectives on the Gold Rush*. Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 76-77.