

Byron Harmon - Biography

Information sheet B1

BYRON HILL HARMON, 1876-1942

Byron Harmon was born near Tacoma, Washington, USA in 1876. His love of photography and gift for invention emerged during his teenage years. During this period, Eastman Kodak marketed its first roll film and, with the aim of reaching a broad audience, designed cameras that could be used with little training. Initially Harmon could not afford one of these cameras so he built his own. His first instrument was a hand-made pinhole camera.

In the mid 1890s, Harmon opened his first portrait studio. By the late 1890s he was ready for a change. Packing up his photographic equipment, he began a journey that would take him around the United States and Canada, eventually leading him to Banff, N.W.T., Canada, now in the Province of Alberta.

Harmon discovered that Banff was full of photographic opportunities, yet did not have a permanent photography studio. The potential for photography, together with magnificent scenery and health benefits of living in the mountains, appealed greatly to Harmon. He decided to settle in the town of Banff in the famed Canadian Rockies.

Claiming he would rather photograph mountains than people, Harmon launched a life ambition to photograph every major peak and glacier in the Rocky and Selkirk Mountains in as many moods as possible. In this pursuit, he became an avid mountaineer. In 1906 he became a charter member and official photographer for the Alpine Club of Canada. Harmon organized and accompanied numerous expeditions, both with the ACC and independently. These expeditions were ground-breaking and daring, and resulted in thousands of still photographs and considerable motion picture footage, as well as prestige and international recognition.

Byron Harmon's pursuits did not pertain solely to photography and film-making. His entrepreneurial ventures were numerous and over time included a photographic studio, theatre, drugstore and tearoom, as well as a variety of publications in the form of viewbooks, calendars and postcards. Harmon built a large home overlooking the town, raised a family, and was a prominent community member.

In his later years, Harmon continued his adventurous lifestyle, travelling and photographing around the world. He passed away in 1942 at the age of sixty-six. The Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Archives and Library has an extensive collection of Byron Harmon's work, consisting of more than 10,500 photographic negatives, prints, postcards, transparencies and motion pictures.