



## Archival Record AN1940s

Item:	AN1940s
Date:	1945-1948
Type of material:	photograph
Place:	Point St Charles/Pointe-Saint-Charles, Montreal, Quebec
Place of creation:	Charron Street/Rue Charon
Extent:	black and white 35 mm negative film
Photographer:	Jack Abbott (1924-1995)
Additional names:	Irene Newton (1925-2001)
Found in:	Abbott Newton archives
Source:	Private Collection
Subject heading:	Photography; Montreal - Streets; Fur
Alt text:	A picture containing ground, outdoor, mammal, black (description automatically generated)

# Archival Record

## Image Description

**A**s a boy, my father spent all his free time on the St Lawrence River, which flowed past the bottom of Charron Street, where he and his family lived in Point Saint Charles, just east of downtown Montreal. In those days a city boy could spend the summer fishing for bass, pike, and muskie under the Victoria Bridge. He took up hunting and rode the train to the south shore to shoot rabbits, partridge, and fox. It was on the river and in the woods where my father felt most at home, where he discovered himself as an outdoorsman.

In January 1945, as the Second World War wound down, my father was demobilized from the Royal Canadian Air Force and returned to work at the Northern Electric Company. He was twenty years old. He saved enough money to buy a second-hand German-made 35 mm rangefinder camera, a camera similar to a Leica but not a Leica, to document his outdoor adventures. Film and developing must have been costly, and my father reserved his film for what mattered most to him at the time – fishing, hunting, skiing, snowshoeing, being in the woods and on the river – anywhere outdoors. There are hundreds of photographs of unknown locations in the countryside, and images of my father and his friends, in all seasons and in every kind of weather, standing next to a hanging deer, holding a brace of rabbits, a string of fish.

At work one day, my father held a door open for a beautiful young woman with black hair and flashing blue eyes, and my mother walked through the door and into his life. It must have been love, because after meeting my father, my mother transformed from a city girl obsessed with movies and the lives and loves of Hollywood film stars to an outdoorsy young woman. Amongst my father's 1940s fishing and hunting images are his earliest photographs of her, pin-up pretty in high-waisted shorts and a tight crop top, a bathing suit, a summer dress, the skirt blowing in the wind. There she is, with her dazzling smile, swimming, sunbathing, rowing a boat, wearing overalls and hip waders, a fishing pole in hand, or cooking over a little campfire on an island in the St Lawrence River, the raging Lachine Rapids and downtown Montreal in the background.



One particular photograph of my mother has intrigued me since the first time I saw it. Taken on a city street, one of only a handful of pictures my father shot in the city, it's a strangely evocative and mysterious image with a timeless quality common to great photographs.

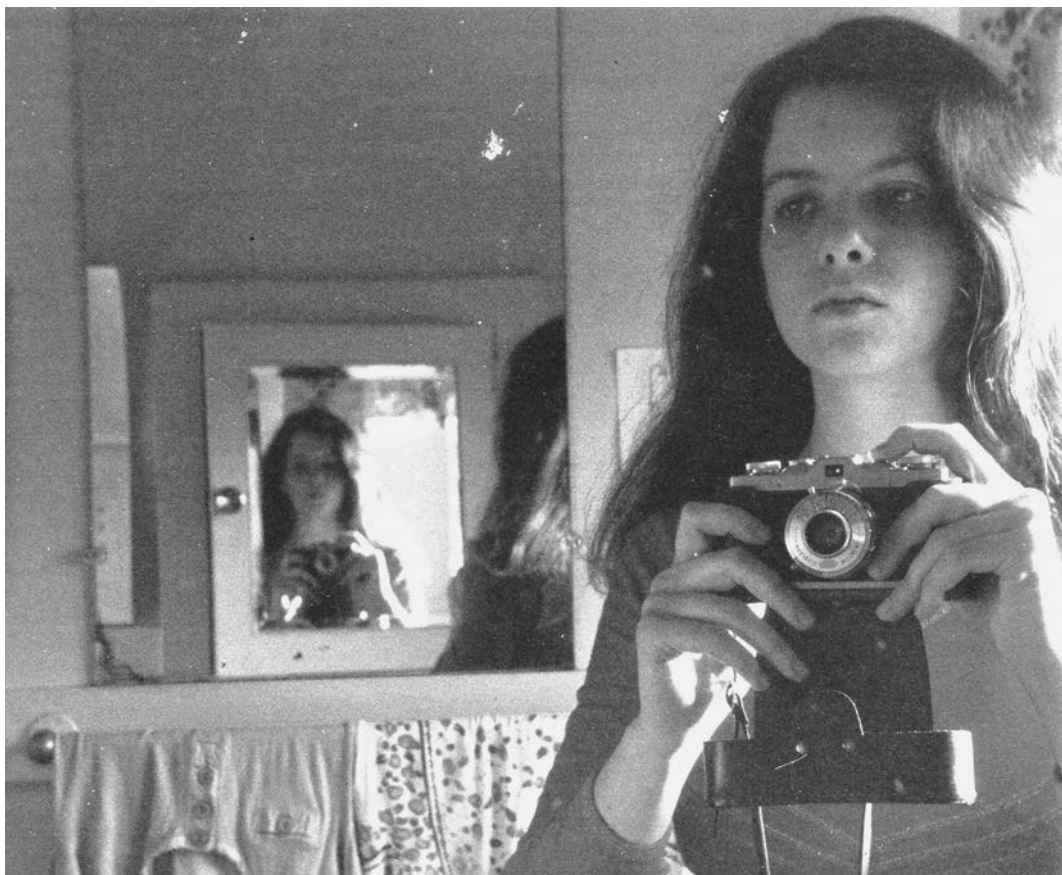
My father shot the photograph over my mother's left shoulder, an unusual angle for a portrait, and a sharp contrast to his usual straight-on documentary style. In the foreground, my mother's face is in profile, slightly out of focus and overexposed, the skin of her cheek a soft, featureless white. She wears a dark coat with a large, luxurious fur stole, and her dark hair is topped with a beret. The urban setting of a city street lined with architecturally unique residential buildings is also distinctive. A man on the sidewalk wearing an overcoat and hat walks left, in the same direction as my mother, while a young girl with ankle socks, who looks directly into the camera, walks in the opposite direction. The photograph has an arty edginess reminiscent of post-Second World War fashion shoots in *Vogue Paris* or *Harper's Bazaar*, where glamorous fashion models wearing designer clothes are posed against gritty urban streetscapes.

### Camera Information

**W**HEN I was a teenager, my father gave me his first camera, the 35 mm German-made camera that wasn't a Leica, and it became my first camera, too. I learned to adjust the f-stop and shutter speed on the completely manual camera without a light meter – because I didn't know then that I needed one. The camera had a brown leather case with a long strap, and I still recall the weight of it, the pull of the strap around my neck. I carried it everywhere through the 1970s and early 1980s and shot thousands of photographs.

When I was 23, I assembled a portfolio for an application to study photography at the Vancouver School of Art. I taught myself to develop black-and-white film in the basement where I lived, but in these early attempts, the negatives were covered with dust spots. In a rented darkroom I made poor prints of the poor negatives for my portfolio, which included portraits of my friends, my boyfriend, and a self-portrait. Unlike my father, I shot few photographs of the outdoors.

One self-portrait from this period was taken in the medicine cabinet mirror in the bathroom of my apartment. The reflections are multifaceted – my impassive face gazing downward and out of frame, a reflection of the back of my head. I wear a T-shirt that I remember, and two T-shirts hang on the towel rack; one I don't recall; the other I wear in several photographs from the period. But it's my father's German 35 mm camera that wasn't a Leica – which I don't know the brand name of, which I've searched to identify,



unsuccessfully, on vintage camera websites and on eBay – that’s still so remarkably familiar to me. That, and the distinctive way that my hands hold the camera, the unusual grip I still use more than forty years later.

My first assignment at the Vancouver School of Art was to photograph another student in the class, and I found myself partnered with Tom. The date on the negative envelope is September 23, 1977. We rode the bus downtown and had tea and French pastries at Notte’s Bon Ton on Granville Street. In the photograph Tom took of me on the bus, the camera hangs around my neck; I look off into the distance, and there’s a familiar shy awkwardness in my body language. In my photograph of Tom, he looks directly into the lens with a disarming openness that makes my heart ache – the leather jacket and beret he often wore, his wet umbrella on the grimy floor of the bus. From that day forward, until his death from AIDS in 1988, Tom and I remained close friends.

I don't recall what became of the camera. In the early 1980s my father wrote and asked me to return a camera that he'd given me, but I don't believe it was the German 35 mm. I think it was the medium-format Rolleiflex-like camera that wasn't a Rolleiflex - which I seem to recall sending back in the mail. If I did return the 35 mm camera to my father at that time, during a period when he was testing the depths of rock bottom during a decade-long bender, he would likely have pawned it. Or ... I may have traded the camera in to buy my first Nikon.



## Additional Information

**W**HEN my father died, I inherited an envelope stuffed full of the late 1940s black-and-white negatives and photographs he shot with his first camera. When I sorted through the collection, I found few images of his family, and fewer still taken in the city. At first, I disregarded the unidentified landscapes as meaningless to me, and almost discarded them. It was only later that I came to realize how precious they must have been to my father. Despite moving house so many times in the years after the divorce, despite losing or pawning everything he owned in the darkest days of his alcoholism, when he had struggled mightily to hold on to anyone and anything, he had somehow managed to preserve this collection of early photographs.

Later I understood that, to my father, these images may have represented the best of himself and the man he'd wanted to be. That young man who had spent every spare moment learning to navigate the currents, rocks, and shoals of the St Lawrence River and the Lachine Rapids – back when the marshes and woods where he hunted were as familiar to him as the neighbourhood where he lived. Before marriage and fatherhood and work and life's expectations and disappointments tamed his wild spirit. These photographs of a glade in the woods, of roiling rapids on a river, of a placid lake at dawn, were the tangible evidence of his life as an outdoorsman, and became, for me, the key to understanding the man my father used to be.







## Image Research

WHEN I asked Uncle George, my father's younger brother, about the photograph of my mother with the fur stole, he told me it was taken on Charron Street, now Rue Charon, in the Point Saint Charles/Pointe-Saint-Charles neighbourhood of Montreal. From a Google Maps search, I discovered that the unique buildings pictured in the photograph are located directly across the street from the family's rented flat at 428 Charron.

"Your father shot that fox," Uncle George said.

His casual remark took me aback. This was brand new information.

"He was so proud of it," he said. "Your Dad got the fox pelt cleaned and made into that stole for your mother."

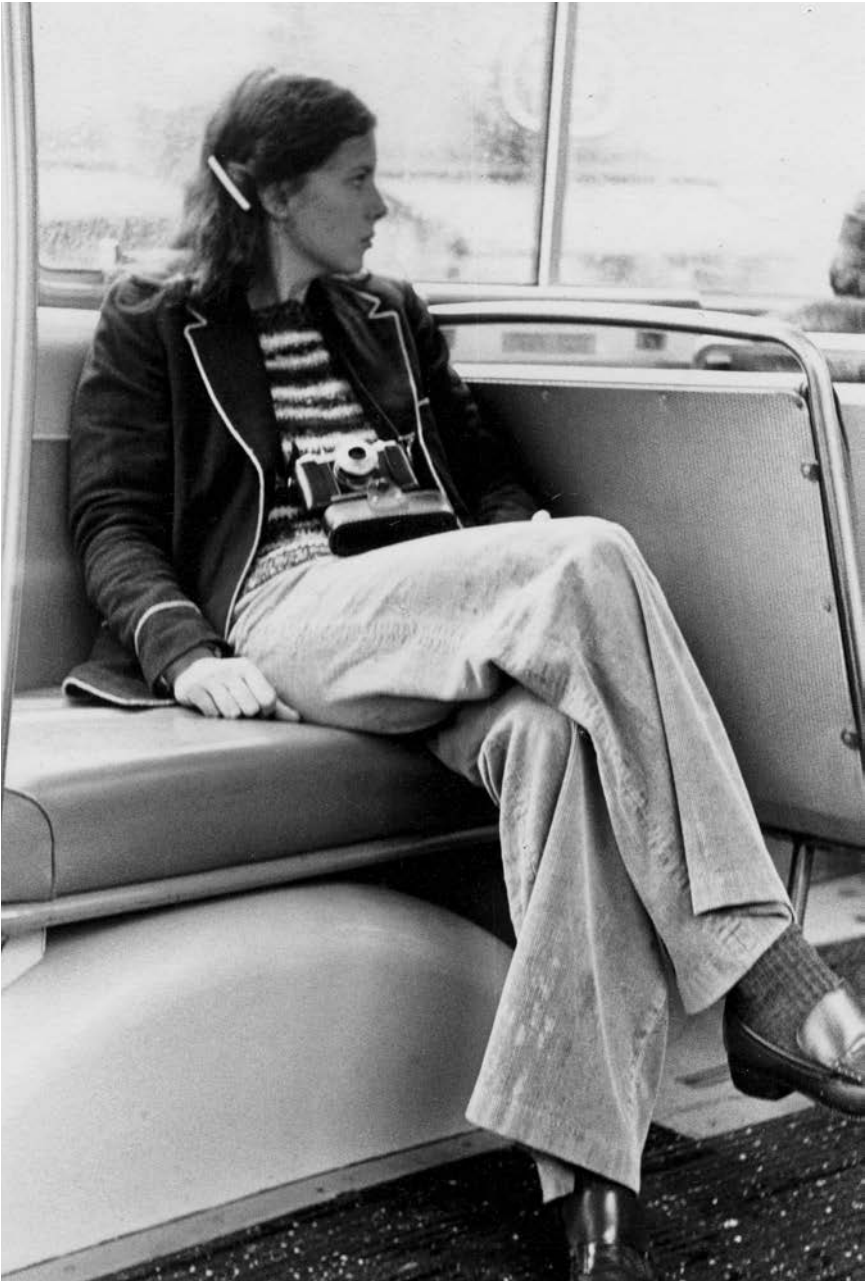
In that moment, my long-held interpretation of my favourite photograph began to shift. Now when I looked at it, while I discovered the exact same scene, it was as though I'd suddenly switched camera lenses from macro to wide angle, and now viewed it from a completely different perspective.

I searched through my father's photographs and found a picture of his youngest brother, Gray, at the age of seven or eight, on the back porch of 428 Charron. In his right hand he holds up a dead fox, whose sleek body, with long fluffy tail, is taller than he is. When I compared the image of the dead fox with the photograph of my mother, it appeared that, more likely than not, this was the very fox that was fashioned into my mother's stole.

The mystery of the photograph had finally revealed itself to me. I understood, then, why my father chose to shoot this image from such an unusual angle. I realized that it's not an arty portrait, and the subject of the photo is not my beautiful mother. Instead, it's actually a photograph of the fox stole or, more specifically, of the fox my father shot and had made into a stole. A trophy, documented by my father, to showcase his hunting prowess. I had to laugh.

Besides the fun of learning the story behind my favourite photograph, something wonderful happened in the process of investigating it. By some miraculous alchemy, I unexpectedly conjured the deeply familiar and welcome spirit of the young outdoorsman who shot the fox and photographed the fox stole. I could almost see my father, walking home down Charron Street, his rifle slung over one shoulder, the dead fox over the other. I could almost hear him say to my mother, as he snapped the photograph, *Irene, just look straight ahead, just like that ... That's perfect!*

I wonder now what my mother thought of this photograph – whether she'd recall the day it was taken, and what my father intended to capture on film. I imagine that my mother, who even after the divorce loved my father to the end of his life, and hers, did understand. And that remembering it would make her smile, too.



**KATE BIRD's** work has been published in *Prairie Fire*, the *Sun*, and other literary journals. A retired news research librarian, she is the author of three books of newspaper photography, including the bestselling *Vancouver in the Seventies*.