

Dr. Otto Schaefer's Slides of Canada's North

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There is a hidden gem for environmental history at the University of Alberta. It is called Canadian Circumpolar Institute (CCI) [<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/CCI/>]. The CCI is an interdisciplinary institute with a mandate to promote and enhance the knowledge, awareness and sustainability of polar environments for all, through quality research, education and outreach programs. This year the CCI received a donation that necessitated hiring a Digital Archive Research Assistant for the summer. The collection is on loan from the family of Dr. Otto Schaefer [<http://ichr.ca/2009/11/dr-otto-schaefer-passes/>]. It consists of 35mm colour slides and printed photographs (colour as well as black and white) taken over the course of a 32 year medical career in the Canadian arctic. Before the collection can be digitized metadata about each item needs must be created because without this information searching a database is a near impossible task. I was hired to create the metadata and over the past month and a half have become very familiar with the collection.



Otto Schaefer was born in Germany and came to Canada after the Second World War to fulfill a lifelong dream of working in the arctic with the Inuit. After a couple years repeating his residency in Edmonton so he could practice medicine in Canada Otto and his wife Didi moved to Inuvik, NWT for a two year term (1953-1955). Then came two years in Pangnirtung, NU (1956-1958) followed by two more in Yellowknife, YK (1960-1961). When Otto's appointment in Yellowknife ended the family moved to Edmonton permanently with their four children (the fifth was born after the last move). Initially Otto found work at the Charles Camsell Hospital [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inglewood,_Edmonton], a hospital for First Nations and Inuit patients only, but was shortly after appointed the director of the Northern Medical Research Unit. Over the next twenty years, Otto traversed the arctic collecting medical data on the overall health of the Native populations to better understand the implications of the move from traditional lifestyles on health. What he found was a ethnic group so well adapted to survival in the harsh climate of the arctic struggling to adapt to the rapid change brought by modernization. All of these finding were published in medical journals, presented at international conferences, and shared with the medical community in Canada.

For these reasons alone the career of Otto Schaefer is worthy of study by historians interested in the transformation of Canada's North, but there is another reason Schaefer and his collection of images deserves greater attention. He photographed everything and in the process created a visual archive that tracks the rapid transformation of Canada's arctic and the lifestyles of its Inuit inhabitants.



The collection consists of 97 boxes of slides and box full of bundles of photographs and negatives. To date I have inventoried 69 boxes containing more than 3200 individual slides and have a pretty good feel for the contents of the collection. Schaefer photographed everything: the view out airplane windows while flying between remote communities, his growing family, plants of the tundra, friends in each town, various types of traditional shelters, the more extreme medical cases he treated, the different anthropological types of Inuit (often complete highlighting their tattooing traditions), as well as the amazing natural scenery he encountered on a daily basis. The range and diversity of these images provide a valuable alternative archive to the transformation of the North. Most of the images accessible to the public were created by government agencies. They present certain idealizations of the North and perpetuate stereotypes about the Native groups that inhabit the region. Schaefer's images were not created for government propaganda and promotion. They were created for private commemoration of a place he loved, share his family's life in Canada with their relations in Germany or to illustrate presentations about health care issues specific to the Arctic. Schaefer also made copious notations about the images that provide a context visual historians rarely have the privilege of finding in the archive. Unfortunately, for the first decade Schaefer was in Canada he was working on mastering English so often made notations in German - notations often rendered incomprehensible to me due to the combination of stereotypical doctor handwriting and zero fluency in German.



Most of the images are of smiling groups of people, celebrations and dances, the breathtaking landscape, and traditional aspects of Inuit life. These slides show the transition from traditional hunting and fishing by dog sled to snowmobiles and the movement away from foods from the land in favour of processed foods imported from the south. Through the slides it is possible to watch how quickly relocation and the influence of the south changed everything for the Inuit and Schaefer's notes and medical graph slides support these observations with data on how these changes affected Inuit health.

Some of the images in the collection are hard to look at because as a doctor Schaefer photographed things most other people would not. To date the most difficult slides have been from an autopsy of woman murdered by her husband and his lover. She was shot in the head and when the pretense her husband presented did not fit with her medical history, Schaefer performed an autopsy that required cutting into the skull to remove a bullet from her brain. Not a nice scene to find two views of right after lunch but one of many related to Schaefer's medical work. Some of these images are heartbreaking, like the photographs of a man withered to no more than skin and bones who refused to be evacuated for tuberculosis treatment. According to Schaefer's notes on the slides after refusing evacuation and treatment, the man stopped eating or drinking, and passed away four days later.

When the slides are eventually digitized they will present a fantastic archive for an environmental historian to explore the post-1945 transformation of the Arctic. The medical components could easily be used to supplement studies of health and environment. The landscape and scenic aerial views could be of great use to historical geographers or anyone interested in changing land use and how place and space are negotiated.

