

Nicholas Morant's Fairbridge



Introduction

When reading the eulogy to Dr. Ron Hancock in the spring 2012 Gazette and seeing the picture of Ron as a teenager bandaging a 'patient' under the watchful eyes of the school nurse it was noted the photo was taken by Nicholas Morant.

Some may know of him while a few who grew up at Fairbridge may have met the photographer or even are in one of the outstanding pictures he took while visiting the farm school. However, many may not be at all familiar with this great Canadian photographer whose career spanned over seven decades.

Early

Born in Penticton on June 19th, 1901 and growing up on a fruit farm near Kamloops his parents sent him to University Military Schools, a Victoria private institution, (now St. Michael's School) for eight years to better his education. Although he never graduated due to his failing math, he did like English and began taking photographs as a hobby. After finishing with his schooling he returned to Kamloops and became an assignment writer, or 'stringer' and photographer for the *Victoria Times* but by age 23 he joined the *Winnipeg Free Press* as a news photographer and once-a-week columnist. The job turned out to be quite demanding and after four years, on the advice of his doctor, he quit the paper. Shortly after it occurred to him that the Canadian Pacific Railway may need an experienced photographer and by 1929, for \$90 a month, was in their employment with the title of Special Photographer assisting with company public relations and advertising. He once again briefly left the CPR in 1935 rejoining the *Free Press* and *The Canadian Press* as a portrait and news photographer but by 1937 was again with the railway company and based out of their Winnipeg Public Relations Department. A year earlier he married Ivy May "Willie" Young (1910-1986) who became his constant working companion on his many assignments across Canada and elsewhere in the world.

In September 1939 the CPR was intending to build a rustic cabin retreat about 12 kilometres from their small station of Wapta, Alberta and sent Morant along with Swiss Guide Christian Haesler to inspect the site. Unfortunately they came across a grizzly bear with a cub and it attacked both men who were badly mauled. With a broken right leg and badly bleeding from a torn arm and scalp wound Morant was only saved when the cub barked out and the two grizzlies went off down the trail. By now Haesler escaped the attack and had gone for help. He made it to Wapta and an engine and flatcar were summonsed for the rescue. After being carried four miles down the mountain on a stretcher Nicholas Morant spent several months in hospital undergoing a number of operations.

Because of his injuries he was rejected from military service but was loaned by the CPR to the Canadian Wartime Information Board, part of the National Film Board, and took numerous photos of the armed services and industrial plants churning out everything from new ships and planes to bombs. This work culminated with an assignment to the first United Nations conference in San Francisco.

Nick was also a good prankster. As he recalled, "at one time the CP's head office in Montreal complained that the prints he'd been sending them were too small." He "responded gleefully by making an enlargement eight feet long and mailing it to Montreal! That ended the complaints."

Another time, Omer Lavallée, an associate in the railway's public relations department mentioned "Nick picked up the remains of an aluminum kettle on the CP Rail roadbed in the Rockies. A bulldozer had run over it and it was quite flat, though the handle was still attached. Nick tied on an address label and sent it by railway mail to our departmental accountant. On the back of the label he made the notation, 'Please have this repaired, and returned'."

Visits to Fairbridge

Starting in 1937 the CPR asked Morant to travel throughout the country during the winter months giving special photographic presentations to audiences ranging from small groups of 50 to as many as 3,000. Two of his most popular engagements being, "A Talk Without Words" and "The World At Your Feet". At the same time as visiting the many communities he of course took more photos of not just the local railway operations but of every day life. One of the places he visited often during the winter and spring was Vancouver Island since by now his mother was residing in Victoria. He took many pictures of the city, and of course the Empress Hotel, steamship activity in the inner harbour and logging at various locations on the Island. Once the Prince of Wales Fairbridge Farm School was established the Morants also came and presented shows for the children and staff. They were always well received.

The Fairbridge News column in the *Cowichan Leader* of April 4, 1940 reported "Mr. Nicholas Morant, Montreal, well known C.P.R. photographer and Mrs. Morant visited the school for four days last week and were able to get several good 'shots' of the cross-country run as well as pictures depicting school life, interior views of the new chapel and a group of all the school children.

On Thursday evening the children and members of the staff gathered in Lord Kenilworth Hall. Mr. Morant was asked to present the Cora Hind trophy to James Lally for winning the annual cross-country run; and also to present bronze badges to the four house leaders in the inter-house competition for points given for work for school, for sports and for discipline. The four boys were William Renwick (Blue House) Kenneth Bennett (Maroon), John Newell (Black), and Arthur Worsnop (Green)." In late October the Morants along with Mrs. Morant senior again made a brief visit to the school.

It would not be until October 1946 that the Morants would once again visit the school for a few days and take more pictures but mentioned "Mr. Morant is a great favourite with the children and has a happy knack of catching them with his camera in natural poses." (*Cowichan Leader*, Oct. 24, 1946) It was during this visit that he took the picture of Ron Hancock 'doctoring' the patient.

Over the years many of his photographs of Fairbridge have been printed in the *Gazette*, both during the 1940's and in more recent editions, in publications of the Fairbridge Society as well as on web sites. He took some of the very first pictures of the inside of the new chapel in 1940 and of course life around the school. A number of his Fairbridge photos are with the Canadian Pacific Railway archives in Montreal and a few (11 photos and some black and white negatives) are in the Nicholas Morant fonds at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Alberta.

A 50 Year Career

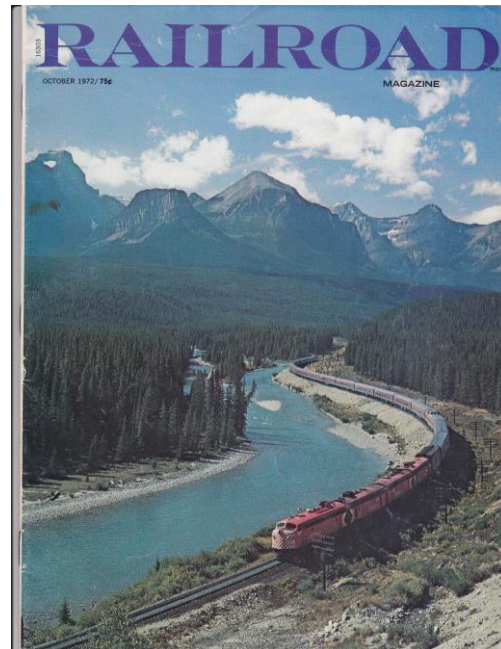
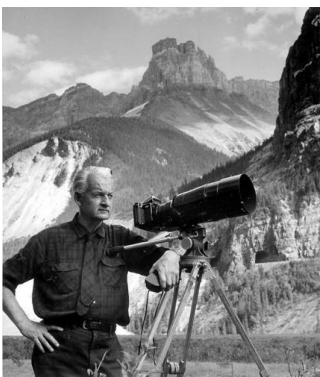
While working for the CPR for 44 years and living in Banff Nick and Willie crisscrossed Canada on passenger trains, to and from assignments photographing all aspect of the company from trucks to trains, ships, hotels and the airline, their mines, logging operations and of course many, many people, places and events. His work appeared in numerous books, national and international magazines, including two CPR publications, *The Spanner* and *Rail News* as well as on postcards, Canadian postage stamps and on former \$1, \$10, \$50 and \$100 Canadian bank notes, on railway timetables and brochures. Two books by John Garden; *Nicholas Morant's Canada* (1998) and *Nicholas Morant's Canadian Pacific* (2002) present some of his finest images. Before he retired in 1981 he had taken many thousands of photos. Many are catalogued and preserved and at the CP Archives, in the Whyte Museum and Archives Canada in Ottawa.

In 1990 he was awarded the Order of Canada and in 2007 was made a member of the Canadian Railway Hall of Fame, posthumously as he had died in Banff in 1999. There is one section of Canadian Pacific Railway mainline that he made world famous and will forever be known as Morant's Curve. It is located just east of Lake Louise off the Trans-Canada highway on what is now highway 1A (Bow Valley Parkway). He took some his most iconic photographs at this spot; of freight and the streamlined CP passenger trains as they snaked around a curve beside the Bow River with the beautiful Rockies framed in the distance, in every season, for many years. A fitting tribute to one of Canada's great photographers



Rt. Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King and Hon. Louis St. Laurent broadcasting a message to Canada on VE-Day, 8 May 1945 from San Francisco when attending the initial meeting of the United Nations.

(photo by Nicholas Morant) Archives Canada c22716



Morant's Curve

Photo by Nicholas Morant

By Ron Smith, 2012

