

Picture Pioneer

Anthony Tooton making documentary film about great-grandfather, founder of Tooton's photography store

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— Photo by Gary Hebbard/The Telegram

Anthony Tooton, 31, with some the the pictures and information he has used while making a documentary film about his grandfather, also named Anthony Tooton, who came to Newfoundland from his native Syria in the early 1900s.

If Tooton's, the province's pioneer photographic store, had survived the economic downturn of the early '90s, it's likely Anthony Tooton would be inheriting it.

Instead, the filmmaker is in the process of making “Tooton’s: A History of Photography in Newfoundland,” a documentary chronicling the life of his great-grandfather — also named Anthony — and the impact his business had on the photography industry in this province.

Anthony Maurice Tooton left Damascus, Syria at the age of 16 in 1903, spending a year in school in Paris with the goal of immigrating to Montreal or New York to study medicine. On the way across the Atlantic, however, Tooton suffered so much from seasickness that he left the ship when it docked in St. John’s, where his older brother had come about a year earlier.

Speaking no English but needing to make a living, Tooton, who had studied photography, donned a threepiece suit and went door-to-door, offering to take people’s portraits. While many had no money to pay for pictures, they invited him in, and he quickly made a network of friends and colleagues.

Not long after, he opened his own business, the Parisian Studio, on Water Street, branching out to a second store, the American Studio, in 1908. Tooton had been making glass plate portraits up to this point, but had a sense of where photography was going. He travelled to Rochester, N.Y., to meet with George Eastman, of the Eastman Kodak Co., with the intent of getting distribution rights for film and other Kodak products in Newfoundland.

Eastman was so impressed with the young entrepreneur that he granted him not only the rights, but exclusive permission to use the Kodak name on his storefront and all his printed materials, and Tooton became the first person in Newfoundland to develop a roll of film.

Under the name Tooton’s, the Kodak Store, Tooton expanded his business further, moving into what is now the Heritage Shop on Water Street and opening a large film developing plant on Cabot Street, where film was delivered from more than 400 drop-off points across the province.

After changing the store name to Tooton's Ltd. after Confederation, the company opened 11 retail stores in Newfoundland and Labrador, and extended into Nova Scotia. Tooton's son, Raymond, took over as president of the business in the late 1950s, although Tooton remained active in the company until his death in 1971, at age 85. His grandson, Geoff, became president in 1979. Industry pressure and a downturn in the economy forced Tooton's Ltd. to close in 1995. Anthony Tooton, 31, had been immersed in the family business and interested in both still and moving photography at a young age. While working in the retail portion of the business as well as developing pictures as a teenager, Anthony took an interest in his great-grandfather's story and his success as an entrepreneur. "It hit me, and I decided, if I ever get the opportunity to go through the provincial archives, I want to gather as much information as I can and tell his story," he said. "Since then, it was always in the back of my mind."

Tooton's interest in video production was developed after working with artist Peter Wilkins and sieved.com, where he edited and produced dozens of videos.

Having worked on a documentary in Toronto and committed to making some kind of film about his grandfather and the family business, Tooton applied for a Toronto Film School entrance scholarship, and says he was surprised when he won it. He enrolled in the school's film production program, and developed a love for documentaries.

"I threw myself into it. I didn't have to force myself to do it — it just came," Tooton said of the program. "I've never done anything as intense in my life."

Inspired by the documentary medium and moved by a trailer for "Body of War," a documentary following an Iraq veteran paralyzed from a bullet to the spine, and featuring original music by Pearl Jam frontman Eddie Vedder, Tooton contacted Ellen Spiro, the film's director, who asked him to film the Toronto premiere.

Returned home

With a demo of the documentary in hand, Tooton moved back to St. John's last summer, and pitched it to the CBC as part of a six-part series on successful family businesses in Newfoundland and Labrador. He received the go-ahead, along with funding from the broadcaster and the Newfoundland and Labrador Film Development Corp. for the project.

"Tooton's: A History of Photography in Newfoundland" will be 22 minutes long, and is about two-thirds completed, said Tooton, who's mainly doing the project himself. Combining archived information, newspaper clippings, old family photos and footage on 16-mm and 8-mm film, as well as new interviews with his father, grandfather and former Tooton's employees, the film is set to be a mix of biography and history, with a business component and an exploration of Tooton's commitment to a "responsible monopoly."

"Another element, which I think is consistent with other businesses in Newfoundland and Labrador, is Confederation, and how the doors to trade were open then, so the doors to competition opened, too," the filmmaker explained. "It was important to the trajectory of Newfoundland business, and probably more than people realize."

Through the documentary, Tooton hopes to inspire others in this province to explore their own background and family stories, and give them an appreciation for the stories that came before them. Above all, he said, he hopes to tell, through film — much like his great-grandfather did — a story of local success.

"He had all these potential reasons to leave, but didn't. He said — and I have the same motto — that you have to look at things as opportunities."

More information on the project is available on Tooton's website at www.tootonfilms.com.

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