
Aerial Obliques

Howdy McPhail hatched the idea of taking aerial photographs while spraying crops and brush. Flying over fields had given him a unique bird's-eye view of the province's farm houses, outbuildings, and gardens, and he decided to record the scene on film and then try to sell the pictures to the people who lived on the land. Working "on spec," as it was known, certainly had its financial risks because of the glut of fly boys also trying to make a living in the business at the time. But Howdy was not new to taking pictures. He had owned a camera at least from his university days, if not going back to his travels in the late 1930s. There are pictures from this period in one of his photo albums. He had also taken photographs during his wartime training in Canada and later overseas, mostly street scenes in London and Edinburgh. He even somehow managed to get pictures during his time in detention in Sweden.

Aerial photography had been practised for almost a century by the 1950s. The first aerial photograph was taken by a French portrait artist from a hot air balloon on the outskirts of Paris in 1858—it captured on a glass negative three houses, a gendarme, and a delivery van in the village of Petit Bicêtre. A quarter century later, a member

of the British garrison at Halifax made Canadian history when he snapped a photograph over the city, again from a hot air balloon. It was not until 1909 that an airplane was used to take a photograph, in this case by one of the Wright brothers of American aviation fame.

Aerial photography was widely used for intelligence purposes during the Great War. Much of the planning for the April 1917 attack on Vimy Ridge, for example, depended on photographs gathered by aerial reconnaissance. Canadian ace Billy Bishop sometimes served as an escort on these missions. The medium also proved indispensable to topographical mapping and land surveys, especially in remote areas or over large expanses of territory. Canada pioneered the grid method of plotting a map from a set of aerial photographs taken at prescribed intervals (photogrammetry), a technique that was eventually adopted worldwide. The first official air mapping photograph in Canada was taken over Pelican Narrows in northern Saskatchewan in 1922. In fact, a plane equipped with a camera was found to have all kinds of applications—forest inventories, mineral prospecting, land classification, wildlife surveys, even documenting the reach of

the drought on the prairies during the 1930s. And it could be done at a speed that was once thought unimaginable.

It was the Second World War, however, that accelerated developments in aerial photography—and for good reason. It has been estimated that aerial reconnaissance accounted for ninety percent of Allied intelligence operations, not just in planning but in assessing the results. Once the war was over, many pilots who had flown recon missions or had been trained to read aerial photographs started their own commercial aerial photography business.³⁰ It was another way for them to keep flying, just like crop dusting. It was only natural, then, that Howdy should try his hand at it.

There are essentially two kinds of aerial photography. “Verticals,” as the name implies, are taken as nearly vertical as possible (or straight down) to the earth’s surface. In other words, the optical axis of the camera is at a ninety degree angle to the ground. “Obliques,” on the other hand, are taken at an angle. High oblique photographs, where the optical axis of the camera is tilted sharply away from the vertical, usually include the horizon, while low obliques capture a more limited area. Low

obliques also tend to show more detail. But much also depends on the conditions at the time of the exposure and the skill of the photographer. The pilot must not only fly at low altitude and at a reduced speed, but position the plane so that the sun front-lights the subject. Then, there is the composition of the photograph itself. Whereas verticals are essentially neutral (i.e., they do not allow for interpretation), obliques give expression to the creative talent of the photographer.³¹

Howdy took oblique aerial photographs for about six weeks each year, usually in late July and August when he was done spraying. His surviving business papers are full of hand-drawn township maps, carefully showing all the farmsteads he photographed in a district before moving on to another part of Saskatchewan. He wanted to have a record for every picture he took—just as he had done for his personal photographs before and during the war—even if the photographs were never sold. He also handled much of the processing himself, working with developing solution, fixer, and other chemicals under red light in a makeshift dark room in his home. There were times, though, when he simply sent the rolls of exposed film to



Kurjata, St. Walburg, Saskatchewan.

Hillyard Photography in Saskatoon so that he could concentrate on shooting photographs. All of the negatives were placed in individual white sleeves, with the photograph information written in pencil across the top.

Howdy employed a team of salespeople to go from house to house hawking the photographs: his kid sister Myra (nicknamed Muggins), his brother-in-law Serge, and friends Augie Mostoway, Glen Furse, Allan Bean,

and Arnold Moody. Each worked a particular area on commission, armed with a master sheet, listing the name of the household, the location, and the negative number, and a set of 3-by-4 inch, black-and-white contact prints. Their experience at the door could not have been better scripted. Most people didn't recognize the small photo at first, but then realized to their amazement that it was their place and excitedly called over the family to have a look. If a sale was going to be made, it usually took no more than fifteen minutes, according to Serge Kujawa, who was working his way through law school at the time. He also claimed that a person didn't have to be much of a salesman to make good pay.³²

The most popular reproduction—and cheapest order—was an 8-by-10 inch, black-and-white print, often paid for in advance. The same photo could be ordered in colour, but it cost almost twice as much because of the hand-tinting. Customers were quite particular about the colours to be used on the buildings, including the trim and roofs—and why not? They were being given the chance to “paint” their home in the colours they always wanted, always imagined, for their place, if they had the

time and money. These colouring instructions were at first written on the back of the sample photo, but were later included on special order forms that Howdy developed for this side of his business. Some of the comments recorded on the forms are quite revealing. Raymond McCaffrey of Edam ordered a colour print with the request to “hurry it up.” Another farmer, K. Bakker, was equally anxious to get the photograph of his farm because he was headed to Holland and wanted to take it with him. J. Yeo of Evesham, on the other hand, wanted his photograph held until after harvest and was forced in early October 1954 to ask for a further delay “as the fall has been so backward as you know and we have no combining done as yet.”³³

The cost of Howdy’s photographs was quite reasonable. At first, an 8-by-10, black-and-white print could be bought for as little as two dollars. But then, the price went up to \$9.50 to better reflect the expenses incurred in taking the photograph. The hand-tinted photographs were understandably more expensive—a framed, 8-by-10, colour print was \$19.50, three dollars less without the frame. The other popular item was greeting cards. Six

Christmas cards in a glossy finish cost five dollars in 1953. Most people put down a small deposit and paid the rest on C.O.D.³⁴ Even with steady sales, though, Howdy soon found that he wasn’t making much from photographing farms. It was a lot of work for little profit, and he faced competition from other people in the business. It might have been different if the photographs had been ordered in advance, but by doing the work on spec, he never really knew whether his sales staff would be able to sell the pictures.

That’s when Howdy came up with another, more promising idea—photographing towns and villages. The pictures could be made into postcards and calendars and sold in bulk. Beginning in 1955, then, he started taking aerial photographs of urban centres, well beyond the range covered by his farm series. He would plot a route, often following railway lines and highways, and then literally shoot every place along the way, from major cities to rural sidings. Some of these trips tested his flying abilities, especially in British Columbia where he had to negotiate his way through the mountains, often flying through narrow river valleys to get a good view of min-

ing towns. But he enjoyed the break from the monotony of his other business activities and liked to touch down in a town, ostensibly to get gasoline, and see what business he could drum up from the local café, garage, or hotel for one of his photographs. A few bought postcards, but most storekeepers ordered fifty calendars to be given away over the Christmas holidays.³⁵

Howdy's photographing expeditions eventually took him across more than half of Canada—from Toronto in southern Ontario to Port Hardy on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. In fact, the aerial photographs from these trips would come to constitute about two-thirds of his collected work. But then one day in 1962, he announced that he wasn't going to do it anymore. Maybe he had lost interest or was just tired of being away from his family. Whatever the reason, Howdy simply stopped taking aerial photographs.



Revenue, Saskatchewan