

A glimpse through the lost lens of Nick Yudell

By Lorne Stelmach

Putting together the exhibit and forthcoming book *The Lost Expressionist – Nick Yudell, A Photographer Discovered* became a labour of love for Celia Rabinovitch.

Currently on display at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, the exhibit reveals a vibrant world in Manitoba of the 1930s through the young Jewish Canadian's photographs that feature dramatic portraits, experimental photography, and images of play, place, and self.

Morden plays a major role in them, as this was where Yudell spent a majority of his life. The exhibit all started with the discovery of a hidden cache of negatives shot before the Second World War by the young man from Morden who perished during that conflict.

Rabinovitch spent years researching and developing the collection of work by Yudell, who at some point organized his images into an archive that was preserved by his cousin Milton Rabinovitch, Celia's father.

She was moved to create *The Lost Expressionist* to recognize Yudell's artistic vision and the various communities he touched, and she sees it all as being a vital archive that shows daily life in the 1930s.

"It captures a time and an era when I think people were more authentic," she said of the exhibit, which is scheduled to come to Morden later next year. "This is a complete record of a different time. There was a lot of joy. People were able to have fun without having a lot of money, and they were able to make their own fun."

Yudell was born in Winnipeg. His mother died soon after his birth and his father had a business and older children to manage, so it was felt it would be better for the child to live in Morden with his maternal aunt, who was Rabinovitch's grandmother.

Yudell grew up with seven other Rabinovitch children who were still at home, including Milton. He was very much part of the family, Rabinovitch learned.

"Everyone adored him. They took him around everywhere, and he was fully a member of the family. He was my father's brother, and my father told me he shared a bed with him when they were little," said Rabinovitch, who noted her father was about nine years older than Yudell.

She believes Yudell had a better opportunity to grow and flourish in Morden with the Rabinovitch family.

"He had seven cousins who loved him and did stuff with him ... he was completely part of the family. He had two families, one in Winnipeg and one in Morden, but his Morden home was, I think, his true home."

Perhaps especially close to him was Milton, who went on to start a business on Railway Street before opening Rabinovitch Brothers on Stephen Street.

"I remember that building from when I was a child because we used to go in to see my dad ... the wood floors and a lot of older fixtures, it was a very interesting place when you were little, lots of things to look at," Rabinovitch recalled. "It became a gathering place for people in the '30s to meet and talk ... especially Saturday nights when my father kept it open for farmers coming in to get supplies and things."

"The family had a very significant presence and were very well liked and a very integrated part of the community. I don't think having different religions made a difference in Morden. It was always an egalitarian, sharing community," she suggested.

Yudell's journey as a photographer started when he received a camera in 1928. He quickly started taking photos of family and places around Morden.

"Obviously, he just fell in love with photography," Rabinovitch said. "His first pictures are of my uncle Wilf Rabinovitch on a telephone pole in 1928 ... and then another is of his other older cousin Ruby Rabinovitch in front of the family home, which was an old Victorian house on Stephen Street."



Yudell attended school in Winnipeg around 1930 but then came back to Morden around 1933.

"He studied photography there, and he photographed all of his classmates, so his photographs provide us with a complete record of his youth," Rabinovitch noted.

"Morden is quite prominent in his photos. He photographed the Morden dam and the park right after it was built," she added, noting her father at one point acquired a movie camera, and he used it to record scenes of daily life which her brother David recently had restored.

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SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Morden-raised photographer Nick Yudell's work is on display at the Manitoba Museum this summer. Top: Yudell in a self-portrait he took just before leaving to fight in the Second World War. Above, from left: The old Morden post office in 1933, the Morden dam in the park prior to 1937, a shot of Ruby Rabinovitch in front of the Rabinovitch family home in Morden sometime before 1930.

> YUDELL, FROM PG. 7

"I'm putting small clips of those on Instagram because they are really charming ... and you can see how different Morden was then," she said. "It was, I think, kind of on the cusp between a really rural and agrarian life and then the life of the town and new technology that had come in at the time."

There are a number of things that stand out for Rabinovitch, who observed that people then had to make their own entertainment in the midst of the Great Depression.

"[Milton] shot all kinds of things, and Nick did still photography, so sometimes Nick's in the movies and sometimes he's shooting them."

Later on, Yudell studied portrait photography, so he captured a wide array of people and locales in the community—everything from the nurses residence to the experimental farm to a popular local bakery.

"He did all kinds of interesting portraits, both casual and somewhat styled with strong black and white contrast, just as you would see in film noir movies," Rabinovitch said.

"I'm assuming they went to the movies a lot."

He continued to study photography and learn new skills throughout the '30s.

"In 1937 he got the first copy of *Popular Photography* ... he had every copy then from 1937 on," Rabinovitch said. "He was studying and informing himself about photography, and it was also at the same time he was doing dramatic black and white portraits of townspeople."

As part of her research, Rabinovitch interviewed many people to rebuild details of Yudell's life, particularly closer to the war. She feels those oral histories gleaned from interviews have given her a good idea of what Yudell was like as a person.

"I was able to rebuild most aspects of his life up until 1943 ... it's been a fascinating journey, first to read Nick's life through his photographs, which I took as kind of a visual diary."

A cousin described him as very quiet and introspective.

"I sense that in the photographs be-

cause he's got great observation. He pays very careful attention to people's faces ... and at that time, they didn't have a lot of money to buy film, so he used every shot in the roll carefully ... he tried to get it right.

"I think he had a great sense of play as well ... he had a quiet sense of humour," Rabinovitch added, citing the example of a couple photographed behind the family store with each in one leg of a large pair of pants, while another had people dressed in costumes, for example.

"I think they were very forward-thinking and very curious about the world as well. These were self-educated people," she said.

"What was interesting was some plans for a dark room fell out [from a magazine], and those plans were electrical plans for how to hook up a darkroom, so he was already studying things like that," she continued. "He also was studying nighttime photography with long exposures, so he has a shot of Stephen Street at night and then the next day after a snowfall. He would take it from the

same perspective.

"So he told stories with his photographs, and the stories told me about him," said Rabinovitch, who suggested her father was similarly shy and observant "so I think he and Nick had a lot of fun together."

The Lost Expressionist exhibition's run at the Manitoba Museum was recently extended into fall.

Locals will hopefully also have the chance to see it closer to home sometime in late 2023, as the Pembina Hills Arts Council is involved in plans to host it.

"I think it will be fantastic to have the exhibit in Morden," said Rabinovitch.

You can support this exhibition with a tax-deductible charitable donation to 'The Lost Expressionist Development Fund' with receipts issued through The Pembina Hills Arts Council. All donations go to the hard costs of exhibition expenses.

Learn more about the show at lost-expressionist.com.