



Promoting, Preserving, Publishing Our Heritage



Spring in the Peace, Early April
Forget the water wings, who brought skates?

Upcoming Spring Events

- Please plan to join us for the PCHS Annual General Meeting
Sunday, April 23rd, 2:00 PM at the Grande Prairie Museum
Members will receive their AGM package prior to the meeting.
- The PCHS **Northern Alberta Heritage Fair** is back on schedule. This year, it will be held on **Thursday, May 4th**. The fair is a chance for students to show off history projects that they have developed in and out of school. Susan Thomson, Fair Coordinator, will need help for English and French judging of fair entries and general help with set up and take down. To assist us, please contact **Susan at 780 512 6782**. It's a very enjoyable day.
Details on the PCHS website under the Projects page will be updated very soon!
- This spring we intend to offer a second tour of the Kleskun Lake Ranch if you missed the excellent presentation by David Leonard last year. Watch for the date to be announced.



President's Message

Pat Wearmouth

Greetings to you All:

Welcome to the first issue of the newsletter for 2023, our 13th year of being the Peace Country Historical Society. The numbering of newsletters continues to use the calendar year instead of our new fiscal year.

The end of winter officially occurs this month as we arrive at the equinox, and hope springs eternal. History, though, reminds us that this is seldom the case in the Peace Country.

Last year, we emerged from the pandemic and resumed our in-person tours and events.

Those who attended enjoyed getting together with like-minded people to hear stories of the Peace Country's history. Our Society also met several goals set in our Strategic Plan. These included completion or continuing work in administration, finance, advocacy, social media, and reporting to government agencies and the Historical Society of Alberta.

To hear more detail about all of this, please plan to attend our Annual General Meeting (AGM) which will occur Sunday, April 23rd.

Watch for the package that is sent to you prior to that meeting to see the details. This is your opportunity to suggest topics to your Board for tours and presentations, nominate candidates, elect your Board members, and bring up any other matters on your mind.

Looking ahead, our 2023/24 fiscal year holds the promise of continuing this trend. First up, is our Annual General Meeting mentioned above. In early May, PCHS will sponsor the Northern Alberta Regional Heritage Fair. The Fair encourages students from area schools to complete history projects which are then displayed and judged. Also already planned, is a second tour of the Kleskun Lake Ranch for those who missed it last year.

The Board will continue to look for ideas to fill out the summer and fall seasons. We need your suggestions!

As well, the Board will again use the Strategic Plan to guide our activities. One of the major goals this coming year is to apply for a casino license, the proceeds from which can help fund our activities. Another chapter of the Historical Society of Alberta has its license. As Alberta Culture grants have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, the Board considers this a reasonable option. Those possibilities and the options for the chapter will be on the agenda for the AGM.

So, here's wishing you a fine spring. To paraphrase an old Irish prayer, may the sun shine warm upon your face, and the wind be always at your back.

Peace Country Historical Society

Vision: To encourage the appreciation of the history of the Peace Country.

Mandate: The mandated area of the Peace Country Historical Society is the northwest region of Alberta

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Get in the game...

Contact us early with a submission idea for the Summer edition of our PCHS newsletter!

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What We Can Offer

- A chance to help set the direction for our Peace Country Chapter at membership meetings or by other communication means.
- A chance to learn about Peace Country history during presentations and tours, through Facebook, the Newsletter, the Website, and at membership meetings.
- A chance to meet other people who enjoy history.
- A chance to contribute as a volunteer in various projects that we carry out.
- A chance to advocate for the preservation of the history of our area.
- Qualify to submit applications for HSA grants to fund special projects.
- We hope you choose to continue with, or to join our Society.

The Peace Country's Other Rail Lines

The Great Slave Lake & Alberta Resources Railways

A Personal Perspective by Pat Wearmouth

The Great Slave Lake Railway (GSLR) and the Alberta Resources Railway (ARR) became part of the Peace Country in the 1960s. Both were driven by a need to serve large mining developments outside our traditional boundaries. But in the long term, the two lines became important transport arteries for the entire region.

Both connected to Canada's mainline railways, the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National. These, in turn, led to the domestic and international markets that are vital to the Peace region. The connection for both the GSLR and the ARR was via the Northern Alberta Railway, which had served the Peace for many years. The story begins there.

The Original Lines

When settlers began arriving in the Peace Country in the early 1900s, they were responding to the promise of homestead land, which was essentially the last free land on the North American continent.

As well, multiple promises of a railway drew them. Settlers understood that a railway was a critical element in the region's development and, therefore, to their own success. In order to prosper, the commodities produced would need to be shipped to outside markets. The income returning would enable that development. Such a railway would offer connections to these markets.

There was no lack of schemes to build railways to and through the Peace Country. Some were purely speculative, interested more in government subsidies than the actual construction. Some were legitimate railway companies, although again, subsidies were part of the plan. The first was the Canadian Pacific Railway, Canada's first transcontinental, which surveyed the Pine and Peace River passes

through the Rocky Mountains in 1879. Despite favorable reports, the CPR chose a more southerly route through Roger's Pass.

The next railways to hold promise were the Canadian Northern Railway and the Grand Trunk Pacific. Both were building lines through Edmonton, competing to be Canada's second transcontinental railway. Both considered running lines north of Edmonton to the Peace Country in the early 1900s, but their plans never materialized. The former built a line to Sangudo and surveyed a route from there all the way to the Grande Prairie. The survey stakes created much speculation and hope. A.M. Bezanson, for instance, built his town on the banks of the Smoky River where the survey line crossed.

In the end, though, it was the Edmonton, Dunvegan & British Columbia Railway, (ED&BC) that first reached the Peace Country. Construction began in 1912, just north of Edmonton. The rails followed a route through Westlock, Slave Lake, and McLennan, which was reached in 1914. From there, it proceeded west and south to Grande Prairie (1916) and eventually Dawson Creek (1931), although by then there had been a name change.

When the ED&BC arrived in McLennan, another separate railway started construction from a junction there. It was called the Central Canada Railway (CCR) and followed a route north to Peace River Crossing (1916). The Company then built a bridge across the Peace River, allowing the rails to push onto Fairview and ultimately Hines Creek (1930), again with a name change.

From the beginning, both railways suffered WWI-induced material shortages and ongoing financial issues. This situation continued through the 1920s. Eventually, the Alberta Government, concerned about maintaining transportation in the north, became involved. They arranged for the sale of the ED&BC and the CCR. After much negotiation, the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National Railways agreed to take over the two, along with Alberta Great Waterways and the Pembina Valley Railways. The newly combined railways received a new name, the Northern Alberta Railways (NAR).

The NAR was officially declared on March 29, 1929. Under the new name, the two original lines continued to serve the North and South Peace areas.

The Next One

The next railway built in the Peace Country was the Great Slave Lake Railway. It ran for 377 miles from a connection with the NAR just east of Grimshaw called Roma Junction to Hay River, N.W.T.

A GSLR Caboose



At a point just south of Hay River, the GSLR put in another junction and built a 50-mile-long spur line that ran east along the south shore of Great Slave Lake to a lead/zinc mine at a place called Pine Point. The mine was owned by the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company (Cominco), a company connected to the CPR.

The presence of lead/zinc ore in the region was known to Indigenous Peoples and other prospectors for many years. Cominco became involved in the mid-1900s, and by 1954 had confirmed that a profitable mine was feasible. Cominco's interest stemmed from the fact that they owned a smelter at Trail BC, which was running short of ore supply. However, the absence of a railway to haul the ore south limited the prospects of Pine Point.

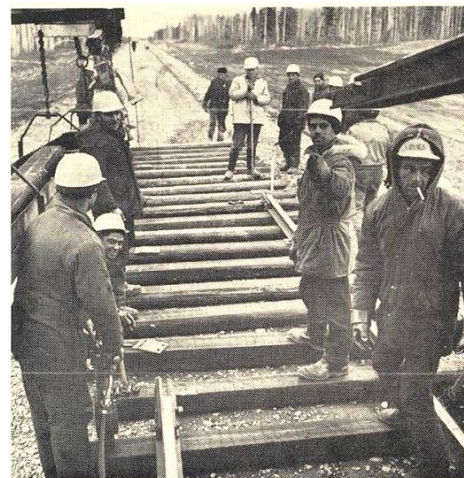
In 1958, the Canadian Federal Government committed to building the railway under the "Road to Resources" program, an initiative of John Diefenbaker, the newly elected Prime Minister. There was general agreement that the railway was "a work for the general advantage of Canada", but politics entered the picture immediately. A Royal Commission had to decide on the route, the eastern one starting from Waterways, or the western one from Grimshaw. In the end, the

western route won out. The Government arranged with the CNR to complete the grade surveys, build the railway, and operate it.

The surveys began in 1960, and construction began at Roma Junction in February 1962. From there, construction proceeded north through relatively flat country. The only real obstacle was the Meikle River, requiring quite a spectacular 2000-foot trestle to span the valley. A new self-propelled track-laying machine was a significant improvement over traditional methods. By delivering ties and rails continuously to the track-laying crew, they accomplished a rate of 10 feet per minute.



Meikle River Trestle



Track Laying Machine and Crew

Construction proceeded year-round despite muddy summers and cold winters. The all-weather Mackenzie Highway, which paralleled the railway grade, was a bonus for the project. Unlike some northern projects, trucks could stage materials ahead of active construction, and crews felt much less isolated than otherwise, which boosted morale considerably.

Twenty-one months later, the first train left the mine at Pine Point with 36 cars of ore going to the smelter at Trail. The cars would travel over the NAR to Edmonton, transfer to the CPR and travel south and then west through the Crowsnest Pass to their destination.

Cominco built the new town of Pine Point to support the mine, concurrent with the railway. It had all the characteristics of a Canadian small town, containing utility and health services, residences, recreation facilities, and small businesses. At its peak, about 2000 residents lived there.

The mine and the town lasted until 1988, nearly a quarter century. The GSLR then hauled the last of the stockpiled ore and removed the spur line. Cominco dismantled the town entirely. They saw some buildings, particularly houses, moved to other locations. When Cominco was done, there was very little left above ground, but there are still traces in the abandoned road and utilities network. Water fills the open mine pits.

The principal reason for building the GSLR was to transport the ore. But the Royal Commission's report also noted that there would be many collateral benefits. Agriculture would expand as it became easier to move crops to market. The same would happen to the forest industry. And the shipment of supplies and materials north to the Canadian Arctic would become easier. These forecasts proved correct.

**Hawk Hills
Elevator**



Agricultural land expanded considerably in the North Peace as grain buyers built elevators along the track at places like Manning, Hawk Hills, and High Level. Areas around LaCrete and Fort Vermilion opened up for farming because of the elevator in High Level. Until the railway arrived, farmers in those areas had to haul their grain to Grimshaw.

As one farmer put it, from Fort Vermilion, it was 300 bushels in a 3-ton truck going 300 miles one way. With cereal grains, it was an iffy proposition to even make costs, unless prices were exceptionally good. With seed grain and legume seed, the prices always seemed to justify the haul. But it was a great relief to have an elevator much closer and not to have to make those kinds of decisions.

Forestry saw the expansion of sawmills at Manning and High Level, based partially on the presence of a railway. The lumber, along with agricultural products, made up the payloads going south.



Fuel Tank Cars at Hay River

Shipments to the Arctic, as the Commission had envisioned, became a reality. With the railway delivering materials and supplies to Hay River, tugs and barges could deliver them down the Mackenzie River and east along the Arctic coast. Fuel was especially important.

The route and rails of the former GSLR and the NAR still provide these services to the Peace Country and the N.W.T. The entire line is now owned and operated by the CNR, running north from Edmonton to Hay River. There are very few spur lines left. Most payloads for the railway come from facilities right on that primary route. It can still claim though, to be the farthest north railway in Canada.

The Last One

The last railway to be built in the Peace Country was the Alberta Resources Railway. It ran 234 miles north from a junction on the CNR mainline west of Hinton to Grande Prairie.

Again, the major driver for construction was a mine, this one for coal near Grande Cache. However, the same collateral benefits that resulted from the GSLR, occurred when the rail reached Grande Prairie and the NAR junction. Agriculture, forestry, and oil and gas all benefited. And the dream of a direct connection to the Pacific coast ports, wished for many years, finally became a reality for the Peace Country.

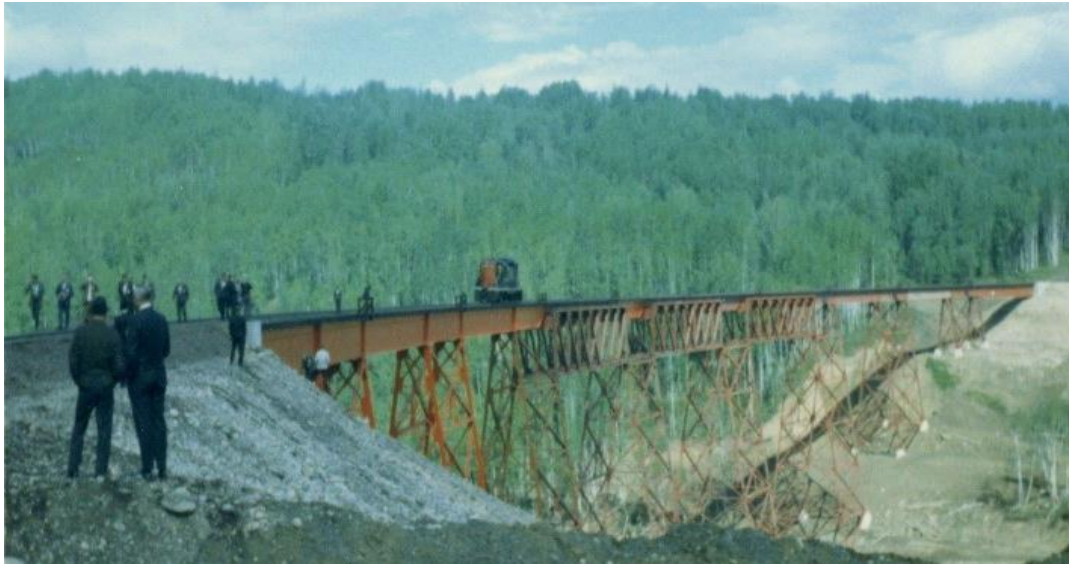
This time, it was the Alberta government rather than the Federal one that stepped up. Under the leadership of Premier Ernest Manning, Alberta incorporated the Alberta Resources Railway Corporation in April 1965. Its mandate was to build railways into areas of known resources not yet served by rail transport. One such area was the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains between Hinton and Grande Prairie.

McIntyre Porcupine Mines Limited had several coal leases in the Grande Cache area. The leases contained prime grades of metallurgical coal of great interest to Japanese steelmakers. A supply agreement was in the works, but it could not happen without a railway link to the coast. In order to move ahead, the Alberta Government financed the construction of the railway. It also built the Town of Grande Cache to support the mining development.

Construction began in 1966 after the Corporation contracted with the CNR to build and operate the railway. CNR used techniques they had learned and since improved from building the GSLR. They included the use of helicopters in completing the grade survey and electronic instruments that established grade control points. The track-laying machine was like one used for the GSLR, delivering ties and track to the crew.

Computers were used to design the required bridges used to cross the rivers and streams encountered. There were many of these because the railway ran across

the grain of the land. Especially between the CNR mainline and Grande Cache, the watercourses came east from the Rocky Mountains, but the railway ran north and south. This meant long bridges spanning the entire valley. Once leaving Grande Cache to go north, the railway then followed the Smoky River.



A locomotive traveling over the Alberta Resources Railway route from Grande Prairie south to Grande Cache and Hinton, in celebration of its opening crosses the bridge as spectators watch, 1969. (SPRA 476.01.02.06)

Crossings were still required. In fact, the Wapiti River crossing is one of the longest trestles in Alberta at 2800 feet. But the bigger issue was the risk of flooding which washed out grades and tracks. 1972 was a terrible year for this when 37 miles washed out and reconstruction requiring re-location and stabilizing took two years.

In 1969, after three years of construction, the ARR received authorization to carry traffic. Coal was the major payload, but like the GSLR, grain, and lumber from the Peace Country moved south as well. Proctor and Gamble's pulp mill added to payloads after it began producing in the early 1970s.

Like the GSLR, the ARR became an important part of the Peace Country rail system. In fact, after a severe flood of the Smoky River in 1987, which made the Watino bridge unusable, the ARR became the only rail access to the South Peace region.

Currently, the entire rail system in the Peace is owned and operated by the CNR. They operate it as two separate lines, the Edmonton to Hay River line, and the Swan Landing to Rycroft and Hythe line. Edmonton is the connection point now. **See the maps below.**

A Personal Story

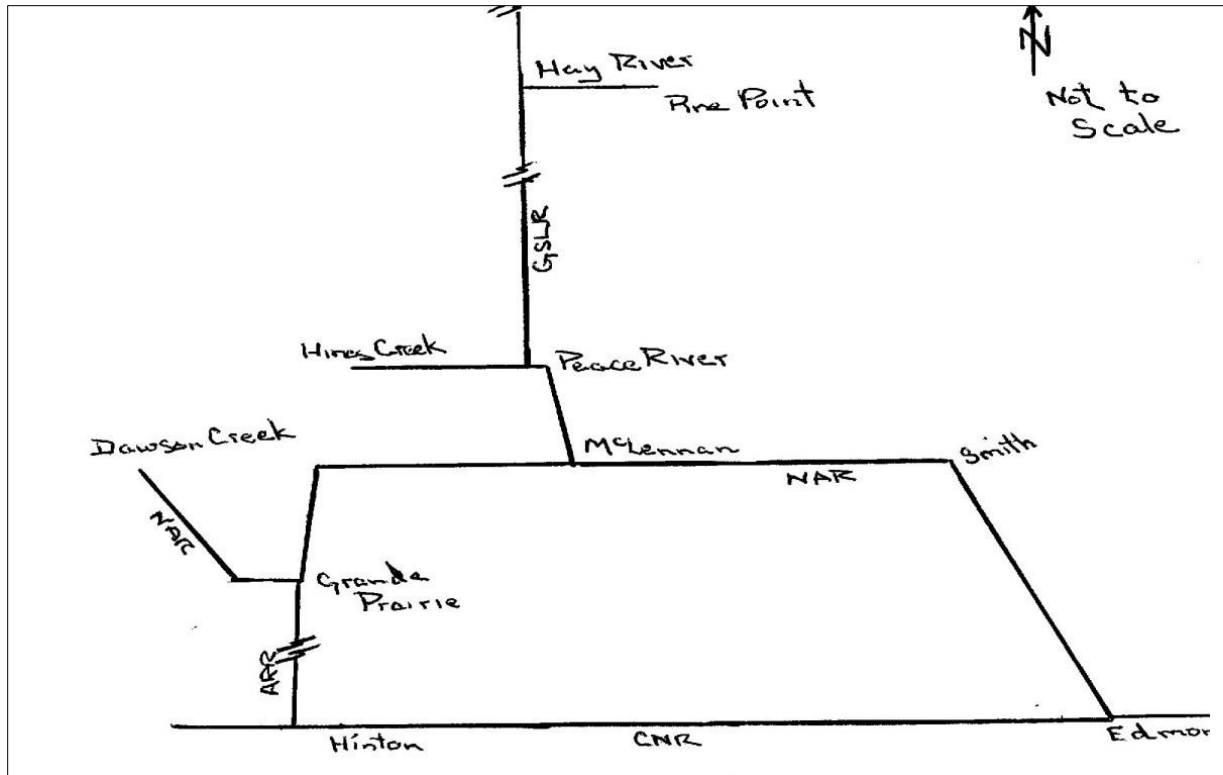
The author's father was a locomotive engineer on the NAR during the early years of the ore haul from the Pine Point mine. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, he had, among other things, been a miner in a lead/zinc mine at Field, BC. Often time he and a fellow worker would stay at the mine site as camp watchmen on weekends.

One Sunday, an elderly man appeared at the door of the cookhouse. He asked for a meal, claiming he was riding freight trains around BC's mining districts, seeking partners to prospect with him up north. They had to be fit and have a hundred dollars for a grubstake. They would prospect for lead/zinc ore, known to be present in places along the south shore of Great Slave Lake. The two younger men were fit enough, but neither had the hope of obtaining a hundred dollars in those years. They fed the prospector, and he caught the next freight out of town.

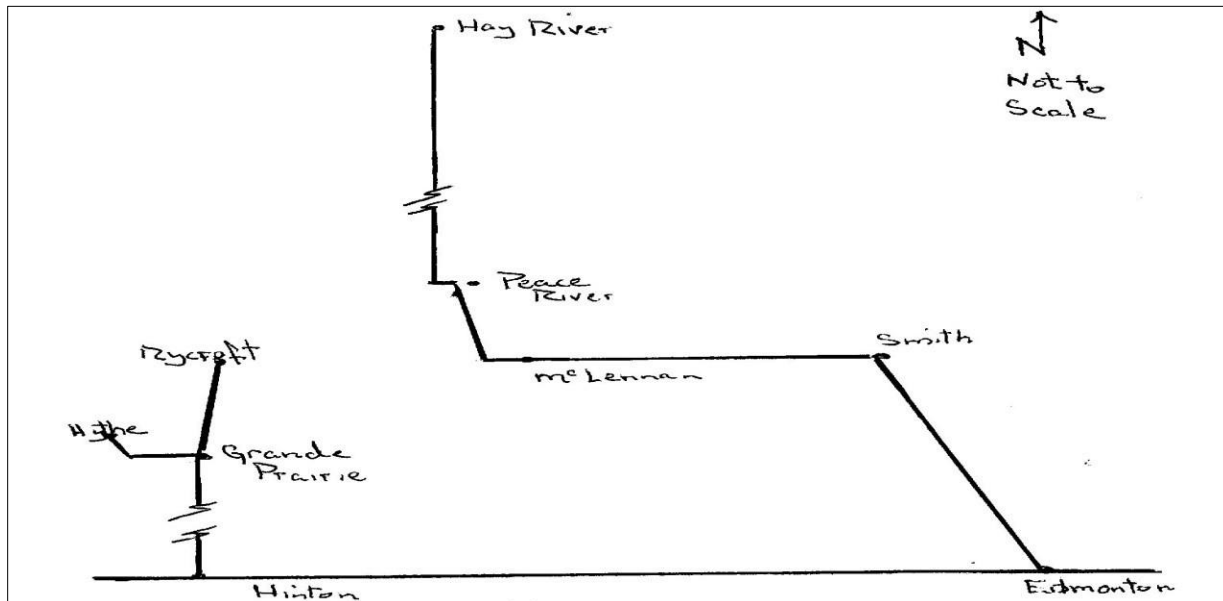
Dad often wondered what might have been, as he ran a train of ore down and up the banks of the Peace River on its way south to the smelter at Trail.

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: South Peace Regional Archives Photo



Maximum Extent of Peace Country Railways



CNR in the Peace Country, 2022



On behalf of the Historical Society of Alberta, our chapter presented the Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee Medal to Duff Crerar in style on January 15th.

Congratulations and our thanks to Duff for a career of service to many community organizations as an educator, writer, historian, and friend of the Archives. He was escorted into the room in proper Scottish fashion by piper David MacLean, where Duff's colleagues and friends spoke of his positive impact on our community. Duff offered a memorable response on the importance of historical perspective in charting a path toward a better society.

Our thanks to the Grande Prairie Museum for their hospitality and hosting, and to William Vavrek for his images from the event.



**Wanda Zenner
Awarded the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Pin
Pat Wearmouth**

PCHS member Wanda Zenner recently received the Queen Elizabeth Platinum Jubilee Pin. A very official-looking envelope arrived in her mailbox from Canada's House of Commons. It contained the pin and a certificate, which was signed by Chris Warkentin, Member of Parliament for our region. In part, the certificate states:

"I am pleased to present you with this pin in recognition of your service and commitment to the community. I am happy to recognize you for all that you do to make the Peace Country a better place and to celebrate your work and achievement."

This will be no surprise to PCHS members. Wanda works on history and heritage projects in the east end of the South Peace, the Old Bezanson Townsite, and the Glen Leslie Church being examples. She often writes them up in articles that appear in our newsletter. Congratulations Wanda. And well deserved it is.

The Peace Country also has another (associated) Medal Recipient to Mention:

Many of Glen Bowe's road trips throughout the western provinces for photos and stories have included Peace country locations for his subjects. Recently, trips to Hines Creek, Manning, Falher, and other communities are presented in Glen's Travels at: <https://glenbowe.home.blog/> Our neighboring HSA chapter to the south, the Edmonton and District Historical Society, has chosen to honour him with a Queen's Platinum Jubilee Medal, presented by Tim Marriott, Past President of HSA, on January 24th. A performance on the Chinese harp (the modern konghou) by Jia Jia Yong, in their Speaker's Series, was a memorable start to the evening.



Glen Bowe



Jia Jia Yong

Building Lives that Value our Shared History

Personal Reflections by Duff Crerar

Invisible others, looking over my shoulder... that's what much of my life with history has felt like. Coming from a family with great pride in its past and Scottish origins (with a strong dash of Irish thrown in!), raised in a community not far past its pioneer roots, with photograph albums and long Sunday dinners with long stories of the past, it was not hard to develop a historical consciousness from the beginning. I grew up feeling as if the people of my past were looking over my shoulder. I had to know them better.

And I felt an obligation to write, to share, and to present what I learned so that it would not be forgotten. For to lose the past is to be a community with a type of dementia; with no roots and perhaps only delusions to take it into the future.

So my university studies and graduate degrees qualifying me to teach history became gifts for a long quest, that led through a great deal of deferred gratification but also to great personal rewards. There are many who helped me along the way to thank...

My teachers, from the one-room schoolhouse at Springhill, through Metcalfe and Osgoode Township High School, are so many to name, especially my History, Latin, and English teachers. My professors who patiently listened as I used up so much of their time during their office hours. My Queen's University professors and College of Education teachers who encouraged me to be creative in my classrooms.

The faculty and early leadership of Grande Prairie Regional College, where I was able to do some of my most creative teaching. I also am grateful for the many students who were so receptive to my eccentric methods and caught my passion for history in those classrooms, or added mine to their own.



I especially want to thank the Indigenous people who have accepted me, both my extended family as well as my students and the elders, who have taught me so much, and remain among those who have helped me in my own spiritual walk, along with some of our churches and their leaders.

I mark the latter out for special appreciation because it has always been my experience that history is not a gathering of facts or theories, dates, and maps, but a special story of the land, the people who live on it, and the spiritual realities which shaped and still shape their lives. With every quantitative measure we take of the past, there are many qualitative aspects that we ought to integrate into the account. As one of my earliest professors inspired me to think: “There is first of all what it takes to make a living, but then there is what makes that living worthwhile”. This is why anthropological, cultural, and literary studies are so important, yet now seem so increasingly threatened by the forces of economics and wealth generation which drive our lives.

In short, “History has soul”, and we must keep seeking that aspect of our past if we are to have a life worth having in our own time. And that takes the efforts of a wide range of talented and dedicated lovers of our past, who are both chroniclers and critics, and so keep our memory of the past things in our nature which we must learn from. Else we risk a renewed Dark Age when all that was good is forgotten or distorted. A day without good history is indeed a day without the sun.

So, again, many thanks to all here and in my own past who have contributed to my nature, my education, and my quest, not least my family, who have bestowed on me the name and character of a Crerar.

Telling Tales Out of School, January 29th

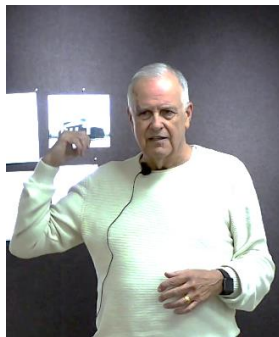
An Afternoon with the Grande Prairie Seniors' Reading Theatre



In a series of performances of stories from the early school days in the South Peace, the performers, dressed in period costumes, recounted the shenanigans and dormitory rule-busting of their youth. While some tales were archival, others were told by the original participants, both teachers, and students.

The Russian Refugees Presentation, March 14th and 15th

Michael Andruff, Author of The Russian Refugees



Michael Andruff, born in Fairview, spent most of his years in British Columbia after his father was badly injured at the Waterhole Oldtimers Sports Day in 1955, and the family moved to the coast. As the 100th anniversary of his family's 1924 arrival in Alberta as Russian refugees approached, he turned the writing of his family's history into a project to build a fund to sponsor a current refugee family. After his talk in Grande Prairie, he traveled on to Fairview to encourage attendees to also join him and consider paying their good fortune forward. See the: [Homeglen Legacy Fund](#)

Polish Settlers and Their Fox Creek Church

From a Research Project by Edwin Piebiak

Starting from the full scope of Ed's lengthy submission for inclusion in another author's project on Polish immigration to Canada, we have highlighted and condensed some of his work for our readers. Ed focused on those who settled in a small part of the Peace Country largely missed in previous accounts. In this issue of our newsletter, we'll introduce some of those families that settled on virgin forests, and their struggle to open new farmland. Settlers continued to arrive over two decades, and we'll add more details in coming issues.

Our next issue for Summer 2023, will focus on the history of the church and more arrivals. It will cover the church's early conception and include its planning, construction, use, and ultimate demolition, as well as the Fox Creek Cemetery which is located on the church grounds.

Ed has had an enduring concern for preserving the history of his Polish-Canadian community, from an area between, and to the south of, Codesa and Eaglesham. This is the area where Polish settlers, including Ed's family, established the church they knew as the Fox Creek Church, or more formally, "Our Lady of Czestochowa" Church. Ed compiled a narrative of the early Polish settlers who had emigrated in the mid-1930s (and later), looking for a better life for their families.

It is not known how these pioneers learned that land was available in Western Canada. It is assumed that they may have read articles in some of their local newspapers which were not all that common in their own remote farming communities in Poland, but it is known that much of their information was spread by word-of-mouth as one neighbor told another neighbor.

This account assumes that a few ambitious individuals came to Canada and wrote back to Poland about this vast new country with dark rich soil which was wonderful for farming. From those letters, the word spread throughout the communities. As a result, many families sold their properties in Poland and took the long and arduous journey to Canada not knowing the size of the country, the weather, the culture, the railway system, or the language. How they made it from Halifax or Quebec City to Western Canada still amazes one, for this was a one-way journey and there was no turning back.

For some, like Edwin's father **Sam Piebiak**, their arrival in the Peace was delayed as they worked their way from Eastern Canada, with mining, and forestry, or as labourers on more southerly farms in the West. Their wages were often sent back to families in Poland to buy their transit to their new homes.

Being from the agricultural part of Poland, as Sam looked out from the train heading west, he was dismayed by the sight of the rugged Canadian Shield, and he wondered what he was doing here. Through tears, he nonetheless endured the trip, got started in the gold mines almost immediately, and after working a month he made more money than he could have made over a year in Poland. Initially, Sam intended to save money in Canada and eventually return to Poland. Instead, he sent his Canadian money over to relatives, who in turn purchased a new parcel of land in his name in Poland. He also sent money to his wife Katarzyna to help her with the farming operations that she was undertaking alone.

As he became more acquainted with the country and the language, he decided in 1936 to visit his sister and her husband Albert Popek, who were already farming in the Eaglesham area. Albert showed Sam the excellent quality of the soil in the area and he immediately knew where he was going when his 2 years in Kirkland



Sam Clearing Trees

Lake were up. He came to the Eaglesham area in late 1937 having worked his way west on various farms in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. When he arrived in the Fox Creek Area, he stayed with the Popeks while he cleared out the bush on his own land and began building a house. In 1938

he brought over his wife Katarzyna, and children Bernice, Tony, and Joe to Eaglesham where they started a tough frontier life of farming by horses and clearing land with dynamite.

The land could be very productive, but in the early days, it was only gained by clearing it one tree at a time. The only periods of rest were measured by the time spent sharpening an axe, or by the length of time a fuse would burn, once lit.

Unlike some who arrived flush with funds to afford mechanized equipment, building family wealth for these Polish immigrants meant years of hard labour, considerable danger, and careful saving - if the crops were good. Skills brought from their homeland also had some popular applications for neighboring farms.

John Hrishuk was a dynamite expert who apparently learned the trade in the Russian Army back in the early 1930s. For whatever reason, he was always very reluctant to talk about his past. He was certified in Canada and was authorized to purchase, store, and use dynamite in the area. He removed a huge number of tree stumps with dynamite and made land clearing much easier for the local people. He went out of business when crawler tractors with dozers became available after the Second World War.

John also saw himself as an expert “distiller” of wines and was known to store a clear, odorless fluid in 5-gallon pails hidden in his yard, until the RCMP raided his farmstead, and using sniffer dogs found this fluid. He paid a fine of \$500, which at that time was a lot of money and of course he lost his still. He was under the impression that the dogs couldn’t sniff out his “fluid” until, of course, they did.

Joe Bilinski originally drove a horse-drawn “School Bus” on a roughed-in Highway 49. He took children to the Old Log School House and later used a tractor-drawn



School Bus to take them to the New School House south of Andrew Piebiak’s. He was also a driving force in the establishment and building of the Fox Creek Church, and a director of a committee that would oversee this venture.

Horse and Wagon Transportation

John Los had a close call when taking a pitchfork into a standoff with a black bear over ownership of his stoked grain. Luckily, the bear retreated after a nose-to-nose confrontation, but it took some time for John to settle down his nerves. Another brush with death came after a winter visit to neighbors.

After dropping his wife Katie at home, he made the trip to the creek to water the horses before putting them in the barn. Though it was a familiar part of the creek, John didn't realize that the current was strong enough under the ice to thin it out. As he led the horses onto the ice, he fell through. Fortunately for him, he held on to the reins as he went into the water, and when he yelled at the horses to back up, they pulled him out. And if his luck held, his wife would have a good fire going!

Jan Veredka lived on a fraction of land south of John Los' farmhouse and immediately near the creek. He was a bachelor and apparently did not farm per se, but was a farm hand, or a farm worker for pay.

It is rumored that one Saturday night, he and Sam Piebiak were setting up a "still used for refining" fruit wine. This was being done in the dark (for obvious reasons) and due to either the lack of light or the lack of knowledge, they didn't bolt it properly. As they fired up the still one of the pipes burst open at a joint, badly scalding Jan in the face. Katarzyna Piebiak said that she could hear him from the house and that he "yelped like a dog whose tail had just been stepped on". Needless to say, the distilling operation ceased and he walked home.

The next day was Sunday and Jan went to Church in the Old Community Hall near John Los', with, of course, his face all blistered up. When the congregation asked him what happened to his face – he said he was eating some soup by tipping his head back and pouring it directly into his mouth because he couldn't find a spoon. The bowl slipped out of his hands and all the soup poured onto his face. Of course, no one believed him except perhaps Fr. Michalowski.

John Mycek died from a fence-building accident. While a fellow worker was driving a fence post into the ground, the head of a sledgehammer flew off and hit John in the chest directly over the heart. He was fatally injured and died several hours later. Life was hard, and sometimes tragically unpredictable.

Andrew Piebiak was a brother to Sam Piebiak and Apolonja Popek, and a brother-in-law to Albert Popek. All four were from Luchów Dolny, in southeastern Poland, and obviously knew each other. Andrew was in the Polish cavalry in the mid-1930s and was very fortunate to leave Poland when he did, for as the Nazis invaded Poland, his cavalry unit would have faced German tanks, and it is very unlikely he would have survived the war.

Albert Popek, **Stanley Socha**, and **Mike Yurchysyn** were the first settlers to arrive in the Fox Creek Area. Apparently, they met on the train between Edmonton and Eaglesham. When they arrived on their properties southwest of Eaglesham, they needed a shelter and immediately set about building a “lean-to”, from tree branches leaning at about a 45-degree angle. The branches reflected the warmth of an open fire, helped reduce the impact of any wind, lessened the discomfort of sleeping on the ground, and provided some shelter from the rain. With that for a “home”, they immediately started building log houses on each of their properties.

Albert had arrived on the east coast of Canada and made his way west by working for various farmers in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. He built his first house by the winter of 1935, and his wife Apolonja arrived in Eaglesham in early 1936 where they were married in February at the Eaglesham Catholic Church.



Albert, at some point after 1937, acquired a sawmill and began providing sawn-lumber planks to the locals thereby making the construction of houses and other structures that much easier. He operated the sawmill until the late 1950s when a hardware store in Eaglesham started to provide better quality sawn lumber.

Albert Breaking Sod

John Sanochi arrived from Ukraine in 1938 and was known as quite a woodsman who would often walk overland to Grande Prairie. Unfortunately, he left home one day and was never heard from or seen again. The RCMP conducted a thorough search but did not find him although he was apparently seen in Grande Prairie. It was concluded that he perished along some trail while making his way back home. Sadly, his wife Annie was left a widow with three children.

Stanley Socha was from Poland. His wife Annie, from Ukraine, was often required as a midwife and oversaw the birth of many children in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In those years access to the nearest hospital was only available by train to Spirit River. Later, as the road system improved, children were born in either Spirit River or Grande Prairie hospitals.

As families, farmsteads, and livestock herds grew, finances kept pace and there were advances in farm equipment and improved building materials. After work on the land was done, it meant more time for family, church, school, and social gatherings in much-improved buildings.



Small Children and Large “Ponies”



Preparing for Company at the Farm

Extensive original bush trails were used from the earliest days, but when surveying and upgrading of roads allowed better movement, life improved, even when some of that movement involved settlers’ first houses. Many had been located for ease of access to water, and now needed closer access to the roads.



Making Bundles for the Stooking Crew



Threshing Grain, Building a Straw Pile

Albert Popek, and **Father Michalowski** were the driving forces behind the establishment and building of the Fox Creek Church in 1948. He was a Director and Secretary-Treasurer for a Committee consisting of Antoni Wozniak, Joe Bilinski, and Fr. Michalowski. **But that’s a story for the next issue.**