Peace Country Historical Society
Box 897 Station Main
Grande Prairie, AB, T8V 3A8

June 2023
The Summer Issue
Volume 13 - Issue 2

Promoting, Preserving, Publishing Our Heritage

Sub-alpine wildflowers bracket Lupines, as seen above Two Lakes in mid-July.

Upcoming Summer/Fall Events

- This may be late for much notice for the HSA Annual General Meeting which is **Saturday, June 24th, 1:00 to 3:00 PM online by Zoom from the Calgary office.** Members will receive their AGM info email prior to the meeting, with directions for joining.
- The PCHS **Northern Alberta Heritage Fair** is back on schedule and was held on **Thursday, May 4th**. It was a resounding success. Thanks to Susan Thomson for this!
- **Forbes Open House**: After discussion, **August 2nd** was chosen for the **PCHS Forbes Tea** this year and the theme will be the recent Coronation.
- **Bezanson site presentation, Aug 7th**: Wanda Zenner informs us that the two archeologists, Drs. Meaghan Peuramaki-Brown and Shawn Morton will be having an event to highlight the old Bezanson Townsite. Watch for details on Facebook Forum.
- **A Bus Tour will be scheduled for this fall, traveling further afield**: to the Hines Creek and Fairview region with historical context presented by Dr. David Leonard. Dates and details will be announced on our PCHS Facebook Forum Page.

What? Me? A Historian?

Duff Crerar

It's not as hard as it looks. You and your family's lived experiences (and those of your neighbours and friends) are part of a long chain of living, working, learning, and loving in our region, and you bring them with you even if you have not lived here for seven generations! Settler, farmer, householder, youth, child – all of us have contributed to our history, which has made you and our people's story important. We are inviting you to tell your story, your way because it is important to the Peace Country Historical Society.

How? It starts with how you think about the past. If you are used to putting yesterday into what some call "Yester year", and putting all that stuff in a museum, then you may not have figured out how to get started. You may think it is "not important enough" to put on record. But here is how we think about it...

Our goal is to be one of the best story-keepers and storytellers of the South Peace. But we know that we can't do this by ourselves. We work with the South Peace Regional Archives, where written, photographic, printed, and map collection records exist, and we have many great museums around us. But historians are moving beyond, to what is yet untold about our past, and our people. And so, we are inviting you to join us to help tell "the rest of the story".

Think about your family or local traditions: family rituals, such as Christmas, weddings, fairs, rodeos, or parades. We have so many cultural and family backgrounds and have held events that have a great deal of human interest, and humour, and which create our identities – personal, local, and regional. We have a distinctive Peace River identity, and your stories, even though we may not know them yet, have shaped that distinct outlook.

How did our people get by? Making a living has stretched our ingenuity, and often left behind, in our attics, sheds, barns, and backyards, a distinctive collection of machinery and gadgets which, even now, we cannot be sure how people used them all. You do not have to have been from "old timer" stock, either – people who have been here even a short time will have noticed aspects of our history which are universal the world over: snow-forts, skiing, even potholes! They all have a bearing on how we make a living, and how we make it worthwhile.

Life was challenging here, as our climate and our land do not give up their wealth without work, and in the earliest days, real hardship. We value the stories of how our people – your people – faced these challenges. We want to remember more than just their names. We want to know what they believed in, and why.

These, and any other stories which have inspired you and yours, are important to us. Will you help us write them? We are storytellers, and we are willing to help you get going. The rest is up to you!

If you are interested in joining or contributing some of your stories to the Peace Country Historical Society, please contact us.

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 Autumn 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.

Polish Settlers and Their Fox Creek Church

Part Two, 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. It continues with this, our second part of Ed's account, and his enduring concern for preserving the history of his Polish-Canadian community, from an area between, and south of, Codesa and Eaglesham.

The Old School House

The old schoolhouse was a large 2 room log building with a large pot-bellied wood-burning stove located roughly in the middle. The school had a single entrance and was bordered on the south side with a very large window giving plenty of natural light but also making the place very cold. Many of the Polish children could not speak English so Mary Sanochi did a lot of translating in the early years. Some of the older children came to school via the trails by horseback, the younger ones were driven to school by wagon or sleigh. The school taught grades 1 to 9, then the students would have to go to Rycroft or Spirit River.

The Old Community Hall

In this time frame, a community hall was built on the fraction of land that was immediately west of John Los' farmstead. At that time it was probably Public Land, i.e. none of the farmers owned this land. The exact date that this hall was built is unknown but it is assumed that once the settlers had completed their basic buildings, they would have started work on it. Since the hall was built of sawn lumber, the probable year of construction would have been around 1937 – 1938 and it would have been a cooperative effort with Polish, Ukrainian, and English-speaking Canadian and American volunteers.

The hall served may functions. It obviously was built for dances, bingos, and weddings, but it also served as a church for the catholic people of that area. Father Michalowski arrived in Webster in 1937 and was assigned as the circuit priest for the Fox Creek area. Webster was the missionary hub at that time and was the residence for several priests pastoring this part of the Peace River Region. He would have taken the train from Webster to Rahab (Codesa), then he would have been met by whoever was offering him residence, and they would have travelled by horse and wagon to that residence. The follow morning, they would go to the hall and he would conduct Mass as well as any other priestly functions like baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. The Mass was held on a fairly regular bases but not all that often because of the travel involved, and based on collection plate records, was conducted roughly once a month with special occasions being the exception. It should be noted that Father Michalowski also conducted the occasional Mass at various homes, probably because the hall was not available. The old hall remained in use at Los' location until (it is assumed) the new

church was built in 1948, and then it was moved to Codesa which had become a larger center.

A 1946 housewarming at Mazurek's showed the need for larger community buildings.

Radio
There was not a lot of entertainment available in the area during this time frame. The radio station in Grande Prairie (CFGP) began broadcasting in 1939 however not very many of the pioneers could afford a radio which was a very scarce luxury at that time.

A New Fox Creek School House
It is not known exactly when the new school house was built but it is estimated to be around 1945. It was located about 1 mile south of Andrew Piebiak's farmstead and on the north side of Hwy 49. It consisted of two rooms, one for grades 1 to 3 and the other for grades 4 to 9. It had a basement for coal storage and it had a coal-burning convection furnace. The heating system was a definite improvement on the wood-burning pot-bellied stove used in the old log school house. Mrs. Warner, Mrs. Peterson, and Mrs. Ann Larson all taught at this school for many years. Miss Ann Konapelka also taught at the school for several years.

In 1954 a large school was built in Eaglesham, and that included a new Elementary Wing and a new High School Wing. Many of the students later attended the Eaglesham School with the first High School graduating class being in 1957. Prior to the school in Eaglesham, students going to classes beyond grade 9 had to go to either Rycroft, Spirit River, or Grande Prairie.

Some of the Polish students went on to achieve significant status in Canadian society. Teddy Mazurek, along with his older brother Stanley, went on to run one of the largest farming operations in the Eaglesham area. Joan Piebiak became a registered nurse and

worked in several hospitals in B.C. and Alberta. Eddie Popek became an aeronautical engineer and worked in Montreal and Toronto, and Christine Piebiak attained a PhD in Education and taught at the University of Calgary for many years.

New Community Hall
At some point the Old Community Hall located by John Los' was moved to Codesa which was now becoming a larger center with the original railway station, a new Chamberland's general store, a post office, a pool hall, a small school, a small log church, and several new residential houses. The hall remained there until the late 1960's at which point it was dismantled because it had become dilapidated.

With the development of a rudimentary road system, Codesa was a better location for the hall. However, its use by the Polish community lessened as the western resident settlers still did their business in Codesa whereas the eastern settlers now went to Eaglesham. At one time there was a small hall at the new Fox Creek School site but the Polish community never used it, instead going to Eaglesham which had a newer and larger hall and also was becoming a much larger center than Codesa.

And More Radio
A second radio station (CKYL), located in Peace River, started to serve this area. Radio stations were the only means of obtaining immediate news and weather reports. They carried a variety of programs and served such vital purposes as broadcasting current wheat prices, obituaries, public notices, and messages to individuals in remote locations.

The Fox Creek Church Committee and Father Joachim Michalowski O.M.I.
Father Michalowski was born on December 17, 1909 in Wielkopolsce, Poland. He studied at a seminary in Lublin, and was ordained by Bishop Dymka on June 21, 1936 at Obrze as an Oblate Priest. He was immediately sent to Canada to do missionary work in Alberta, and specifically in the Peace River Country – namely Webster and Fox Creek where there were large Polish communities. His home base was a moderately sized log cabin in Webster which he shared with another priest. They had a small garden but mostly depended on food from the surrounding communities. He served nearly 14 arduous years in this area, after which he was sent to various other locations in Canada and retired in his old age to Vancouver. He died on January 30, 1997, in Vancouver, B.C. and is presumably buried in Winnipeg where the Oblates have a large cemetery.

Planning
The main religious event at this time was the building of the Fox Creek Church. The Polish community felt uncomfortable in attending church services in either Codesa or Eaglesham because of the seating arrangements in those churches. They felt that one should be able to sit wherever you wanted and not at pre-arranged pews. So, in consideration of this aspect and distance still being an issue, they wanted their own church nearby.

The planning for the church began on March 2, 1947 when the Polish Association, presided over by Chairman Joe Bilinski, convened a meeting at Albert Popek's house. In fact, they held two meetings on this date.

In the first meeting, they formed a Committee with Antoni Wozniak as President, Albert Popek as Director / Secretary-Treasurer, and Joe Bilinski as a second Director. In the second meeting they requested Fr. Michalowski to represent their congregation in the establishment of a local Catholic Parish with the desire of a Polish Priest conducting all religious services. The following representatives which were at the meeting all agreed with the decision: Joe Bilinski and Family Antoni Wozniak and Family
Sam Piebiak and FamilyAlbert Popek and Family
Bill Wojenski and Family Geo Repetowski
Joe Mazurek and Family Katarzyna Los Mike Kasprow

They then set about lobbying the Bishop in McLennan with Father Michalowski as their representative. Their first efforts were unsuccessful as the bishop felt that the churches in Codesa and Eaglesham were adequate. Nonetheless, they persisted, and the bishop relented and agreed to the creation of an additional church in the Fox Creek Area.

The planning of the size of the church structure was not without controversy. Father Michalowski wanted a size of 26 ft. X 40 ft. in his letter of April 30, 1948. The Congregation deemed that too large and decided to construct a building 24 ft. X 36 ft. as per Albert Popek's letter to Fr. Michalowski of May 3, 1948.

Acquisition of Land

Their second challenge was to find a site and to obtain the land from the Province of Alberta. They determined that the best location would be along Hwy 49 right at the 6th. Meridian, and on a fraction of land starting south of Hwy 49 and ending at the ½ mile mark. They originally wanted to acquire 4 acres for the Church and Cemetery Site and an additional 33.6 acres (the balance of the fraction) for purposes of financially supporting the Church. The 33.6 acres is their number which the province challenged as 37.6 acres.

John Pazuik wrote to the province requesting this land, presumably because John was well versed in English whereas the others were not. Their plan was to work up and seed the 33.6 acres, then sell whatever crop they planted and use that money to support the Church. The province refused their request saying that the support of the Church by the use of this land in this manner was inappropriate, but did agree to grant them 4 acres. They accepted the 4 acres and began planning the construction of the church.

Fund Raising

A lot of fund raising was done by donating lumber, nails, and labour. However, they did acquire a decent amount of money by cash donation. A $1,000.00 donation was received from a Mr. Eugene Chittle of Toronto through the Catholic Church Extension

Society. Mr. Chittle originally intended to donate the money to a church in Mexico known as “Our Lady of Guadalupe” where a peasant had several visions of the Virgin Mary who instructed him to have the Bishop of Guadalupe build a church on a specific location. The bishop did so, and that peasant’s cape incurred a colored impression of the Virgin Mary. That cape is mounted under glass in the church and to which the origins of the impression, even to this day, cannot be explained by scientific examination. Mr. Chittle agreed to re-route his donation to the Fox Creek Church if it was named as “Our Lady of Guadalupe” and a photograph of the chapel sent to him. The local Committee thought that the proposed name by Mr. Chittle was inappropriate for a Polish community so they named the church “Our Lady of Czestochowa”. It is unknown it they advised Mr. Chittle of the name change or if they ever sent him a photograph.

On a lighter side, the committee also raised money by “Kolendi” which in English is “carolling during the Christmas season”. One evening Katarzyna Piebiak was doing some Christmas baking and Tony was playing outside. He would often run up to the outside door and howl like a coyote. When Katarzyna heard some singing outside, and thinking it was Tony, she grabbed a broom and warned him through the door “choc choc ty zarazo” which is gently translated to English as “come come you rowdy rascal”. She prepared to give him a good swat, but when she opened the door - there stood Father Michalowski and his Kolendnici (carolers). Needless to say, she profusely apologized to them and gave them a handsome donation. Father Michalowski got a real good chuckle out of the episode when Katarzyna explained what happened, and he remembered it for a long time. It is somewhat inappropriate to call a Priest a “zarazo”.

Construction

They held several meetings in early 1948. In those meetings they got commitments from the community for lumber and labour, and agreed to start work in the summer of 1948 with completion set for spring of 1949. The following people donated lumber:

Albert Popek1,000 board ft.
Bill Wojenski1,000
Antoni Wozniak1,400
John Los 2,000
Sam Piebiak 2,000
Joe Mazurek2,000

They opened the church up while it was still not fully sided, but just in time for First Communion Ceremonies. The photograph on the next page shows these Ceremonies happening in front of an un-sided church in July of 1949.

The work was done by all members of the community. The men and the boys did the physical work and the women brought out the lunches. A lot of young men pounded a lot of nails in the construction of this church – young men like Walter and Ernest Socha, Stanley Mazurek, Merlin and Matt Wozniak, Joe Piebiak, and many others. The young men were more agile and therefore could scale up the scaffolding easily whereas the older men were not so capable.

Local history says that the steeple was constructed on the roof, apparently the men were in a hurry that day and forgot to nail the metal cladding to the steeple. They didn't realize this until the scaffolding was down and the steeple was up – so what to do? They commissioned the two most agile boys, Eddie Popek and Roman Wozniak, to scamper up the roof, climb the steeple, and nail down the metal cladding which is what they did but with some interpretation.

Upon completion of the building, the only seating they had available were the quickly constructed wooden benches that they set up to be used as pews. A short time after completion, they hired a "finishing" carpenter to build the communion rails among other things. From the church records, there are several large payments to a Mr. Bill Young starting on Nov. 10, 1948 and a notation that he is a "Majster" which in English is a foreman, and it is assumed he also was a "finishing" carpenter. It is not known whether he built the actual wooden pews (of high quality) or if they purchased them later. There were about 12 high quality wooden pews for the front of church, 4 on the north side and 8 on the south side, the remaining seating areas further back were facilitated with the original wooden benches.

At some time after completion of the church building, Maria Wozniak organized the local ladies and they fundraised for curtains to the background of the altar area. Once they had enough funds to purchase the materials, the women assembled to form a sewing bee and sewed the materials to create vertical curtains with red sides and white interior, emblematic of the Polish flag.

Religious Events and Other Gatherings

<u>First Communions</u>

Before the new Fox Creek Church was built, these were almost always conducted in the Old Community Hall. However, when the new church was built all First Communion Ceremonies were conducted in the church. The following photo shows the first of First Communion ceremonies being conducted at the new church with Father Michalowski attending.

Wedding, Baptisms, Funerals, etc.
Some of these events continued to be held in the farmhouse with the exception of perhaps a very large gathering that may have been held at the Old Community Hall if it was available and later in the new Fox Creek Church. As to the funerals, coffins were now purchased but in the early stages the body was still kept in a cold storage room in the house or in a closed garage or granary. Funeral homes were now becoming more available as the road systems improved and pioneers attained more financial resources, and toward the end of this time frame almost every burial was conducted by a Funeral Home.

Surprise Parties
The pioneers would hold gatherings at various people's houses on such occasions as "surprise parties" as time allowed. A surprise party was a "secret arrangement for setting up a house party at someone's place without their knowledge". These seldom surprised anyone because Frank Majewski was not able to keep a secret and would quietly advise the to-be-surprised party of the upcoming surprise.

Due to the weather, the surprise parties were almost exclusively done in the summer time after planting of crops was completed but before harvest started. In the later years all these events had large numbers attending, with friends and neighbours coming from a greater distance since the road systems improved and the houses got larger. The surprise parties required everyone to participate, the women would provide the baked goods while the men provided the "fruit juice" that John Hrishuk was famous for "refining". In later years access to liquor stores was easier, and Mr. Hrishuk's fruit juice wasn't required anymore. The house parties hit a peak of popularity by the mid-1960's at which point television arrived in the area and everyone stayed home to watch TV.

Sporting Events
After the end of the Second World War, baseball was the game of the area. Several boys from the Fox Creek Area – namely Merlin and Roman Wozniak, Stanley Piebiak, Tony Piebiak, and Ernie Socha all played for the Eaglesham Eagles baseball team, and were Central Peace Baseball League Champions in 1958.

Maintenance
The church was heated by burning wood stove made from an improvised gasoline barrel, with welded door and attached stove pipe running to the roof. Apparently, this heating device was built by Walter Socha. Although the church was insulated with wood chips, there were no storm windows, and no storm doors; and it only warmed up the building by the time Mass was completed. There was also no porch to remove wet or muddy footwear. In 1954 Andrew and Sam Piebiak, along with Albert Popek built a porch that served this purpose as well as adding to the warmth of the building in the winter time. Before the porch was built it was the local women who would take turns in washing the entire floor in the main building.
In about 1963 the church purchased an oil heater which a local boy (Edwin Piebiak or Allen Dubey) would start on Saturday night. By Sunday 11:00 AM the building was toasty warm for Mass.

Other Uses
Based on collection plate amounts in the financial records, Mass was now conducted every 2 weeks and as time went by increased to every Sunday. Aside from the usual use of the church for regular Sunday Masses. Weddings, Funerals, etc. the church and the church grounds were also occasionally used for other activities.

Religious lessons were taught in the church. When Father Thomas was the local priest and taught catechism, he would teach from 9 AM to about 12 Noon. Father Thomas, an American, played baseball for the Wanham Combines, and was a former Chaplin for the U.S. Airforce in Alaska during World War 2. After a really quick lunch, the boys would then prepare to play baseball using the back of the church as a backstop and Ted McDaid's barbwire fence as a home run fence. Then off they would go for 5 innings of baseball. The girls would go walking down the local road and talk about whatever girls talk about. By about 3 PM it was home time.

On occasion picnics were held on the church grounds. The women would bring lunches and the men would bring soft drinks. The early church did not have a communion rail nor regular pews. The early arrangements for seating were just home-made style wooden benches. These benches were light weight and could be moved around easily, including taking them outside for seating at picnics.

List of Priests, the evolution of Mass Languages, and approximate dates

Father Michalowski1937 – 1951	Mass in Latin and Homily in Polish
Father Lukas1952 – 1959	Mass in Latin and Homily in Polish
Father Thomas1960 – 1962	Mass in Latin and Homily in English
Father Marceau1963 – 1964	Mass in Latin and Homily in English
Father Forget 1965 – 1968	Mass in English and Homily in English

A dedication ceremony was held at the Church grounds on June 13, 1999 celebrating the building of the church in 1948. A monument was constructed at the site and the original surviving members and/or their family members were invited to participate.

The Demolition of the Church
The Church was decommissioned in the fall of 1968. The pews and the communion rails were apparently taken to Joussard, AB. The altar was made of sawn wood and was not deemed to be worth saving. There never was a bell in the steeple.

Demolition took place on Oct. 2012 with the remains of the Church buried on the site immediately north of where the church had stood. The building had dilapidated to a point that it was not feasible to attempt to save it and so it was decided to demolish the building but leave the original concrete foundation in place to mark the location.

The Cemetery

The cemetery is located on the grounds of the Church. The first two burials in the cemetery were Evelia Wozniak and Anton Kropelnicki in 1950. Since then, 24 additional people have made this their final resting place.

Editor's Note: Edwin Piebiak has made it a special family project to maintain the location to respect the contributions of the families that made up the Fox Creek community.

Seniors Week was June 5th to 11th across Grande Prairie.

PCHS neighboured tables with South Peace Regional Archives members to meet and greet visitors to the Eastlink Centre and share common interests in history with new visitors, and old friends. Thanks to Susan Thomson and Doug Spry.

Lavern Sorgaard 1927 - 2023

Lavern Sorgaard, a long-time member of the Peace Country Historical Society, passed away in Grande Prairie on June 9, 2023, after a brief illness.

He was well known for his work in keeping alive the history of settlers in the Valhalla and Laglace areas. His willingness to share what he knew was much appreciated by members of our Society and the public at large. Lavern was a real source of history on all things Norwegian around Valhalla and Laglace. Our recently retired President of PCHS Pat Wearmouth had also called on him for information on a lot of the early sawmills in the Saddle Hills area. He had not been to our meetings for some time because of mobility issues but looked forward to the arrival of each newsletter to keep up with PCHS topics.

Editor's Note:
The following excerpt from the Inga Fimrite story is available in full on Glen's Travels at **https://glenbowe.home.blog/** There you will find many of the photos and documents that this newsletter has to omit due to space restraints. The dynamic addition of family and reader submissions to the storyline after his initial post allows him to add more depth to subjects covered in Glen's Travels. Reading ahead online is not discouraged, and we will also be adding more installments of Inga's story for your enjoyment in future newsletters.
Continuing east of the Polish settlement account by Edwin Piebiak, look for more history in Glen's post of January 20, 2023, titled **St. Jean Baptiste Catholic Church Historic Site.**

Inga Fimrite of Valhalla

Vikings were on the move in the 9th to the 11th centuries. These Scandinavians valued courage, bravado, and grit as well as skill on the battlefield. They often traveled to distant places to trade or to fight. Women sometimes fought along with the men and they were known as shield maidens. Both the men and women were unafraid of dying in battle because they firmly believed that a battlefield death would guarantee them a place in Valhalla in the afterlife. But wait, why am I writing about Vikings in the opening of a blog post about history in western Canada? There is a reason.

Today's post is about a woman who was born and raised in Norway. She demonstrated an enormous amount of courage by leaving her home and crossing the Atlantic Ocean to travel to the USA and Canada; two countries that were quite unlike Norway. In Canada she traveled first to central Alberta and later to the northwest part of the province at a time when it was quite a challenging journey that very few Europeans had done before her; fewer still made the journey with children. She was known for her toughness and resilience. She skillfully confronted the Canadian government when its regulations interfered with her goals. Now she has an eternal place in Valhalla. Her name was Inga Fimrite but she wasn't from the Middle Ages, nor was she a shield maiden. In fact, Inga Fimrite was born in 1883.

Valhalla means, "Home of the Gods". It's also the approximate location for the photos in the post. Not the mythical Valhalla that Vikings aspired to, but rather Valhalla Centre, Alberta. Valhalla Centre is located approximately 500 km northwest of downtown Edmonton

In response to a question "If you could have dinner with any three persons, living or dead, who would they be", my answer would be Inga Fimrite, Nelson Mandela, and Queen Elizabeth II.

Rod Fimrite - email to Glen Bowe 2023

To Canada and Tragedy

When I began this blog post about Inga Fimrite I had only the tribute written by her daughter Olive *Fimrite* Stickney. I later received a great deal of information from Inga's grandson, Rod Fimrite (Martin Fimrite's son). I've tried to merge the two sources of information while keeping this post short enough to remain interesting to the general public. Further down in this post, I'll fill in some of the blanks with some additional information that I obtained through a little archival sleuthing.

Inga Firmrite was born in Norway in 1883 and had five older brothers plus a sister who died at eighteen months of age. Inga's family experienced the untimely death of their parents. Inga was only 10 years old when her parents died so she was cared for by her older brothers. The family home in Norway was a tiny house only 3 meters by 4 meters in size based on the ruins of the foundation (likely two or more storeys high though). The house was located on a large island surrounded by the waters of the cold North Sea. Her childhood home was roughly the same latitude as Yellowknife, NWT.

That kind of childhood must have contributed to the intrinsic toughness Inga is now known for. There was much poverty and hardship in Norway in the 18th and 19th centuries. Inga left Norway to move to the USA at an early age in search of a better life. She was just nineteen when she left Norway with a girlfriend to travel to Wisconsin, USA. They arrived in the USA in June of 1903. Inga Fimrite's destination was Madison, Wisconsin where she found work with Mr. Howard Palmer and his wife Alice as a nanny and housekeeper. Mr. Palmer was believed to be a doctor or other professional such as a banker. A lot of Scandinavians had immigrated to Wisconsin, Minnesota and North Dakota for the opportunity to work in the timber industry as well as for farming. It was here in Madison that she met the man she would marry, Nels Fimrite.

Only eight days after their March 12, 1912 marriage, Inga and Nels Fimrite entered Canada to begin their lives together as farmers. They moved to the Kingman area in Camrose County, Alberta. Kingman is about 80 km southeast of Edmonton, not far from Miquelon Lake Provincial Park. This was a logical location because Camrose County was the destination of choice for a lot of Swedish and Norwegian settlers. That area has good land and generally the right amount of rain for farmers. The newlyweds borrowed money to buy a farm near Kingman rather than homesteading and that meant that there was a mortgage to pay. Perhaps the good land had already been taken up by earlier homesteaders so a purchase was the only option available for them. Kingman is where Inga's and Nels' three children were born.

At this time it might appear that Inga and Nels have realised the dream of owning land, albeit mortgaged, and having a family. That is true and her family believes that this was the happiest time of her life. However, the good times didn't last long. It was on this farm that Nels suffered from severe frostbite while hauling a load of grain to market. He was first hospitalized for the frostbite which involved the surgical removal of removal parts of both of his ears. Then he was hospitalized at Alberta Hospital - Ponoka for delirium. His illnesses were so severe that he couldn't work the land and as a consequence they were unable to pay the mortgage which in turn caused the bank to seize their land. That was the beginning of the time of the troubles for Inga and Nels Fimrite.

The Troubles

The tribute called, My Mother's Trunk, written by Olive *Fimrite* Stickney, implies that her father suffered from an infection caused by the frostbite and later died in the country of his birth, Norway. She said that her father was sent back to Norway because he was not a Canadian citizen but these are her memories from a long time ago based on stories her mother told Olive when she was a child. This seemed like an incomplete memory to me because why would Canada deport somebody in the early century simply because they were not Canadian. In the early century Canada, and especially the prairies, were full of new immigrants many of which would not become Canadian until there was some reason to do so. Canada, like most countries, could refuse entry to someone or put them in quarantine when they entered the country with an illness. But would Canada send Nels Fimrite back to Norway? He had already started a family in Canada and, prior to the bank seizing his land, he owned a functional farm (he had the farm before the frostbite incident). There must have been another reason why he was sent Norway.

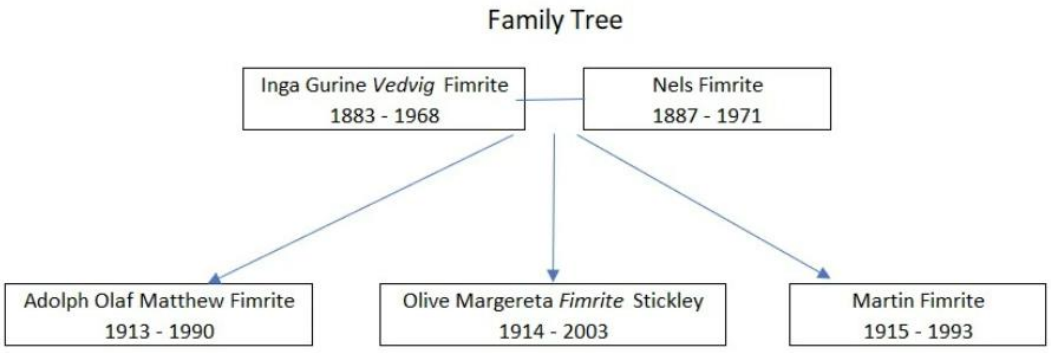
We know approximately when the Fimrite family last saw their father because we're told that Nels Fimrite was home to see the birth of their new baby boy. Olive recalls her mother's story that when her father saw his newborn son he simply said "*Call him Martin*" and so they did and that's why, unlike the other children, Martin has no middle name. Friends used to say that with Adolph having 3 names, Olive 2, and Martin only one, if she had a fourth child he or she would have been just “Fimrite”.

Some readers may wonder why Inga Fimrite didn't return to Norway to be with her husband Nels. We don't have a definitive answer to that question as Inga took the answer to the grave.

Rod Fimrite speculates that it's because Inga remembered the hopeless poverty that she experienced growing up in Norway. She saw no hope for her children if she had returned to the country of her birth. I have to agree with Rod's conclusion as to why Inga Fimrite remained in Canada. Also, Nels had by this time been in and out of hospitals so his ability, or lack thereof, to be able to provide for the family in Norway likely also weighed heavily on Inga in reaching her decision to stay in Canada. Regardless of the factors considered, it must have been a terrible decision for Inga to make and live with.

After Nels Fimrite was sent back to Norway, Inga contacted the American family – the Palmers – with whom she had worked when she lived in the States and they invited her to return, ostensibly to work for them again. Inga Fimrite tried to accept the offer but there were problems in crossing the border into the USA because she didn't have evidence of the necessary funds to support her children. There was some uncertainty as to her status as to whether or not she was an American citizen, although clearly, her children were Canadian. I believe, based on some other documents reviewed, that Inga was not an American citizen because if she were American that country would have been obligated to let her enter despite the fact that her children were Canadian. Those details may be lost to history but they are not important. Suffice it to say that Inga had very few options and none of them seemed very good.

So poor Inga had just lost her husband, the Kingman area house, and land at a time when her children were all under three. What was she to do with no family nearby? Fortunately, there were some friends in the area. The Rorem family invited Inga to bring her children to their Kingman home in order to give Inga some time to figure out what to do. This was a great kindness but it was still temporary. Inga needed a plan.



To the Valhalla Area

At the time that Inga Fimrite was living with her friends the Rorems, a Lutheran pastor, the Reverend Halvar Ronning, was organizing a group of Scandinavian people to travel to the Peace River area of northwest Alberta. I've read other accounts of church pastors and priests going out of their way to either bring people to Canada or to guide them to specific areas such as the Peace River area. In northwest Alberta there was very good land available for homesteading. The hard part was finding a way up there because there were no roads and only one railway that just started taking passengers and freight sometime in 1916. This is why it's been rightfully referred to as the last great west. Homestead land only cost $10.00 at that time so to the nearly penniless Inga this seemed like the only option. The Reverend Ronning agreed to allow Inga Fimrite to join the group traveling north to the Peace River area. In July 1916 Inga Fimrite found herself sitting at the back of a wagon, with her three children, on her way to a new life even farther away from everything she had known before. It was raining and muddy so this made for a rough trip for them in the back of a wagon.

Reverend Halvor Ronning's Marker Image by Ron Thoreson is used with permission.

There were two main routes that this group could have taken to the northwest. Olive Fimrite Stickney says that they took the train from Edmonton to Sexsmith. This is very possible because the Edmonton to Sexsmith line did open in 1916. However, another route that they could have used was by way of the Edson trail. That trail was a difficult journey by horse and wagon but in many ways superior to the other pre-railway alternatives. One advantage of using the Edson trail

would be to reach the Peace Country before the rush of people who also wanted some of the good homestead land in that area. Depending on when in 1916 the train began taking passengers to Sexsmith, this group that Inga Fimrite traveled with could possibly have reached the good farmland before those people who took the train.

At last, they reached the homestead that was to belong to Inga if she could be granted access and then prove it up. It was an excellent piece of land. Centrally located with a school site just across the road. It had minimal amounts of bush to be removed before breaking the land for crops and a creek ran through it so water was readily available. She later learned that the other settlers of her group had refused to claim this choice piece of land because they heard about Inga's sad, even desperate, situation and left the land for her. Here she was dropped off with just a few belongings stuffed into her trunk and three hungry children. They would first winter in a log shack with a sod roof on the nearby Ronning land and then in the spring Inga and her children moved into a tent on the homestead land where they would live until a house could be built.

The Plan

Inga Fimrite was a tough woman but homesteading was no small task. Many a bachelor has tried and failed to make a go of it. Usually, bachelors quickly and desperately sought out a wife to help share the work. Regardless of whether the homesteader is a man or a woman, homesteading was a task for two. How would Inga manage while caring for these children? This must have seemed like an impossible task to her and to those around her. During the journey to the Peace River area, Inga met many of the other people who would be settling in the same general area. They were part of the same Lutheran congregation so they were a community. She knew that in this community there were many families but the group also had plenty of bachelors. No, she wasn't scouting for a husband; she was forming a plan. Those men who were living on their own had no one to bake bread, wash clothes and even iron the occasional shirt needed for Sundays. Inga decided that she would exchange her labour for theirs to do the heavier farm tasks. We know that the plan was successful because by the fall of 1917, she had lumber from a mill and her house was one of the first frame houses in the district. Inga and her children had a home! Next came rough sheds for the animals, the first barn, and eventually the beautiful barn that I photographed. Her barn remains on that land to this day. My photos of it show the upper-level dormer-style window that still gives it a touch of class rarely seen on barns. It is one of the more beautiful among the many beautiful barns in that part of the province. Now with land, a house, and a barn, Inga was on her way to being a successful farmer but even successful farmers have hard times.

Life on the Farm

Sometime in the late 1920s or very early 1930s, Hilda, Inga Fimrite's niece, was sent out from Norway to Canada to help Inga on the farm. Inga hired a prosperous local farmer, Lyman Rorem to go to Sexsmith with his car, (one of the few in the district) to fetch Hilda from the train. That

worked out well – for Hilda – because she and Lyman married and raised two sons, Torgerim (Ted) and Marvin. I don't know if Hilda was still able to help Inga.

This image of Inga Fimrite is from South Peace Regional Archives, circa 1930.

Olive Stickney recalls a story that her mother told her about the time that a cow wandered off.

There was that one dark night when the cow strayed. We had to have milk, and as I recall she put us on a blanket on the floor, hid the matches for fear of fire. Then out she went into the dusk to search. There were no fences – only trees and darkness. Soon she was lost in the night. For hours, she wandered in circles until finally she saw a light. She called, was recognized, and soon was drawn out of the darkness. It was two in the morning and only because there was sickness in the home did [they] have a light. She was so confused, they had to lead her home, to three small children asleep with tear-stained faces. This was the only time anyone saw her break down. She, who had endured so much fear, knew wat we had gone through before sleep came. Kind neighbours brought the cow home the next day.

Olive Fimrite Stickney - Unsettled Pasts page 247

Barn on the homestead of Inga Fimrite. The building to the lower right could be her house.

Ploughing could be an adventure on a homestead. One day she stopped her horses at the far end of the field and looked toward the "Big Trees". Lurking in the bushes a few rods from her was a cougar. She was terrified: all the more so when it inched toward her and the horses. She unhooked the traces and turned the horses toward home. Speaking reassuringly to the nervous animals, she dared not take her eyes off the beast as she backed up step by step. The cougar followed at a few yards distance and, not until the buildings came in sight, did he slink away. Turning, she raced the horses for home.

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Dealing with lost cows and stalking cougars may seem overwhelming to some people, but for Inga, this was possible because she had land and a farm. How was that possible when it was technically against the law? In the next part of this blog post, we'll discover how Inga conquered the Canadian laws and regulations that might have thwarted her plans.

The Rest of the Story

The tribute written by Inga Fimrite's daughter is very beautiful and well-written but it leaves as many questions as it answers. It was a tribute rather than a biography so the omissions are by no means a deficiency in Olive's account of her mother's life. However, I wanted answers. I checked with the South Peace Regional Archives and obtained a copy of the timber permit that Inga Fimrite used to obtain the wood for her house. The writing on it is difficult to read but appears to be from May 1917. The next stop was the Provincial Archives of Alberta. This is where I typically go to obtain copies of homestead agreements. Often, they contain little new information of use but occasionally there is an unexpected note or letter. Inga's homestead file fit into the

latter category as there were a number of very informative letters and notes. Sadly, many were barely legible but after playing around with the focus on the microfiche machine, and the darkness feature of the copier, I managed to squeeze some answers out of some of those historical documents.

"Woman Applies for Permission to Make Homestead Entry"

Along with the Fimrite homestead documentation, I found a letter from the Department of the Interior dated October 4th, 1916 that provides a lot of information not stated in the local history books. I have transcribed substantially all of it. It's a statutory declaration with the heading "Woman applies for permission to make homestead entry." It seems that they were at a loss as to what to do with Inga Fimrite's application to homestead. The problem was her status. The homestead regulations were clear and unambiguous. The bureaucrat's job was to ensure compliance with the regulations. They permitted any male aged 18 or older, or any widow, to obtain a quarter section of land for $10.00 with the condition that they had to build a dwelling on the land and reside there for at least six months of the year for not less than three years. During this time, they had to bring 15 acres under cultivation (I believe the number of acres varied depending on the date and location of the land). So, what was the problem? Well, everything that I've read to date implied that Inga's husband Nels Fimrite had died and that Inga was a widow. That was not quite correct or complete as I've discovered from the letter. The bureaucrats couldn't see how they could allow a woman, who was not legally a widow, to apply to homestead on the land. Technically such an act was against regulations!

Look for more on Inga's story in our Fall Newsletter.

Summer is brief, gather ye wildflowers while ye may.