

Peace Country Historical Society
Box 687 Station Main
Grande Prairie, AB, T8V 3A8



September 2023
The Autumn Issue
Volume 13 - Issue 3

Promoting, Preserving, Publishing Our Heritage



High Bush Cranberries Masquerading as Little Red Maples in Mid-September

Upcoming Autumn/Winter Events

(Full Details will be posted on our Facebook Forum Page)

Remembrance Day Event to be held on November 8, 7:00 PM

Christmas Event to be held on December 10, 2:00 PM

Podcasts for Fall/Winter, Topics to be Announced

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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Contact Us

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Get in the game...

Contact us early with a submission idea for the Winter Edition of our PCHS newsletter!

Index

Upcoming Events	1
Index	2
Vice-President’s Message	3
Podcast Topics Requested	6
Surveying the South Peace	7
Recent Events and Travel	15
Inga Fimrite, Valhalla Pioneer	22

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.



Treaty and Land:
The foundations of Settlement and Settler culture.
Duff Crerar

Although most of the very first settlers in the Peace Region respected and cooperated with the indigenous people who had been resident since time immemorial, few who came later had very much interest in the indigenous political and legal background to settlement, and eventually, land patents.

With getting housing, first gardens and crops, and proving up their claim, and always with the thought of the next winter coming on, there was too much work to do. While fur traders depended on the goodwill and continuing collaboration with original inhabitants and, indeed, with the very ecology of the region as it was, the settler agenda was to develop, or, in their language “improve” that land with plow, road, and railroad.

In the Peace Country, though, none of this could even begin without the implementation of two centuries of tradition, history, and law. Canadians and the British before them had learned that land surveyors and agents could not simply walk onto the Grande Prairie and begin making lines on the land. Beginning in 1763, the King of England had decreed that in British North America land would only be secured for settlement by treaty with the indigenous residents, their tribes and territories treated as virtual nations. The principle behind the Royal Proclamation of 1763 was accepted by the Canadian Government at Confederation, though events would prove that Ottawa would take a more cavalier attitude to honouring indigenous sovereignty than London. What followed, along with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, was a sequence of numbered treaties across the prairies, establishing access to the land for surveyors, reserves, and other aspects of acquiring the land from native peoples.



1876 Metis Scrip

Issued at earlier treaty signing, the later scrip of 1899 had the value inscribed and registered on each location depending on the value needed for recipient or family.

Courtesy Library and Archives Canada / Wikimedia CC)

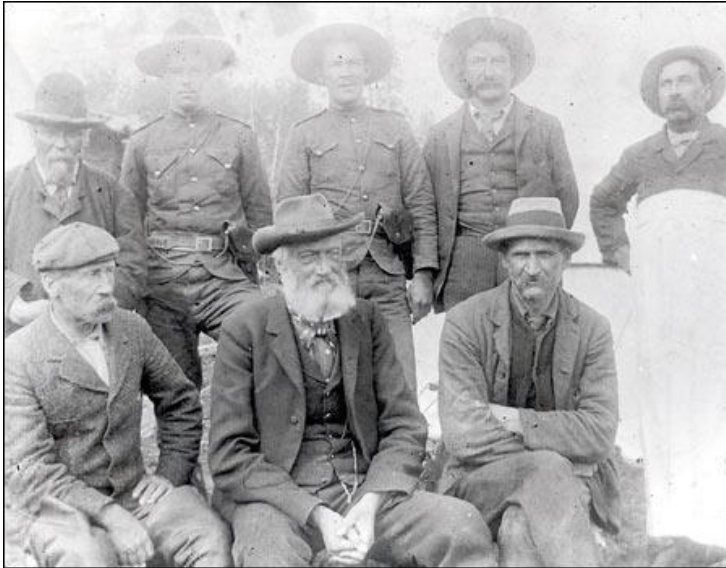
The Canadian Government was in no hurry, however, to send Treaty Commissioners North into the Peace Country. Treaties cost the Dominion money and added to the burdens of government policing and other services. Ottawa considered the people best left as they were, assuming self-sufficiency was the norm.

Trouble was, thanks to the Klondike gold rush, indigenous self-sufficiency was already under threat.

If the fur trade from time to time had caused conflict and sometimes devastated local animal populations,

the attitude and sometimes lawless behaviour of those pushing through the Peace left indigenous people feeling threatened. To many of their leaders who found themselves in the paths of such intruders, it was time to ask Ottawa for a Treaty, for a treaty brought as one of its benefits the provision of the Northwest Mounted Police, and some legal protection.

As word of the agricultural prospects for the Peace, the last undeveloped section of the Canadian Prairies, spread, attracting the interest of settlers and speculators, Canadian officials arrived in 1899, and by 1900, negotiated what became Treaty 8.



Treaty 8 Commission at Pelican Portage, 1899

Left to right, seated: H.B. Round, transportation manager; David Laird, commissioner; Harrison Young, secretary. Left to right, standing: Pierre d'Eschambault, interpreter; two NWMP constables; Henry McKay, camp manager; and Lafrance, cook.

Courtesy: Glenbow Archives/NA-949-87/Wikimedia CC)

Ottawa heralded the Treaty as a triumph, but locally there were serious complaints and a severe test of indigenous goodwill. There was no evidence that David Laird, one of the chief authors of the 1876 Indian Act (which reduced treaty signers to the status of wards of Ottawa, without vote or status to own their own property, or oppose the instigation of residential schools) ever explained to his audience in 1899, that taking treaty automatically placed them under the limitations of the very Act he was responsible for.



Keenooshayoo

Keenooshayoo addressed the Treaty 8 Commission on June 21, 1899. Credit Unknown. As head of the Sucker Creek band, he spoke forcefully at the gathering and was the first to sign the treaty.

Courtesy Lobstick, Treaty 8 Revisited. <https://lobstick.wordpress.com/treaty-8-photo-archive/>

Those who personally attended the negotiations also complained that verbal agreements about immunity from taxation and interference in their religious beliefs had not been included in the written treaty, which they had been pressured to ratify. Missionaries were caught between regret at their role in supporting the government's duplicity, and hope that the Treaty's final clauses still

would clear the way for their ambition to develop strong, devoted, and literate indigenous churches. Over the next decade, the results of the Treaty, for better or worse, worked themselves out on the land of the Peace. Surveyors moved across the territory, noting the locations of traditional roads, trails, settlements, and graveyards. Land offices opened at Peace River, and in 1910, at Grande Prairie. Settlers moved in, the most adventurous pushing over the primitive trails to claim or pre-empt land, sometimes traveling thousands of miles on the new southern railways to hit the trails for cheap and easily developed land, free of the deep dark forests of the previous Eastern pioneering of their ancestors or drawn from overseas by the need to escape oppression or poverty. To these, the dominant drive of ambition and the quest for independence would be realized when they received the treasured patent: land in their own name. They drove deeply into the region, jostling each other and often those who already had their claims recognized by the surveyors. For the settlers, the Treaty and its stipulations quickly became history. For those under its continuing control, thanks to The Treaty and Indian Act, however, it was the foundational structure of everyday life, for better – and for worse.

A Call for Your Involvement and/or Suggestions

Needed: Input for Upcoming Podcast Themes for the Months Ahead

A new initiative your society executives have been discussing is the addition of professionally produced audio programs on a wide variety of historically related topics. All areas are open for exploration and your input would be welcomed. Several areas to be further explored have been considered, but this should not limit your thoughts on areas of local history that could do with a wider audience across generations. Possible themes: Forestry, Museums, Heritage Fairs, Archaeology, Railways, Civil Defence, Women’s Organizations, Legions, and Local Food. Your ideas for local “broadcasting” in this digital age? Get in touch with your PCHS executive or directors.

TEN DOLLARS AND A DREAM

Text by David Leonard and Suzanne Sandboe

Paintings by Suzanne Sandboe

**Photographs courtesy of Suzanne Sandboe, Miller & Beryl Alstad,
and David Leonard**

Compilation by Pat Wearmouth

In the spring of 2022, a group of local artists and writers presented an exhibition at Centre 2000 in Grande Prairie. The show was a collaboration of people interested in the history found along Highway 59 between Valhalla and Sexsmith.

One story told was about Walter G. McFarlane, a Dominion Land Surveyor. He was responsible for the survey that opened up the Grande Prairie to homesteading early in the 20th century. Thereafter, he too homesteaded along that same highway and lived out his life there.

This is that story. It was originally told in the words and artwork of the collaborators, which are reproduced here. They titled the story "Ten Dollars and a Dream", a reference to the fee required to file on a homestead.



Part of the survey crew. McFarlane is behind the tripod.

Walter McFarlane

David Leonard

On 22 February 1909, the largest Dominion Land Survey crew to ever assemble in Edmonton left the city for the south Peace River Country of Alberta. According to the *Edmonton Journal*:

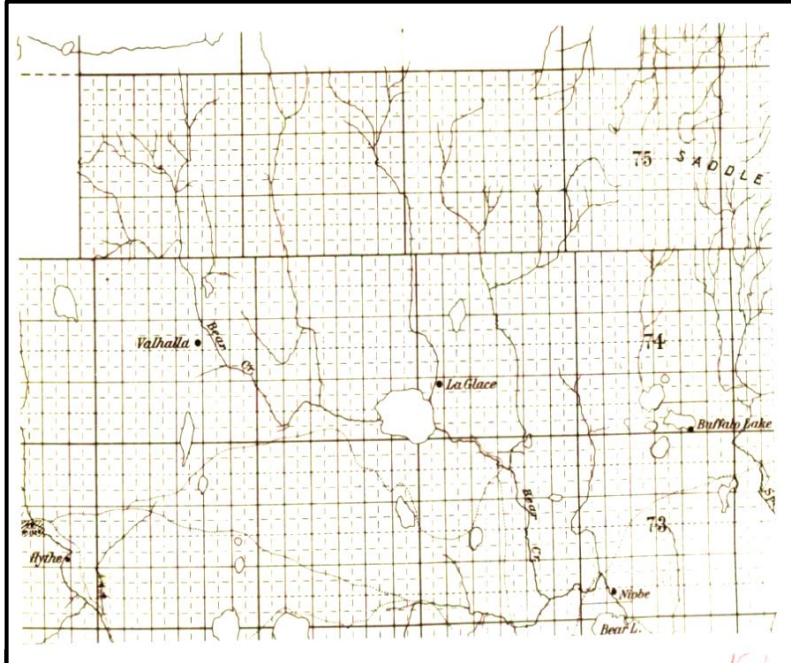
W.G. McFarlane, Dominion Land Surveyor of Toronto, will leave the city today with a survey of thirty men, with 24 horses, 20 tons of supplies, and four tons of iron posts, to subdivide a stretch of country 56 miles long by 18 miles wide, in the Grand Prairie country south of Dunvegan.

The decision to undertake the land survey of the Grande Prairie had been made in response to the announcement by the Canadian Northern Railway that it was about to build a line from Edmonton to south of Sturgeon Lake and proceed west to the Smoky River. From here, it would cross the River and proceed west through the prairie land into British Columbia and, eventually, the Pacific coast.

The rich potential farmland of the south Peace had drawn the interest of the Dominion government since the 1870s. Agricultural settlement had not been encouraged however due to the absence of a railway for, without one, there could be no market economy. Now, to everyone's belief, a railway was at last on its way.

The survey crew was headed by Walter McFarlane, DLS. An Ontarian and a graduate of the University of Toronto, he had professed to be attracted to the prospects for large-scale farming in the Northwest. Upon leaving Edmonton, he and his crew traveled by way of Athabasca Landing, Lesser Slave Lake, Peace River Crossing, and Dunvegan, before setting up headquarters at Spirit River. From here, they departed for the Kleskun Hills in mid-March and began subdividing the first township, TP72, R3 W6, east of the Kleskun Hill. The crew then went on to lay out township boundaries and subdivide the quarter sections within them from east to west.

The Grande Prairie was the largest prairie in the Northwest and therefore it was natural that it was chosen for the largest surveying project. The base lines and meridians had already been plotted, as had the quarter-sections in TP71 R6 W6, containing the future City of Grande Prairie. What was now needed was to undertake the remaining townships. This was necessary to facilitate homesteading by incoming settlers, one quarter section of land (160 acres) then considered the ideal size of a small family farm. Indeed, in May 1909, a Peace River Land Office was established in Grouard to accommodate this.



Part of McFarlane's survey from a Topographic Survey of Canada map, 1916.

McFarlane completed his season's work in December and headed back to Edmonton with his men, leaving his supplies in storage at Flyingshot Lake and Lake Saskatoon. Altogether, they had completed 1,335 miles of survey line on the Prairie. This included the outlines of 37 townships or portions of townships, with the quarter-sections of 17 of them subdivided. Only Kleskun Lake, the Kleskun Hills, Saskatoon Mountain, and a portion of land south of Lake Saskatoon remained untouched. In the spring of 1910, he and his crew were back to finish their work. As they did, settlement exploded, with 2,675 applications made for land on the Prairie by the end of 1914, with a railway still on its way.

Note: the 17 townships above were surveyed into 2,448 quarters for homesteads!

Walter G. McFarlane, B.A., B.Sc., D.L.S., A.L.S.

Acrylic Paintings by Suzanne Sandboe

Acrylic Paintings and Text Below by Suzanne Sandboe

Walter G. McFarlane was a Dominion Land Surveyor from 1909 – 1912, surveyor of the South Peace and BC Block. If you have ever owned land or even lived in the Grande Prairie area, your life would likely have been touched by the hand of W.G. McFarlane who would have surveyed the very land you stand on. Along with several of his surveying crew, who also did the same, he also took up a homestead in the Buffalo Lakes area in 1911. He happened to be my closest neighbour and he and his family and son, Graham McFarlane, were very close family friends.

Born Sept. 28, 1875, in Ontario to parents of Scottish descent, and educated in mathematics at the University of Toronto (B.A. degree 1902) and the Ontario School of Practical Science (B. Sc degree 1904), W.G. McFarlane became a Dominion Land Surveyor (D.L.S.). In 1906 he earned his DLS certification and he surveyed in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and southern Alberta. In 1907 and 1908 he surveyed in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and in 1909 he was awarded a contract to survey in what is now the Grande Prairie area.

As a result of his surveying of the “Grande Prairie” in 1909 and 1910, the Edmonton Journal wrote on Feb 22, 1909, “W.G. McFarlane, Dominion Land Surveyor, of Toronto, will leave the City today with a survey of thirty men, 24 horses, 20 tons of supplies and four tons of iron posts, to subdivide a stretch of country 56 miles long by 18 miles wide in the Grande Prairie country south of the Dunvegan,” the largest section of country yet to be surveyed in the north altogether completing 1335 miles of survey line. He was the most prolific surveyor in the history of the Peace River Country. During 1909 – 1910 he surveyed 18 townships, parts of 11 others, and the boundaries of 10 more on the Grande Prairie which set the stage for the land rush of 1910 which shortly followed. Also included was a portion of land on the Smoky River flat near the mouth of the Wapiti where the Canadian Northern Railway had just surveyed its proposed route to the Grande Prairie and where Maynard Bezanson had begun farming.

He returned to Edmonton to a hero’s welcome and the Journal wrote “Opening the New Empire of the Last Best West,” ran the headlines stating he had completed what was probably the largest subdividing contract ever handled in Alberta by one Dominion Surveyor. The completion of this work marked the opening of that portion of the province which had been fittingly termed the “Last Best West” to which thousands of settlers were expected to settle. For a fee of \$10.00 they could file for a homestead for a quarter of land. Hence the title for our art show “\$10 and a Dream.”

The second survey continued in 1910 and included the districts soon known as Teepee Creek, Sexsmith, Buffalo Lakes, La Glace, and Valhalla. He wrote that he was confident that there will be a large immigration to the Grande Prairie Country next year (1911). As a result of the survey almost all the “Grande Prairie” was available for homesteading.

Throughout this time Walter brought in registered Holstein Friesian Cattle in 1912 and registered horses, mainly Clydesdale mares and stallions as well as three other stallions (Shire Hackney, Percheron, and standardbred). Many of the dairy farmers in the Grande Prairie area purchased Holstein bull calves from McFarlane to improve their herds and many people brought their mares to make use of the Clydesdale and Hackney stallions. He excelled as a horse breeder earning many awards over the years for his livestock and was named the top horseman at the 1921 Edmonton Exhibition. Walter was a very active community member, founding trustee of the local Chatham School board, manager of the first Buffalo Lakes baseball team, and a big supporter of athletics donating \$50 to host the first Sports Day at Lake Saskatoon in 1909. He even let his name stand for nomination as the Liberal candidate of his Provincial Constituency. When contracts became available in the area, he continued to survey many roads and town sites. During the off-season, he continued to spend time drawing accurate maps of the many districts he had seen.

Walter married Lillian Dryden, a seamstress for the T. Eaton Company of Toronto in 1906 and together they had four children. Lorna born Sept. 1908, son Graham born Feb. 19, 1913, the first white child born at Buffalo Lakes, and Doris born March 28, 1914. All the children were university educated and after College, Graham returned to Buffalo Lakes to farm with his dad.

1911 Walter built a two-storey frame house and in spring of 1912, he brought his family to the homestead farm. This house burned to the ground in April 1914, just two weeks after the birth of their daughter Doris, so a second two-story log house was built that served the family till around 1948 and which stood the test of time till it was dismantled in the mid-2000s.

1911 a huge barn was begun with Peder Steien and crew setting up the logs. 1912 the hip roof was raised by A.G. Trelle and crew. The barn sheltered horses, cattle, pigs, grain, straw, hay, and sheaves. It stood as a landmark for fifty years, a tribute to the skill of its builders.



W.G. McFarlane passed away in Grande Prairie in July 1948 and his wife Lillian passed away in 1967. They are interred in the Grande Prairie cemetery. Son Graham stayed on the homestead, farming till he retired and passed away in 1997.

This is the Warehouse Building where I found the artifacts from the W.G. McFarlane survey crew. This original dovetail corner building is still standing

on W.G. McFarlane’s homestead farm and was the storage shed for McFarlane’s surveying equipment and animal husbandry supplies. A scouting expedition in 2020 took me into this old building where many interesting artifacts from the 1909-1910 survey of the Grande Prairie were found.

Note the survey tripod on display along with metal fry pan, dinnerware, and kerosene keg, portfolio, drawings, and journals recently found on a historical research find on the original W.G. McFarlane homestead. These items would have been used by the survey crews.

You can read more on Walter G McFarlane in “Grande Prairie of the Great Northland,” pp. 33-50., Buffalo Trails – Tales of the Pioneers pp 56-62. (The Buffalo Lakes History Book) and Sexsmith to the Smoky History Book Wagon Trails Grown Over pp 828 – 829 (The Sexsmith History Book).



It has been my immense pleasure to research and paint about the W.G. McFarlane Survey Crew of 1909-1912. What determined, pioneering spirits they all were. We all have to be thankful for all their hard work and that of our forefathers who all contributed to the opening up of the “Last Great West” on the Grande Prairie.



Rafting on the Smoky

Acrylic Painting and Text, Suzanne Sandboe

This is an image of the W.G. McFarlane Crew on one of their many river crossings in 1910. Note the handmade log raft they are floating on down the Smoky River.

Life was interesting and tough for these pioneering men. They had to be resourceful and use their skills to traverse the land and the rivers albeit with handmade log rafts likely tied together with leather strapping or ropes. They were very tough and possessed a lot of endurance for the hardships that they experienced.

I loved this image and had to paint it, of them floating down the river, survey equipment visible as they rode the currents. W.G. McFarlane is sitting on the left, next unknown, next Ring Reid instrument man, next unknown.

Packing Up from the Riverbank

Acrylic Painting and Text, Suzanne Sandboe



On 9 June 1910, McFarlane wrote, “We commenced work on the Smoky River and are now in Range 9, TP70 along the Wapiti. The country along these rivers is very rough as the banks are at least 500 feet high and there are numerous deep coulees. The work is very broken and scattered.”

Imagine coming into this country on foot, carrying the supplies and equipment necessary to undertake such an expedition surveying the land on these high river banks and rough terrain. The physical conditions very tasking to say the least.

I love this image of the men climbing the Smoky River Hill with their equipment. Note W.G. McFarlane is the gentleman on the left likely carrying what looks like the transit in a bag for the tripod carried by one of his other men next in line who is likely Ring Reid, instrument man. The other men in the picture are not identified, it would be so interesting to know exactly who they are also.



Instrument Man

Acrylic Painting and Text, Suzanne Sandboe

One of the men with the McFarlane Survey crew in 1910 was Ring Reid, here, serving as instrument man. The work was far from pleasant. Outdoors in all kinds of weather and constant hordes of mosquitoes and flies. As the survey lines had to be straight, many sloughs had to be crossed and much bush and copse traversed. In this image the instrument man is waving a hankie signaling to the rod man where a rod should be placed or that the rod is in the correct location. It appears that there could have been different coloured hankies for different signals but that we are not entirely sure of.

The survey chain used by the crew was over 100 ft. long and the instrument man gestured to the rod man where the rod should be placed. Arm straight up when on cue. Or, so much to the left or right where needed. The distant marker (monument) to line up with was determined ahead of time. When the rod was on cue, the chain man would pound in their stake. Then strike out to the next approximate site for verification and staking.

A Note Explaining my Delayed Fall Newsletter: Trouble Brewing at Home

While not as disastrous as losing a fully loaded pack horse in the muskeg, our faithful home workhorse of a mere 30 years, our Maytag washer, needed repair or an alternative. After searching, it seems they stopped making the electrical repair components allowing another decade or two of use. My better half said the retro solution I found in our garage is just too practical, even if it has outlasted even the Maytag by decades. The acceptable new machine has a warranty of only one year, so it's possibly just a temporary fix!



Recent Gatherings and Events of Note



The Old Bezanson Townsite held an afternoon event on Heritage Day, August 7th. Sponsored by the Old Bezanson Archaeology Project and Bezanson History Consultants, with the approval of the County of GP, the guests were escorted on a tour by Wanda Zenner of the original townsite after a lunch of hot dogs and burgers. With rope making and a smithy plying their trades, the quiet demonstration of flint knapping was a nice shady location to take a break from a hot sun and recall that below the foundations of the Bezanson home, original people of the land had also chosen this site thousands of years earlier.

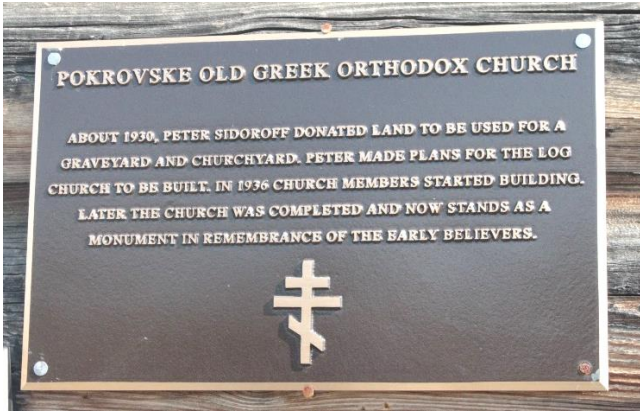


The Treaty 8 presentation by Dr. David Leonard on September 14th explained the need for the agreement, and how the personalities of both sides had few common references to bridge the cultural differences and build the trust required. Many of the same issues remain to the current day.

David had also spoken on Treaty 8 at the South Peace Centennial Museum and Interpretive Centre on June 9th, with engaged audiences at both events.

Our Bus Tour of September 16th through to Hines Creek got us out of the heavy smoke in Grande Prairie, and David Leonard’s narrative covered the early settlements on the road north. The viewing and tour of the early-era Friedenstal Church and its grounds were impressive. The interior spoke well of the early German settlers who had taken such care in its construction.





After a stop at the George Lake influenza mass burial site of 1918-19, it was on to the St. Pokrovske church, with a welcome from Tom and Jean Sideroff, and a tour of the interior.



For a full immersion on St. Pokrovske, search for [A Very Unusual Church - Glen's Travels](#)

A warm and tasty welcome at the End of Steel Museum followed a viewing tour of Hines Creek. The staff had gone all-out to welcome us with not only hot from-the-oven cinnamon buns but even a warm loaf of bread for each to take home from the pioneer bakery oven! They had opened all display buildings and the walkways were busy as we explored the grounds.





Located between the Clear Hills and the Peace River Valley, the forestry, wildlife, and agricultural heritage is well-represented in their display buildings, and undoubtedly many of the local log buildings were brought to form with the broad axes, saws, and tools that now rest in these displays.



The school van made it to the school, then a Chinook blew in. Just waiting for more snow!

Inga's Life on Her Valhalla Farm, Part 2

Excerpted from "Inga Fimrite of Valhalla" by Glen Bowe in Glen's Travels

Editor's Note: Following our first excerpt from the Inga Fimrite story on Glen's Travels at <https://glenbowe.home.blog/> we are adding additional material from Glen's post on Inga. Keyed on her as the central figure of the saga, we would need many installments for the full story, as many photos and family details have been added. Our newsletter, however, has size restraints. For more of the extended Fimrite family story, we encourage you to view his full post, and are grateful for Glen's writing and photography on our region that he is willing to share. Follow the link at the end of the article.

Olive Stickney recalls two stories that Inga, her mother, told her about a time that a cow wandered off, and also a cougar encounter.

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 and 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, that 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 what we had gone through before sleep came. Kind neighbours brought the cow home the next day.

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.

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?

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 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 fits into the latter category as there were a number of very informative letters and notes. 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!

The First Letter

In defence of the hardworking bureaucrats at the Department of the Interior, the second page of the letter did include the recommendation that she be allowed to take up a homestead.

“I came with my husband from the United States to Alberta four years ago. That my husband became mentally deranged and was kept at the Ponoka Asylum for some time and finally released, that he left me 6 months ago and went back to the United States from where he has been sent back to Norway and that my husband never took up a homestead in Canada, that I am the mother of 3 children ages 3, 2 and 1 years respectively, that I am the sole provider of my children, and that I now wish to be permitted to take up a homestead in order to enable me better to support them and myself.”

In support of this, the Rev. S. S. Westby executed this other statutory declaration.

“I am pastor of the 1st Scandinavian Lutheran Church and have known Mrs. Fimrite since March 1916. She has a family of three children the eldest between four and five years of age (note: I have no explanation for the discrepancy in the ages of her children). Her husband became insane and was placed in the asylum at Ponoka. He was discharged from there before Christmas of 1915. He then returned for a visit to Madison, Wisconsin, where he again became violently insane and not being an American citizen was deported to Norway, Mrs. Fimrite has gone to the Peace River district and asks the privilege of homesteading in her own right.”

The Homestead Inspector was instructed to investigate the case but in his letter of the 19th ultimo hereunder the Agent at Edmonton states that Mrs. Fimrite has now gone to Peace River and it will, therefore, be impossible for Inspector Cunningham to report in her case. The Agent puts the following question:

“Is not the evidence of the two Ministers in their declaration of the 26th of July sufficient in this case to allow the Department to decide as to whether or not this woman should be allowed an entry?” Please say what action you now desire taken.

The Second Letter

There was a second letter regarding the Fimrite situation. This one was dated November 9th, 1916 and was written by a homestead land inspector in the Grande Prairie area. It repeats many of the same facts but ends with this comment:

In view of the circumstances attending her case, I would suggest that Mrs. Fimrite be allowed the privilege by wire so that if the land is still available she may make entry.

What a relief this must have been for Inga Fimrite. Had the decision gone the other way she might have run out of options to support her children. I don't think it would be correct to call Inga a feminist. In her own words, she was just trying to survive and feed her family.

“I am the sole provider of my children, and I now wish to be permitted to take up a homestead in order to enable me better to support them and myself.”

Inga Fimrite filed the application to homestead on November 25, 1916. She received patent to the land (ownership) on February 14, 1922. Inga Fimrite could very well have been the very first or perhaps only woman to singlehandedly homestead, i.e., with no husband. I have no way to prove that fact but she was allowed to homestead despite the regulations only allowing widows to homestead and Inga was not a widow. Someday perhaps a historian will be able to definitively say if indeed Inga was the first and perhaps only woman to achieve this.



Inga Fimrite's log structure barn. That upper dormer-style window was a classy touch.

What Does it all Mean?

There is a lot of information in the memorandum by the Department of the Interior and it sheds new light on Inga's precarious situation. We now know that Inga's husband had not died but rather had suffered some type of psychological breakdown and was possibly violent. There's nothing to suggest that he was violent to Inga though. In fact, the reverence in which Inga treats her wedding dress tells me that she never failed to love her husband.

Nels Fimrite spent some time at Alberta Hospital – Ponoka which was a psychiatric facility until 2002 when it was closed by the provincial government. He was discharged from the Alberta Hospital and then, for reasons described only as a "visit", he left Inga and returned to the USA. While in the USA his condition worsened and, according to the pastor's comments on the declaration document above, he became violently insane and the American authorities deported Nels Fimrite back to Norway, the country of his birth. I believe he was sent back to Norway because he was neither an American nor Canadian citizen. It's noteworthy that on the homestead document Inga reports herself as a Norwegian who became a naturalized Canadian, but not as an American.

This finally explains why Inga Fimrite hadn't married again. In the early century the life of a homesteader meant nearly constant work and often excruciating loneliness. Everyone sought out a partner for both companionship and to share work on the farm. That usually meant a spouse but occasionally an unmarried sister also came to help her bachelor brother farmer with work on the farm. It was a mutual need that brought people together and yet Inga remained alone on her land to care for her children. The problem was that Inga was not a widow and her marital status was known in the community. Inga Fimrite actually died before Nels Fimrite (Inga in 1968, Nels in 1971). The dress that Olive refers to in the quote below is her mother's wedding dress that was kept in the bottom of the trunk.

We who had battled the elements and surmounted every difficulty then found ourselves at war. Adolph did not pass the medical examination, but, in 1939, Martin joined the forces. About this time too, my dreams were fulfilled as I stood at the altar in that dress. Over my shoulder, I caught the expression in my mother's eyes of the lost hopes, loneliness, and struggle in her own life, but quickly it was replaced by that brave expression she had learned to wear so well.

Here is another quote from Rod Fimrite and it describes a helpful bachelor who would do work for Inga Fimrite during evenings. It speaks to the strength of social mores of the era and alludes to the fact that if Inga were able to remarry and wanted to, she had no shortage of suitors.

Mr. Henning Peterson was a bachelor farmer and house painter from Poplar Hill, about six miles SE of Valhalla. Mr. Peterson would do work for grandmother and at the end of the day, sit on the back porch and enjoy a glass of warm milk that Grandmother would prepare for him. Dad (Martin) said that Mr. Peterson would never go inside the house ever respectful of the reputation of Mrs. Fimrite, but would sit on the porch and talk to her while he drank his milk.

The situation with Inga's husband was known in the community but Inga had tried to spare her children the hardship of knowing that their father was psychologically unwell. Of course, Nels Fimrite's condition may have been omitted from the local history book because even in 1972,

when it was first published, mental illness was still not something that was often spoken about. This blog post may be the first public place where the full story of Nels Fimrite's problems was explained.

Nels Fimrite's Life in Norway

Nels Fimrite was indeed sent back to Norway, where he worked for many years as a woodcutter at a hospital and later on a wood lot owned by a nephew in Norway. Rod said that Nels was known to walk great distances, likely lost in thought about his wife and children in Canada. As Rod wrote of his grandfather's life in Norway:

During his time there he was visited by Adolph and his family, by Olive and several of her children, and finally by my father Martin in 1968. During that visit Nels said to Dad "now that I have seen all of my children, I can die in peace". Inga died in December 1968 in Camrose, Alberta and Nels died in Norway in January 1971, and they never saw each other after his return to Norway in 1916.

More than 50 years have passed since Nels walked among family and friends but one thing is quite clear even after all this time. His depression was compounded by the sadness of being separated from Inga Fimrite and their children. Inga likely missed Nels almost as much as he missed her (I say "almost" because she had her children and also the hard work to survive gave Inga little time to feel lonely). Two hearts separated by an immense ocean for the rest of their lives. Somebody could make a very fine movie based on the story of Inga and Nels, whose lives were both filled with hardship and loneliness.

Approaching Retirement

Inga Fimrite's family responsibilities were decreasing as her children grew up and began to leave home. She started to back off from farming by reducing her herd of cattle. Inga was very deserving of a less demanding life. However, she used her extra time to give back to the community. This included becoming more involved in the Valhalla Lutheran Woman's Ladies Aid of which she had always been a member.

Eventually, Inga Fimrite moved away from the farm to Hythe to be closer to her daughter Olive. She lived in other parts of the Peace River area but was always close to one of her children until the late 1950s when she returned at last to be near where her Canadian life had begun. I'm not sure why she returned to the Camrose area. Perhaps some friends also returned there and invited her to join them, but regardless, that is where Inga's life came to an end. She was returned to Hythe for burial at the Valhalla Cemetery near her homestead as she wanted.

I have no doubt that if Inga Fimrite were born one thousand years ago, she could have become a shield maiden who fought along with the other Vikings. She was certainly tough and courageous enough for that ancient role. Whether as a shield maiden or a pioneer, Inga Fimrite lived a difficult and constantly demanding life. If a life is measured by what is accomplished, we can unequivocally say that Inga Fimrite lived a good life. She will spend eternity in Valhalla.

For a complete list of citations and the full pictorial post and text, please see Glen's full post here:

<https://glenbowe.home.blog/2023/05/12/inga-fimrite-of-valhalla/>