



## Promoting, Preserving, Publishing Our Heritage



**A Springtime Feast:** Aquatic plants provide moose with delicacies that are high in nutrients, an irresistible treat for moose, especially in the spring. Since such aquatic feeding coincides with the period of antler growth and lactation, a need for calcium, phosphorus, and other minerals is likely.

Though there is no agreement on whether a moose can dive to any great depth, they can swim for miles at Olympic speeds. They are equipped to easily feed underwater, with nostrils that can be closed to prevent their large nose from filling with water as they graze on pond bottoms.

### **Upcoming Spring/Summer Events – see details on [PCHS Forum | Facebook](#)**

**Additional podcasts are being added for your enjoyment!**

**Our first two video podcasts: the historic major fires from our region, and the organizing of area Royal Canadian Legions are now uploaded (with more to come). Our YouTube channel is up at [The Peace Country Historical Society Podcast - YouTube](#)**

**Open it to view and subscribe, and you will be notified as new podcasts arrive. A notice of community events will be sent to members by direct email, and to the wider public on our [PCHS Forum | Facebook](#) page.**

**Kristi Williams won the free year's membership draw from HSA/PCHS for early renewal by Feb.29!**

**The five eligible monument-leveling winners will soon be drawn and advised by direct email.**

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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- Linda Schofield—Generation’s Reading Theatre
- Janet Peterson—Event Greeter/Sign-in

Contact Us

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Get in the game...

Contact us early with a submission idea for the Spring 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 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.



## **A Family Day Historical Meditation**

*with an invitation!*

**Duff Crerar, Acting President**

I became an historian the day my Grade 6 teacher told us we had to write a history of our own family. It was a 1967 Centennial Year project.

My teacher handed it back and said, “You can do better. Get working”. I was outraged, but I did get down to work. I had to get the dates down exactly and give the sources. I had to have captions on my pictures. Where was the map? Make one. Cut down on the hero-and-heroine worship and talk about the hard times our family went through. I had to ground my story in the earth, air, fire, and water of the history we had lived.

It was a big ticket for a Grade 6-er and I did not get it all done perfectly, but this time, I was told it was better than she expected: I presented something like an historical perspective.

In my second year at the University of Western Ontario, my American History professor told us we had to write a serious history of our family, with a newspaper assignment on the events covered by the press the year my parents married.

This again? Is there some kind of conspiracy among teachers to drive us back on the rocks where our families swam the deadly seas of history? But, this time I found myself asking adult questions because I was swimming the waves of history myself. The Vietnam War, visits to the Moon, pollution, indigenous advocacy, and somebody named Jimmy Carter, a president who promised never to lie. Later, I became a student of Canadian history, learning from J.J. Talman, the dean of Ontario social History, “the story must begin with knowing the land and the people”. we studied from the ground up: surveyor notes, soil maps, forestry and agricultural records, then on to census records, tax rolls, newspapers, anything that illustrated what our folk had mastered to live on that land.

Now, I could see a new pattern almost a universal model of immigration and family history. We used to think of ourselves as little nuclear families rooted in one place for generations, in a romantic past in the “old country”. Once in Canada, we stayed put, until our third generation or so moved on to the nearest city, got a higher education, became “progressive”.

But now I could see that we were almost always on the move. Our last place was not the first place we settled or put down our roots. Our families moved every second or third generation, feeling pushed out of the old home, maybe even our first home in Canada, pulled by the lure of other prospects usually further West, or rather, North-west.

Our parents, grandparents, and further back had plans and strategies for their growing families. Often, we historians could pick out what their strategy was, generation by generation, both from our study of land and people, especially their wills. The study of what grandma and or grandpa worked out by firelight when the kids were asleep, looking at their children's future in an ever-crowded place, taught us what some demographers called "the Canadian family strategy".

Of course, the general plan was not unique to Canada: every migrating family or individual throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Australia to Africa usually had a similar strategy. We were a population from Europe on the move: then, in one, two, or three generations, we were on the move again. A family that was captured in the 1861 census would be gone in 1871. Where were they? Why or how did they 'disappear'? Were there any 'rules' to this transiency? What had been the 'push' factor? Or, what had been the 'pull' factor? How were the forces of history moving our forebears around? Did this almost universal transiency actually succeed? Was it fear of falling behind? Was there an assumption that to stand still was to lose? How can we find out?

And so we turn to family history, genealogy, and the ties that bind. These are the fundamental stories that the bigger story is based on. Probably the very first history was family history, followed by explanations of how the bigger world influenced them, and how our families tried not to become driftwood on the waves of history by being what David Gagan called "hopeful travelers".

Do you ever ask the same questions? Have you found some answers, or are you perhaps still looking? Who would you ask? What would you read? Where would you look for more answers? Are you interested in finding out more?

Here may be an opportunity for you: Our local Genealogical Society, in collaboration with the Peace Country Historical Society, is hosting a workshop on Sunday, from 1 to 5, 7th April, in the Community Room of the Grande Prairie Public Library. Admission is free, just let us know you are coming so we can plan some refreshments. Watch for the email and telephone contacts following here, and in our advertisements, or contact one of these two societies.

Four speakers are lined up, with time for questions and answers between each, sharing their work with different sources of family history. Joanne Gontar will be presenting, based on her research with oral history – and DNA research - the way that Sturgeon Lake Reserve became a hub for a wider indigenous community. I will be presenting some of the historical forces influencing many coming to the Peace up to the Great War. David Leonard will be providing information covering the era between the wars, while Dr. Bob Irwin, from MacEwan University, will be taking us into the era of the Second World War and the boom that followed.

Why not bring your own genealogy questions and join up to put our heads together? Whatever your family story, none of us came here by accident. Perhaps we can dig deeper and figure out more about how and why. *(Join us, even if you are late to respond, we'll find you a chair.)* Ed

# Finding Home in the Peace Country

## THE PATHS OF OUR ANCESTORS

Come and hear how historical events affected family migrations that eventually led you or your ancestors to North America, Canada, Alberta, and the Peace Country. **Four historians** will lead us along a timeline that describes how these events unfolded.

### HISTORIANS

**Joanne Gontar**—the many paths taken to found the Sturgeon Lake Indigenous community.

**Duff Crerar**—the push and pull of historical events.

**David Leonard**—factors that drew people to the Peace prior to WWI

**Bob Irwin**—later developments that continued to pull people to the Peace.

### Please REGISTER

with Email Pat: [wearmo@telus.net](mailto:wearmo@telus.net),

prior to **March 28th**

- Indicate your attendance at the seminar
  - Also please let us know if you would like to attend a post seminar supper at a local restaurant with the historians for further discussion.
- Supper would be at your own cost

**SUNDAY, APRIL 7TH**  
**GRANDE PRAIRIE PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
**1:00 TO 5:00 PM**

While admission is free, we kindly ask for a donation to support local history



**A CO SPONSORED EVENT OF THE PEACE COUNTRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND THE GRANDE PRAIRIE DISTRICT BRANCH OF THE ALBERTA GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY**



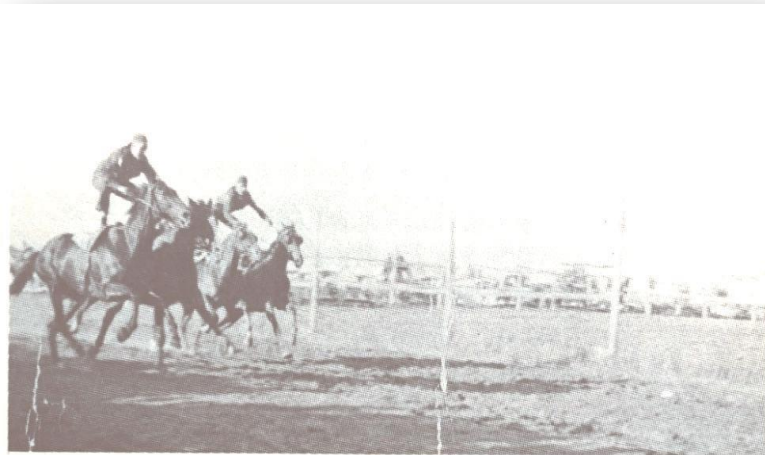
# Benny Lightfoot

## Local Legendary Horseman

Wanda Zenner – September 2021

Benny was born in 1930 in Spirit River to George and Mary Lightfoot. He had five brothers; James, Leonard, G. Edward, Howard and Robert and one sister. The children attended school at Spirit River until the family moved to Grande Prairie in 1942. Once settled in, Benny and his siblings furthered their education at the Grande Prairie School. By the time he was 14, Benny was jockeying for Ewart Ellis who owned and operated a livery barn on the corner of 101 street and 101 avenue. When he wasn't riding horses, Benny managed Billy Salmond's cattle operation. The Silver Crest Lodge (11902 – 100 street) is currently located on Salmond land. Mr. Salmond also had a grazing lease south of Grande Prairie on the Smoky River where he pastured his cattle during the summer months. In the spring, Benny would drive the cattle down Clairmont Road (100 street) south past the familiar sites (at that time) of the Post Office, Bird's Store and Joe's Corner Coffee Shop. It wasn't unusual to see cattle wandering north through town coming home on their own for the winter.

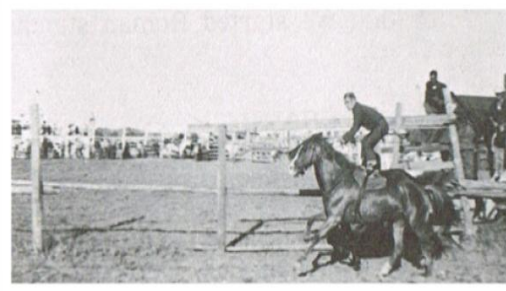
In 1949, Benny started jockeying outside of the Peace Area in the "B" Circuit of central and southern Alberta and into Montana as well. Benny was still riding Mr. Ellis' well-known thoroughbreds; Miss Havoc, Bobby Moore and Safanad.

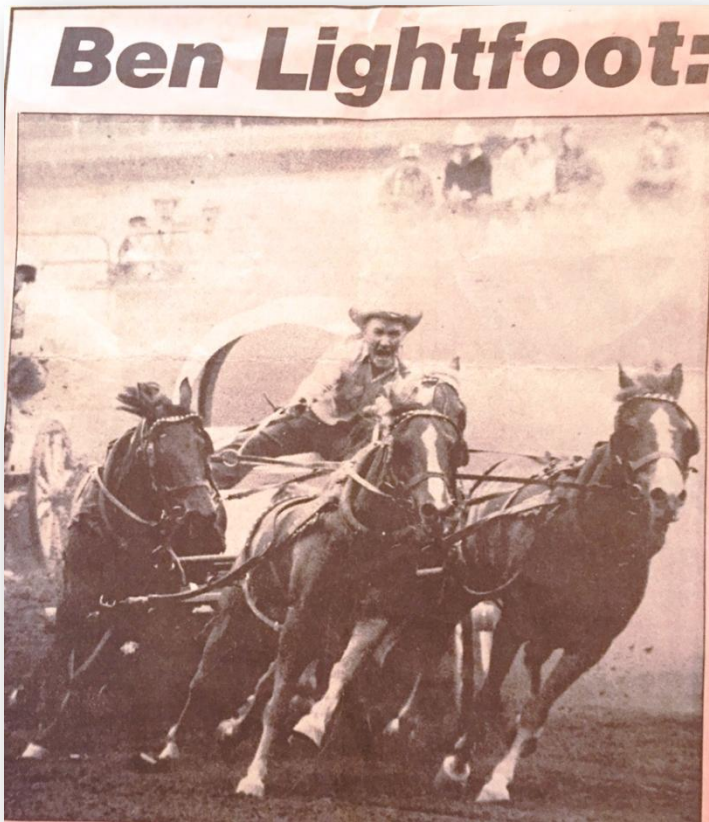


Benny Lightfoot and Don Hawkes, Roman standing, 1955 at Teepee Creek sports.

In his early 20's, Benny lost all the fingers on his left hand in a power-saw accident; however, he never let the accident deter him from his love of racing horses. Benny was very successful and later bought Miss Havoc and Bobby Moore and raced them "***Roman Standing***". Roman

standing has a simple technique – take two horses, strap their bridles together with a two-foot strap, place a pad on each horse's back that is secured by a strap around the girth, hold the reins and place one foot on each pad and race. It was a very exciting event for the large crowds who came specifically to see





Benny and anyone else who would race against him. Benny also competed in the Chariots and the Free-For-All at Grande Prairie, Teepee Creek, Fort St. John and High Prairie. When Mr. Ellis passed away in 1955, Benny purchased Gold Saffron and Prairie Gold.

Benny moved to Glen Leslie during his racing years. He worked alongside many other local young men on Art Patterson's threshing crew. In 1956, he purchased his own farm which had been previously owned by Nels Meyers (SW 21-71-3-W6). During this time- frame, Benny not only also assisted with the yearly organization of the Bezanson Stampede but competed as well.

For a decade or more, in addition to farming, Benny raised racing ponies that were a cross between Quarter Horses and Welsh Ponies. He harnessed the fastest of them for Pony Chariot and Pony Chuck-wagon events around the area. Once again, he proved to be the master of the track.

In February 1958, Grande Prairie received its charter as a City. For the historic event, the City arranged to have Henry McCullough, a northern game guide, to reenact pioneer days by making the 9-day trip on horseback. The Charter was presented to Mr. McCullough by the Premier on the steps of the Alberta Legislature. following which, Henry began his long, cold journey home. Benny Lightfoot and Norman Hollingsworth led the horse escort from the 4-mile corner into Grande Prairie. Although it was a bitterly cold day, many people still lined Clairmont Road to witness the special event.



*Benny Lightfoot and Norman Hollingsworth leading the horse escort as Henry McCullough brought the charter into the City of Grande Prairie, February, 1958.*

Benny was also a well-known prankster. On one occasion, he manipulated a picture of Robert McPhee into a “Wanted Dead or Alive” Poster with a reward of \$500. He then nailed it to a post on the main trail to Grande Prairie where it would be visible to everyone heading to town.

At various times, Benny served as a director for the Peace River Pony Racing Association. Benny’s success, not only as a competitor but also as a horse breeder, made him an important figure in the racing community across the Peace Country. In later years, Benny lived on NW 31-71-3-W6 across from the Glen Leslie Church. Benny passed away in 1986 and was buried at the Glen Leslie Cemetery.

#### **Reference**

Smoky to Grande Prairie History Book

Larry Fells

Newspaper article

Photo of Benny Lightfoot Roman Standing provided by Dave Sorensen Pictures –

Wanda Zenner Collection

## **Asiatic Invasion on the Grande Prairie**

**David W. Leonard**

In light of recent horrific attacks on people of Asian descent across North America, we should not forget that this is, historically, not a new phenomenon. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “yellow peril” was very much a part of the popular imagination, resulting in racial discrimination, some violence, and even legislative measures such as the Chinese ‘Head Tax.’

The feeling was manifested even in the frontier village of Grande Prairie where, in 1914, a second newspaper made its appearance. This was called the *Frontier Signal* and was edited by one G.R. Wilson. Its principal investor was William Rae, whose Argonauts Company had established the townsite which was incorporated as the Village of Grande Prairie in April, 1914. The Municipal Reeve of the new village was John B. Taft who was about to be elected as “second principal” to the short-lived district “brotherhood” of the KU Klux Klan.

In September 1914, the following item appeared in the Grande Prairie *Frontier Signal* :

The Asiatic invasion has reached here. A Chinaman came in on the stage a short while ago. It is true that one swallow does not make a summer, but it is equally true that this Oriental gentleman will be followed by a horde of Asiatics, yellow, brown and black. What is going to be the attitude of the people of Grande Prairie towards these races? Not a day passes on any part of this Edson trail, but what you meet but men taking the long journey looking for work. We believe there will never come a time when there are not sufficient whites to do all the work offering, and we are convinced that it is the duty of the residents here right now to get into the heads of all Asiatics who may have the least intention of locating here that it would pay them to reconsider the matter. There are quite a number of settlements scattered throughout the west where Celestials have made only one attempt to camp. We hope to see Grande Prairie added to this number. We have all respect for these gentlemen and admire their great virtues of industry, perseverance etc., but we wish to exercise our admiration with the Pacific Ocean between us.

In 1917, Rae would win the riding of Peace River (which included the Grande Prairie) as a Liberal in the provincial election held that year.

*Editor’s note: Though the quoted article from the Frontier Signal arose before the “Spanish” Flu of 1918, the Chinese xenophobia shown in the recent epidemic was a sad and repellant result of the too-common habit of vilifying the “other”. “Celestials” was a common ethnic slur for Chinese people emigrating to the UK, USA, and Australia during the 19th Century.*

# The Johnston Trail

## *The History Behind the Johnston Trail*

*Text and photos by Wanda (Johnston) Zenner, March 2020*

Many residents in the area have not only heard about the **“Johnston Trail”** but have used it extensively as an excellent hiking trail or for other recreational activities. As the trail possesses a spectacular view of the Smoky River, It is one of the most beautiful scenic trails in the area. However, not everyone knows where the name came from and it has on occasion even been referred to incorrectly as the Johnson Trail. It was actually named after the person who had originally constructed the trail – **Willis Johnston**.

The Johnston family has been in the Bezanson area since 1912. When Willis returned from WWII, he purchased a ½ section of land from his father. Willis and his wife, Vivian, decided to enter into a cattle ranching business and began to look for land to lease to have sufficient pasture on which to run their cattle during the summer months. Suitable acres were located on the east side of the Smoky River – portions of NE 18, W ½ of 19, NE 20 and W ½ of 20-72-2-W6. The lease was in place by 1959.



Then a road had to be built to reach the leased land. Willis purchased a John Deer 440 Caterpillar, welded a canopy on the machine, began to clear a roadway of trees, and built a base of suitable soil for the road itself. It was quite a daunting task for such a small piece of equipment. At that time, there was a small convenience store and restaurant located on the north side of the Smoky River Bridge on the east side of the river. The **“Johnston Trail”** began slightly east of that point and meandered northward towards the leased land.

Willis and Vivian enjoyed many years in the cattle industry before Vivian became ill and passed away in 1974. Willis subsequently sold his herd of cattle and did not renew the lease in 1977. Willis was very proud that the road became known as the **“Johnston Trail”** and his descendants are very pleased it is still known as that today.



## A Century in the Skies: the RCAF 1924 to 2024

On April 1<sup>st</sup> 1924, Canada's military was re-structured to recognize the growing importance of the value of aircraft as a major force in the country's defense. The motto **Per Ardua Ad Astra**, "Through Adversity to the Stars" was adopted, and was modeled on the Royal Air Force insignia.

The RAF had been formed six years earlier on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1918, near the end of WWI, by merging two existing services: the **Royal Flying Corps (RFC)** and the **Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS)**, when it had become the largest air force in the world. The newly formed RAF became the world's first independent air force, separate from army or navy control. Its initial strength included over 20,000 aircraft and more than 300,000 personnel, including the Women's Royal Air Force.

In 1914, during the First World War, the **Canadian Aviation Corps (CAC)** was established as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Although it consisted of only one aircraft that was never deployed, it marked the beginning of Canada's aviation journey.

In 1918, a wing of two Canadian squadrons called the Canadian Air Force (CAF) was formed in England and attached to the Royal Air Force (RAF). However, like the CAC, it did not see wartime service.

Postwar, in 1920, an air militia known as the Canadian Air Force was formed in Canada. In 1924, it was granted the royal title by King George V, becoming the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). The RCAF existed as an independent service until 1968 when it was amalgamated with the Royal Canadian Navy and the Canadian Army as part of the unification of the Canadian Forces.

The modern **Royal Canadian Air Force**, formerly known as **Canadian Forces Air Command**, traces its history to the unification of Canada's armed services in 1968. (The term *Royal*, dropped from the name in 1968, was returned to the Air Force in 2011).

It has served in significant conflicts such as the Second World War, and the Korean War, and participated in various United Nations peacekeeping missions and NATO operations. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the RCAF maintained a presence in Europe.

The first three RCAF squadrons were sent to England during the first six months of 1940 — No. 1 (Fighter) Squadron arrived just in time to participate in the Battle of Britain. The RCAF overseas grew rapidly, establishing a strong presence within British formations such as Fighter, Coastal, and Transport Commands. By far the greatest concentration of Canadian airmen served within the No. 6 (RCAF) Group, Bomber Command. Although there would be a total of 48 RCAF squadrons, as well as numerous other units, serving in theatres of war ranging from Europe to the Far East, the vast majority of Canadians abroad served in RAF organizations.

By late 1944, the RCAF peaked as the fourth largest Allied air force with more than 215,000 personnel in uniform, including about 17,000 members of the Women's Division. By the time the war ended, more than 18,000 members of the RCAF had given their lives in the service of their country.

Even the surviving veterans of WWII will soon be gone with the passing of years. Recording their stories for posterity is increasingly more urgent, and rests with the family members and friends who can preserve that important material.

Our previous newsletters have extensively covered the presence of RCAF service personnel involved with the early warning/air traffic vectoring radar station located on Saskatoon Mountain. The bronze insignia at the top of this article is a memento from the station's Summit Club presented to a friend for his service on its executive that now remains a small historic keepsake.

Many personnel chose to remain in the region or returned to settle here when their service ended.

The Lure of the Peace remains strong.



# A Commemorative Research Mystery

Ron Thoreson

In this 100<sup>th</sup> year of the RCAF, there are still some questions that arise when researching local servicemen who gave their lives during WWII or shortly after. We are familiar with the conventional tablet-form grave marker of those who died in service, or veterans who returned and wanted to have the same in solidarity with lost comrades.

The Halcourt Cemetery posed an unusual mystery that caught my attention - first, as a former enlisted member of the RCAF, but also as a generally curious local person who has taken an interest in preserving family markers from a historical perspective.

Who were the two RCAF brothers who rest in adjoining plots? The surname was unusual, and by consulting the Peace River Country Land Settlement Database with further research in Ancestry.ca, I found the Mortwedt family, of Norwegian extraction, who had arrived via the U.S. They settled on land south of Beaverlodge in 1911 before the government survey. To make their homestead official, a neighbour, Mrs. Charles McNaught had to vouch for their continuous residence and validate their application.



Jess Ellis Mortwedt was born in 1911, and John Albert Mortwedt in 1924 in Beaverlodge. Jess may have died in an RCAF aircraft incident on March 12, 1945, in the Vancouver area.

Jess has a non-military marker, and according to plaques of the two brothers produced by **Canadianfallenheroes.ca** and displayed in Royal Canadian Legions, circumstances surrounding Jess' death were never revealed to his family. I hope to get that information from the Archives of Canada shortly to complete his story if family members agree. A volunteer at the B.C Aviation Museum is also doing further research with his network of West Coast military station comrades.

John died on an air mission in the Yukon in 1952, having flown during the war as well. On returning to Canada, he flew out of Edmonton with the 416 (Light Bomber) Squadron until his plane went missing in the Yukon. The aircraft wasn't discovered until 1956, when his remains were interred in the family plot next to his brother, and near his mother who had died in 1939. John left a young wife on his last mission. His then-infant son is now in his early 70s.

In this RCAF Centennial year, putting together the details of their service left me with questions. The War Graves Commission couldn't answer why the marker on John's grave has the inscription facing away from the plot, though they say it could have been family wishes. Standing at the foot of the grave, the marker at the head appears to be blank, with the lettering on the reverse side. It has the traditionally engraved insignia and lettering, but with that unusual orientation.



## Russian Refugee Old Orthodox Families Mark 100 Years in Canada



The 116 family members had arrived in Vancouver from China by CP Steamship Line and were transported in Canadian Pacific Railways passenger cars from Vancouver B.C. to Wetaskiwin, Alberta, arriving there on June 24, 1924. The final leg took them west to Homeglen, north of Rimbey, where they were required to remain for four years.

After this period the settlers were free to seek other areas and opportunities, and even other occupations than as farmer-settlers. In the past century, their progeny multiplied as committed and proud Canadians. Their involvement in their communities and service to Canada has been exemplary.

The beliefs they brought from their homeland are founded on centuries of Orthodox Church history. Though Old Orthodox and Old Believers are sometimes used interchangeably, they are distinct branches of the ancient faith.

The Russian Old Orthodox Church emerged from groups of Old Believers who maintained the traditional church practices but resisted the reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon of Moscow between 1652 and 1666. The Old Orthodox commitment to preserving the old rituals and liturgical practices led to their distinct identity within the broader Orthodox tradition, one that cherishes its historical roots and remains faithful to its traditional beliefs and practices, and the old rituals.

The problem that arose in Canada with the continuity of these church rituals was that they were not only in an archaic version of the Russian language but any recognized priests were generally prohibited from emigrating by the Bolshevik regime in Russia. The church itself had also been forced underground by the regime, and that continued for decades. As the original congregants passed on, there were few to take their places. Not all, but many of the first and second-generation children found their spiritual homes in conventional Canadian churches. A change of venue, however, has not meant their pride in their unique heritage or that their forbearers' values have been set aside.

Those descendants are planning a **Hometown Reunion from Friday, June 28<sup>th</sup> to Sunday, the 30<sup>th</sup>** in Rimbey, Alberta. Congratulations, and with any luck, we'll have some colour photos after the big event!

## Glen Bowe's Photo-Journals: Exploring Today's Historic Peace Country

If you're looking for a road tour in the Peace from your comfortable chair, Glen provides the reader with great photos and the detailed historical back story on many of our local sites, often with a bit of humour. His work fits well with our chapter newsletter content, but to limit the expenditure of trees and printer's ink, I'm sending these your way un-edited as bits and bytes for your on-screen enjoyment.

1. <https://glenbowe.home.blog/2022/11/27/charlie-the-crotchety-pioneer/>
2. <https://glenbowe.home.blog/2023/01/20/st-jean-baptiste-catholic-church-historic-site/>
3. <https://glenbowe.home.blog/2023/07/24/the-little-russian-church/>
4. <https://glenbowe.home.blog/2024/02/13/hayfield-school/>



1.



2.



3.



4.

Photo 1. Charlie Plavin at age 65. Source: Jane W. McCracken, *Overlord of the Little Prairie*. Page 1  
Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta

Photos 2, 3, and 4 Courtesy of Glen Bowe <https://glenbowe.home.blog/>

