



Promoting, Preserving, Publishing Our Heritage



December delivered a series of major snowfalls that decorated the trees for Christmas!

Upcoming Events – see details on [PCHS Forum | Facebook](#)

All PCHS podcasts are being archived on our website's Podcasts page with text descriptions. It will help visitors when choosing which to view. You'll see them all on our YouTube channel as well, with the new Danny Rycroft event video. The earliest two covered local Cold War preparations and the history of the GP Air Cadet Squadron, and difficult to find.

Bookmark our YouTube channel and enjoy:

[The Peace Country Historical Society Podcast - YouTube](#)

2026 Events will be emailed to members and posted on [the PCHS Forum | Facebook](#) page.

More details will be added as planning and participants are confirmed.

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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Grande Prairie
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Join or Renew Membership at:

<https://albertahistory.org/> or
Phone: 1 [403.261.3662](tel:403.261.3662)

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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 join, or continue with our Society.

A Post-Holidays PCHS Update and Look Ahead

On Sunday, February 8th, at 2PM, we'll offer a presentation on ***Early Aviation in the Peace Country*** at the GP Museum. Lloyd Sherk, a retired RCAF pilot from Beaverlodge, has volunteered to speak on such things as: the early use of a plane from Grande Prairie's first airport to detect forest fires; Wop May's medical mercy flight through McLennan to Fort Vermillion; activities on the Northwest Staging Route in WWII; and beyond. As they say, the sky's the limit. Share the poster's details with friends that may be interested.

December 2025 was a very busy month for Generations Readers Theatre, as they provided the entertainment at seven events that were thoroughly enjoyed by the audiences. As well as their PCHS Christmas presentation on Dec 13, GRT also presented to Council for the MD of Greenview and the County of Grande Prairie in an effort to spread the word about the services they offer.

PCHS received a donation in David Leonard's memory from the Francophone community's Smoky River Historical and Genealogical Society in Donnelly, and at about the same time, we received the news release that the province was marking 2026 as the Year of the Francophone. The Francophone-themed St. Isidore Winter Carnival is coming in February, from the 13th through the 15th. Pat Wearmouth has put Mark Collings, a well-known videographer and producer of historical content, in contact with the key organizers about a possible recording of parts of the community celebration, potentially for possible inclusion in a video series for a public release.

The substantial David Leonard previously printed book inventory has been allocated to PCHS to organize for future ongoing sales, as agreed by his family and the South Peace Regional Archives. PCHS will develop a marketing plan to make them available to avid readers and researchers of Peace Country history.

We are continuing our search for an accredited and knowledgeable presenter to offer a spring workshop on conducting and preserving Oral History interviews. Contact any board member if you have suggestions to offer.

We will be holding our PCHS Annual General Meeting on April 26th. Details will follow soon.

Our Podcast full consolidation for both our YouTube channel, and our PCHS website Podcast Archive page is underway. Introductory summaries have been added to give viewers a better preview of the topics covered in each episode. Two of our earliest episodes (Air Cadets and the Cold War) have been included on both sources, and visitors can now find all previous and future episodes through either lookup method. Subscribing with an email address will give you an automatic notice of new postings as they are added.

As warmer weather arrives, we hope to get back on the road again with another of our popular bus tours of local and regional historical interest.

The Mail Has Arrived!



First airmail flight Edmonton to Whitehorse stopped near Grande Prairie, July 5, 1937. Below, the Ford Trimotor, on winter skis.

Early Aviation in the Peace Country

Sunday, February 8th, 2026, at 2 PM

The Grande Prairie Museum, Community Room

Join us for a presentation by **Lloyd Sherk, RCAF (retired)**, on the opening of the North, from bush pilots to barnstormers, mercy flights to search and rescue. The early airmail routes and airstrip construction would define the critically important Northern Staging Route of WWII. It's a big story that will give you a new appreciation of these early pioneers of our skies.

Open to the Public, and all PCHS members and guests. Doors will open by about 1:45, for seating. A small donation to help us cover refreshments and snacks is always welcome but not required.

1 (780) 831-6882



Your interest in local history helps PCHS add more events and presentations to continue Promoting, Preserving, and Publishing Our Heritage. Ask us about becoming a member.

pchs.information@gmail.com

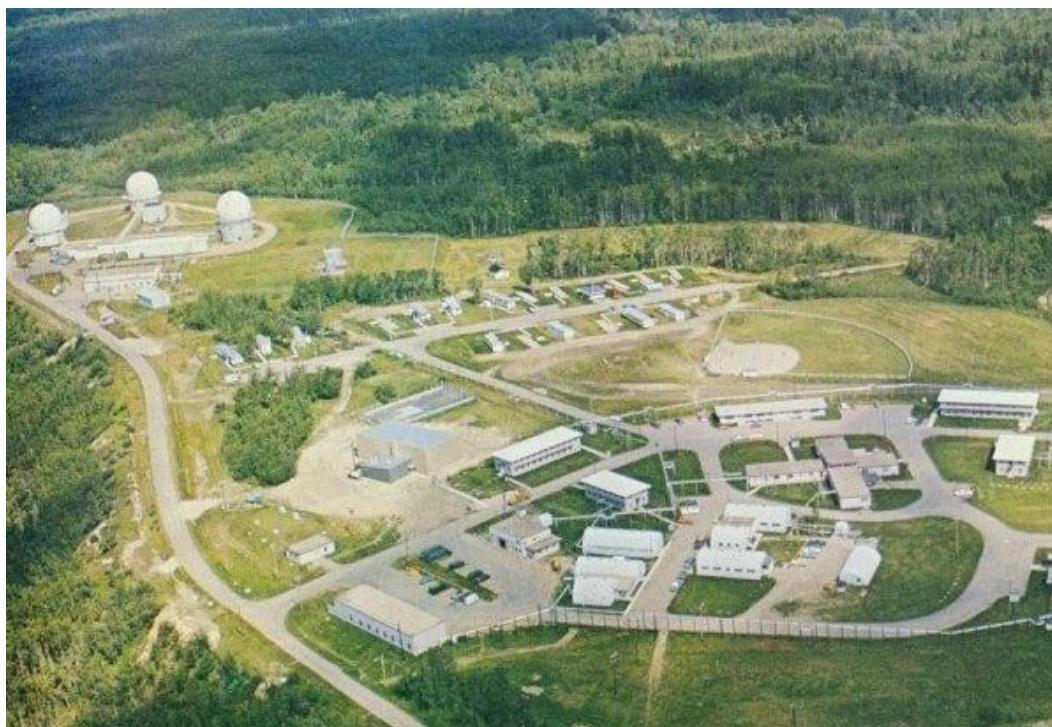


Editor's Message

After 60 Years, Reflections on Life's Choices

PCHS are looking forward to a possible workshop on Oral History to encourage and assist people to record and archive their memories for personal, family or historical purposes. Beyond using audio and video, for those who have memories they want to jot down, the older options are also valuable. I'd encourage you to try your own hand at capturing memories by putting them down to keep on paper or digitally.

Looking back now on the passage of 60 years, and living with the current international turmoil, I wanted to stretch the bounds of historical narrative and pass on my own memories of that era for younger folks. I probably developed my early interest in flight, having spent a childhood in the shadow of the Pine Tree RCAF radar base on Saskatoon Mountain that was built in 1953 by the US Airforce. Southern troops were often a source of funds for local farmers like my father that were called to pull out stuck vehicles from snowbanks or muddy ditches with the farm tractor. Many Canadian airmen had similar driving problems when they shared command, then became sole operators of RCAF Station Beaverlodge until the closure in 1988.



RCAF Station Beaverlodge looking to the northwest. Courtesy Rob Grundy 1975

Having just graduated from high school in 1965, I looked for options beyond farming. In 1966, the RCAF wanted to fill a pipeline to funnel the required numbers of pilot trainees to graduate to wings status. Normally sourced from university grads, the doors were opened to direct entry aircrew officer candidates.

From coast to coast those who passed the rigid health screening and aptitude tests boarded cross-Canada railway coaches that funneled them from Vancouver or the East Coast through to Toronto, then on to London Ontario, and eventually Officer Candidate School at Centralia. Common travel voucher timing meant that during the days of an extended trip, the young men soon made introductions, in anticipation of that common destination.

The high spirits among those selected were in part due to the knowledge that they were already the miniscule few to survive some very rigid aptitude and medical testing. A couple would join our group through graduation from Royal Roads or Canadian Military College, but nearly all of our group were direct enlistment, where Officer Cadets were given an Officer's commission only when they reached wings status. We would be unusual hybrids with a subordinate rank as officers in training.

The WWII era base at Centralia, north of London, was home of the Officer Candidate School, where our intake group of about 40 took our enlistment oath during the first week of January, 1966. We became the Officer Cadets of intake 6601. In addition to classroom courses in aeronautics and navigation, there was drill, inspection, physical training, and leadership development, all on about 5 hours of sleep nightly. In our occasional free time, we socialized as a group, often including NATO trainees that were on the base.



The 6601 OCS Graduating Class: 2 Commissioned Officers, 38 Officer Cadets. DND Photo

After graduation as “90-day wonders,” we were split into two groups. Half would attend primary flying school training on the Chipmunk, a small piston engine trainer. The other half were part of an experiment where the introductory Chipmunk training would be skipped, and flight training would start directly on the CT-114 Tutor jet, commonly recognized today as the plane still flown today by the Snowbirds aerobatic team. For new trainees starting on the Tutor at Moose Jaw, it was a massive immersion in both speed and technology, but choice was not optional for those of us slated for the experimental program.

Possibly planned as a way to cut costs, the training later reverted to the piston-then-jet standard when the results were tallied. Of those in 6601 who graduated to wings status, none were from my direct-to-Tutor cohort.

After driving back West from Centralia there were further aeromedical tests and procedures in Winnipeg that included an EEG, hypoxia and explosive decompression familiarization. A stroll downtown on a free evening, put us near the arrival and a smiling wave from then Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson as he left his limo to attend a TV event, judging by his powdered appearance and unusually rosy cheeks.

It was always in the background of mind, but in 1966 there were several major events in the news on the Cold War front. Leonid Brezhnev came to power in April, and the Chinese exploded their third atomic device, soon followed by the start of Mao's Cultural Revolution in mid-May. For us, the Cold War was just an accepted fact of life.

Although Canada had a world-renowned diplomat and peacemaker as PM, the RCAF still were very busy training Canadian and NATO pilots, and Canada had CF-104 Starfighters staged at bases in Germany. In addition to Canadians, we hosted regular contingents of NATO trainees from countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

While I soon regretted the abbreviated nature of my RCAF service, I had started flying in Moose Jaw on May 31 in typically hot weather, and by June 10th I developed an allergy to my rubber oxygen mask. It led to a break in the middle of my flight training while waiting for a non-allergenic mask material to be sourced, likely in silicone. When I was able to resume flying, it was 17 days later, and the training was expected to continue as if there had been no interruption. It was just one more high hurdle in my path.

As was common, students that had problems in reaching solo status like myself, were offered an alternate path for either air navigation, or air traffic control. Looking back, air traffic control was not a personal ambition, and the math that was central to a navigation career was always my least-favourite area of study. So my course ended with 17:40 memorable hours on Tutors.



Under the terms of the regular forces special program, when we enlisted as direct-entry Officer Cadets, we also had the option, if circumstances changed, to exit the program with an honourable discharge if we so chose. My choice was to return to our family dairy farm, in a partnership with family, as my father had developed some chronic health issues.



Red Knights: Canadair CT-133 Silver Star and the Canadair CT-114 Tutor. DND, Bill Upton Collection

The experiences of new locations, the time in training, and the friends met, remain after the passage of decades. Another who left early became a noted journalist. A later notable loss from our 6601 group, Capt. Brian Alston, was the last Red Knight aerobatic performer. He died in July of 1969, the last of 17 Knights between 1958 and 1969 when the program ended. Bryan was flying a CT-114 Tutor in Red Knight colours. It replaced the last CT-133 that had also been a fatal, occurring only about a year before in May of 1968.

The RCAF history of the Tutor that became the last Red Knight aircraft:

TOS (Taken On Strength): 27 Jan. 1966 Delivered initially to 6 RD in Trenton, ON.

Transferred to Portage, MB as 6 May 1966. Flown by Golden Centennaires Aerobatic Team. Then flown by the Red Knight aerobatic solo team in 1968-69. On 13 July 1969, (the Red Knight) carried out an authorized air display in # **26154** at CFB Moose Jaw. The display had been requested by the Acting Base Commander and coincided with the arrival of a large group of Italian Air Force Officers. The pilot had completed most of his intended flying programme when he deviated from his normal sequence and appeared to attempt a landing on runway 28R near the 2,500 foot mark. During the turn toward the runway the a/c nosed downward, rolled inverted and impacted the runway. The pilot was killed on impact. The investigation later determined that the manual cam actuating shaft fractured causing the Main Fuel Control Unit to jam in the idle position. After determining the cause of the engine malfunction, the investigation focused on why the pilot decided to make a forced landing instead of ejecting. It was concluded that a combination of factors may have led to the decision. The pilot was young and inexperienced, although a very good pilot. He had had a very long day and hadn't eaten properly. He was also under pressure to perform well and not put the show and Red Knight programme in jeopardy. He may have felt that ejecting and losing the a/c would have ended the Red Knight program. The a/c subsequently stalled during the attempted forced landing.

SOS (Struck Off Strength): 17 October 1969 - Cat "A" write-off

Courtesy B Gen T.F.J. Leversedge, RCAF (Ret'd) Kestrel Publications,
<https://caspir.warplane.com/documents/aircraft/200000455-002.pdf>

Sadly, a full listing of all RCAF Tutor aircraft through the years documents many such losses. Tutors have performed in aerobatic shows and related close formation training for decades.

Curious Probabilities and Statistics

I'm still in touch with two of my group who had considerably longer service. For one of them, Ron Knutson, we served as best men for our respective weddings, both of which are now reaching anniversaries in the upper 50's. We struck up a friendship as we both celebrated turning 19 in 1966, just a day apart in early February. He seemed more like a Saskatchewan twin that I had found through the RCAF.

Our close birthdays seemed a coincidence, but one that was actually quite common. Statistically, coincidences are inevitable but often less remarkable than they may appear to us. Usually, coincidences are chance events with an underestimated probability. An example is the "birthday problem" which shows that the probability of two persons having the same birthday already exceeds 50% in a group of only 23 persons.

Our more unusual common ground beyond our shared first name, were Norwegian heritage surnames, and similar family backgrounds. We were both raised on farmsteads that were part of hamlets on our home quarters. We also each had single siblings, both were sisters named Pat, both four years older. That was certainly beyond normal probability. He was the one that had a full career of instructing and flying in the RCAF.

A more recent coincidence which was a product of travel and airplanes occurred when I landed at the Oslo airport on my way to a conference in the north in Trondheim in 1986. With some time between flights, I visited the Folk Museum and the Viking Ships Museum. Returning for my flight, I thought of calling one of the two Norwegian trainees who I had socialized with in Centralia, but could only recall the name of one.

Looking in the Oslo listings, I found a single entry for that memorable surname, but it was for a woman. Though many in Norway are fluent in English, I decided to just head to the gate leading to the apron for stairway boarding. A man was in a family group seeing a person off, and though he looked familiar, his near-white blonde hair topped an extremely dark tan on that cool February day in Oslo. When boarding, I again noticed him in civilian garb chatting with the stewardess at the plane's door. As I got near, I spotted his 767 lapel pin, so I asked him if he had flown in Canada. With his Ja! came the explanation that the airline he flew with spent most of the winter taking vacationers (and him) into Mediterranean sunshine. He also explained that the phone number I considered calling was indeed for his friend, but it was listed in his mother's name.

Granted, Norway had only about 4 million souls in 1986, but on my first arrival it seemed amazing that by a random chance, and after 20 years, I was able to meet one of them in person, and confirm the other's contacts over such a gap in time and distance. They represented the sum total of all my possible social contacts in Norway, and though brief, it remains one of life's happy coincidences.



During special tours and flights, the still undecided trainees were exposed to options that might be chosen on graduation. Multi-engine was emphasized with a memorable flight on a CC-130H Hercules aircraft, usually tasked for search and rescue and heavy lift service. The photos above were from a trip in a venerable CC-129/DC3 Dakota. They were flown from 1943 until retired in 1989. A general workhorse in WWII, it was taking us on a visit to CFB Cold Lake, the home of the CF-104 Starfighter where testing the cockpit space was popular. The 104 was in service from 1961 to 1984. It was an unforgettable experience hearing the unearthly howls echoing across the base, as 104 engines were test cycled.



6601 Tutor Class Graduation

Standing from L 1.Hans “767” Nelson, 2.Haakon Grosvold, Norway, 3.Pellerin, 4.Dahl
 5.**Roger Rivard**, 6.Stene, 7.**Pete Armour**. Front from L, 1.**Brian Alston**, 2.Andersen.
 3.**Jim Dow**, 4.**Ron Knutson**. Six from NATO: Norway, Denmark, Sweden,
 and five **Canadians**.

CFGP - Northern Alberta's First Radio Station

On November 2, 1937, Radio CFGP, 100 watts of power at 1200 on the dial, went on the air in Grande Prairie for the first time. Not only was it the first radio station north of Edmonton but was also the most northerly station in the British Empire at that time. The opening gala celebration was attended by dignitaries from Grande Prairie town, the surrounding region, and Edmonton, with the keynote given by Lt. Gov. JC Bowen "electrically transcribed."

The staff was very small. The first Manager was H.W. Brooker, Music Director Bert Churchill, Announcer Paul Guy, Engineer George Sinclair, and Secretary Margaret Moon. The station was owned by the Northern Broadcasting Corporation Ltd with Cecil Berry as the President.

The station was first located next to the radio tower at 100 Street and 132 Avenue. It was on the air seven hours on Sundays and nine hours on Mondays to Saturdays. Broadcasting wasn't continuous. Sundays, for example, ran from 9 to noon and then in the afternoon from 2 to 6 p.m. Local merchants became program sponsors by advertising the various radio models for sale over CFGP. The radios mostly came with batteries because many did not have power yet. You could choose between wood cabinet mantle sets or wood cabinet console sets.

Before CFGP, people were starting to purchase radios, but they could only get CJCA and CFRN from Edmonton, with heavy static, and sometimes US stations at night.

A big change was that now people in Grande Prairie, and the surrounding communities, could listen to local programming that involved them directly. They could hear area news, weather, and road condition reports several times a day. CFGP had the important role of public service broadcasting within Grande Prairie and the surrounding communities. It provided church services for shut-ins, school broadcasts to enhance curriculum and radio dances to raise money for causes such as for building the Monkman Pass Highway,

They used local talent including Mel Rodacker's "Oldtimers" who played regularly on the radio in the 1940's and 1950's. Sharon Brown Annis remembers listening to them from her childhood home near Bear Lake. Ruth Boyd remembers her family clearing a large space in their house and practicing her dance steps with her family to the radio band. Locally produced radio plays were aired in cooperation with Little Theatre.



The home of the CFGP Radio Station on 100th Street and 99th Ave in 1949. Photo courtesy of The South Peace Regional Archives

People in town could get the announcer to broadcast personal messages to their families in the country, who had no phones. They were kept informed about patients in hospital, including daily updates on their condition and when they'd be discharged. Elvira Grotkowski and Ruth Boyd remember walking from the Wapiti Dorm to the radio station after school to deliver a message to their folks back home. Ruth remembers being warmly greeted by Jack Soars. He would then ask the people to line up so each one could personally relay their own messages over the air. Ruth believes there was a specific time to do this once a week. Margaret Bowes lived on a farm southwest of Beaverlodge and she recalls hearing messages from people who would announce on CFGP that they would be getting home late because of road or weather conditions.

One effective public announcement happened in November 1937, when the burglars of Carl Larsen's store in Buffalo Lake were caught soon after the robbery was announced on the radio.

In 1942, when the Alaska Highway was being built by American soldiers, CFGP gave up to date information on the conflict world-wide and geared the station's entertainment towards the service personnel. On Christmas Day 1943, the all-day broadcast was made up of American Entertainment for the troops including Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Jack Benny, and Dinah Shore. CFGP increased to 1000 watts and now was part of CBC, which brought Saturday night NHL games - Hockey Night in Canada with Foster Hewitt.

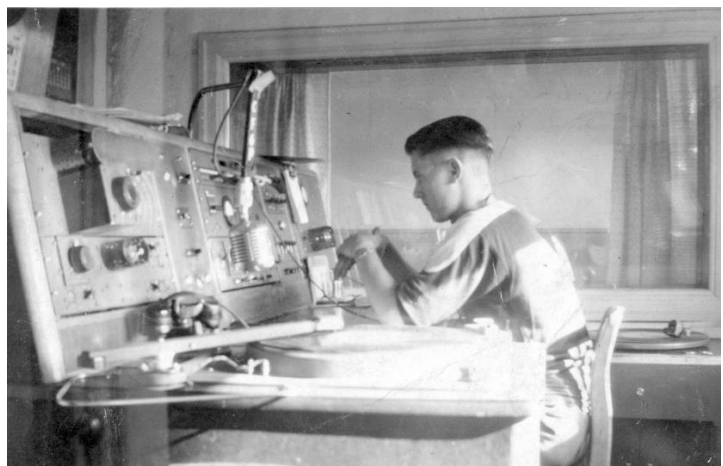
Jack Soars started with CFGP in 1939 and retired in 1982. He was well-known for his Open Line phone-in show that probably started about 1962 and continued until about ten years after he retired. People called in to voice their views on just about any topic. Jack commented that it was referred to as the 'Open Soars Program.' "It got people together. I had regular listeners from every area of the country, and it was a pleasure to talk to them."

Jack had a great interest in the history of the area. He invited local pioneers to send him their memories of growing up in the Peace Country. He converted these stories into scripts which he read on the popular "Pionera" program on CFGP.

Another important figure in the development of CFGP was Gord Percy. He started working there in 1943, at 16 years of age while still in school, and in two years was full-time. With a small staff, he learned to do every job - operate, announce, write commercials, and keep the floor swept. He eventually became Sales Manager and then General Manager.

Gordon Percy started at CFGP at the age of 16 and worked there for 43 years, working up from announcer to General Manager. Here he is at the controls in 1951.

*Photo courtesy of
The South Peace Regional Archives*



“On-location radio” brought thousands of people to historic events such as the Opening of the Smoky Bridge, the Dunvegan Bridge Opening, and the Opening of the Whitecourt-Valleyview Cutoff.

People listened to a variety of programming - Soap Operas; many different types of music from Big Band, to Classical, to Hawaiian, to Western; such favourite programs as Fibber Magee and Molly, Amos and Andy, Buck Rogers, Tarzan and Kate Smith. They could get some of those programs before from Edmonton, but now they were static free. Ruth Boyd recalls listening as a young girl to a weekly show called Inner Sanctum Mystery. She was alone in the house and was so frightened she would not move off the couch until her family returned. Margaret Bowes remembers when visiting her grandparents in Grande Prairie, rushing through lunch so she could see the play “Shondue the Magician” and being so disappointed that it was on radio!

The station moved downtown to the Donald Hotel on Richmond Avenue in January 1938 and then into its own premises by 1941 at the corner of Richmond and 99 Street. It moved into a new building on 103 Avenue in 1963 (now Package Point) and then to Windsor Court in its 50th year in 1987.

Resources:

Fonds 005 CFGP Radio fonds – South Peace Regional Archives, - Records were collected by Gordon Percy and stored at SUN FM, who donated them to the Grande Prairie Regional Archives in 2003, and 2013.

Potpourri: The Voice of the Mighty Peace – South Peace Regional Archives, - Author of the article: Bill Scott: Published Nov 15, 2012

Book: The Grande Prairie of the Great Northland – The Evolution of a County – 1805 to 1952 – by David W. Leonard, pages 214-215.

Book – Spirit of the North – by Mark Kozub, pages 138, 140, and 158.

Interviews with Sharon Brown Annis, Margaret Bowes, Ruth Boyd, and Elvira Grotkowski.

Article by Linda Schofield



Northern Alberta Regional Heritage Fair 2026

New day & date: Tuesday, May 5, 2026 / Registration must be in by April 28th

Website: <http://www.pc-hs.ca> Email: nar.heritagefair@gmail.com

The primary contacts are Susan K Thomson, 780-512-6782 and Kristy Williams, St John Paul II
For additional support, please connect with Charles Taws, Grande Prairie Museum Curator, and Ellyn Vandekerkhove, Executive Director South Peace Regional Archives,

New venue: St. John Paul II Catholic School

8:30 AM Set-up and registration will begin. 9:30 AM: Opening Ceremonies will begin.

2:30 PM Students depart, thank you for sharing your learning!

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE of the NORTH

JOHANNA'S MATERNITY HOSPITAL – Sexsmith, AB

Johanna (Aunt Jo) Rebecca Haakstad was born on June 12, 1885 in Bardu, Norway. In 1888, the family that consisted of parents, Sigurd & Simon along with Johanna and her brother, Hans and two sisters, Ann and Elisa, moved to a farm in Minnesota. Another son, Edward, was born soon thereafter. While visiting a new family in the neighborhood, the children were startled to find out that the young lady of the house was all alone while giving birth to twins. Johanna stayed to help while her siblings ran home for help. Sigurd and Johanna, who was only 16 at the time, delivered the twins without any complications. Johanna was a very versatile young lady and soon found employment in lumber camps and as a dressmaker as she loved to make costumes. Once Johanna gave birth to her own daughter, Thelma, she decided to become a midwife in an effort to assist young mothers.

As farming in Minnesota proved to be impractical, the family decided to move. Various advertising mediums promoting the viability of agriculture in Alberta were reviewed with a decision being made to relocate. The family settled in Bardo (named after the community of Bardu, Norway) in 1906. It was here that Johanna completed her training in midwifery under Dr. McPherson.

In 1918, the family decided to move once again – this time north and settled in the La Glace area; however, Johanna returned to Edmonton and worked as a dressmaker for the Gainers Meat Company. Returning to the Peace District in 1920, Johanna worked as a cook for the Kleskun Lake Ranch. In 1921, Johanna's life was about to change as she embarked upon a remarkable career that would span 37 years.



Johanna's medical bag

Johanna delivered the first baby in Sexsmith, "Graham Howard" to Leonard and Florence Howard on June 4, 1921. The Howard's, who were originally from Ontario, operated the hardware store in Sexsmith for many years. They also managed the post office that was located within the hardware store until the mid-1920's. Graham had a brother, Alfred, who had died in infancy in 1918. Following a move to Edmonton, Graham found employment as a bank clerk. He answered the call of "Duty to Country" in June 1941 and served with the Edmonton Fusiliers (NPAM,) 2nd Battalion as a Private before transferring to the RCAF on October 23, 1941. On a Halifax bomber flight over Kassel, Germany, Flight Sergeant Graham Howard lost his life along with the six other members of the flight crew on October 22, 1943. He was buried at the Schoonselhof Cemetery, Antwerp - he was 22 years old.



Flight Sergeant
Graham Wilson Howard

From that point forward, Johanna became a partner in Dr. Shaw's practice and became the most familiar figure in the area. On horseback, on foot, through blizzards and mud, across sloughs on stone boats, Midwife Haakstad served the growing farming community. She travelled as far as Eaglesham, Woking, Dawson Creek and various locations in between.

Once the delivery was concluded, with or without Dr. Robert Shaw's support, Johanna's efforts did not end with the birth. She would often stay with the family caring for the newborn and mother for 10-12 days or until the mom had regained her strength. During that time, Johanna would also look after the other children in the family plus the father. Johanna had made her home with the *Howard's* at that time and in between delivering babies, she worked at the Howard Hardware and Post Office.

Midwife Johanna then moved to the home of the *Beard* family (near the Anglican Rectory) where she and Mrs. Beard tended to patients. Dr. Shaw passed away in 1927, and a new physician, Dr. Gamey, arrived and soon decided that it was essential to have a maternity home established in the area. Consequently, Johanna rented a three-room shack from Bill Shannon for \$5 a month and opened the doors to the Sexsmith Maternity Home.



When Johanna's daughter, Thelma, turned 19, she began to help with the babies and their mothers. She assisted in deliveries and would often have to run to summon the doctor should he be needed from 8 pm to 8 am as the phone service did not operate during those hours. Johanna moved several times before purchasing *Roy Roberts's* house on 97th street in 1941. It was named the **Sexsmith Maternity Home** but was colloquially known as the **Stork Hospital**. With a fee of only \$1.00 per day, the years were difficult and often the



Haakstad's did not know where their next meal would come from. Often people did not have money to pay, but they would bring something, be it wood, meat, vegetables – whatever they had. As well, the Anglican Women's' Association donated blankets and held baby showers to help secure supplies for the newborns.

In 1934, Thelma married a local grocer, Bob Smith, who was originally from Vancouver, BC. The young couple eventually lived upstairs at



Bob and Thelma Smith, their 40th wedding anniversary.



Thelma in front of Buffalo Lakes Store purchased in 1946

Johanna's. Bob was employed by *Bird's Grocery Cash & Carry* in Sexsmith – a branch of the mercantile firm in Grande Prairie. Thelma continued to assist her mother and Bob, if not working in the grocery store, would be tackling handyman jobs around the hospital. Even after Bob and Thelma purchased the Buffalo Lake Store in partnership with her uncle, Simon Haakstad, in 1946, Thelma continued to assist Johanna at the hospital two or three times a week.

Three mornings a week, the laundry was done on a wash-board followed by ironing. Everything was kept "Norwegian clean" as they say. Babies were bathed and changed and comforted if needed. Cooking and baking were always on-going as snacks that consisted of cookies or cake accompanied by milk or tea, were also provided along with the regular meals. Johanna was famous for her pot roasts and gravy; however, the doctor requested that cabbage, turnips and beans not be served. Johanna had a gramophone on which she often played country music as those awaiting the birth of their babies and those who had already given birth, found the songs soothing and comforting. Members of the Women's Institute would often drop by to discuss the needs of the maternity home and ways to fund-raise. While there, they would often finish handiwork projects, deliver linens or layettes. New mothers would often stop by to show off their babies and enjoy a cup of tea. The maternity home was indeed, a "home-away-from-home" for the patients.

The maternity home had many patients with extenuating circumstances. One lady, the wife of a local businessman, was in such poor health that the first thought was that the baby may have to be taken to save the mother's life. She was one who was unable to consume much in the way of nourishment during her pregnancy; therefore, by the time she came into Johanna's care, she was basically skin and bones. Johanna had specially padded her bed and had taped cotton batting over her protruding bones. That care, along with alcohol rubs, made the patient as comfortable as possible. The baby boy was long and thin when he was born but otherwise perfectly healthy.

The largest baby that Johanna delivered was reported to have weighed 15 pounds – a typical size of a three-month old. Unfortunately, baby Julia Spacil only survived two days as she could not swallow. Born on August 29, Julia passed away on August 31, 1930.

Another monumental birth was that of Gilbert Balderston in 1937. Not only was Gil over ten pounds at birth but he also decided to arrive in the breach position! The family recalled Johanna saying "forget the baby – save the mother". Luckily Gilbert was a strong baby but he did suffer a dislocated shoulder during the birthing process that wasn't set until a chiropractor moved to Buffalo Lakes when Gil was three months old.



Another daunting case was when a baby was born 11 weeks premature on March 31, 1939 and weighed only two pounds. The young mother, Eleanora (Foster) Graham just 19, passed



away from an embolism shortly after giving birth. Under Johanna's care, the baby steadily gained weight and was released to her grandparent's care three months later weighing 8 pounds 14 ounces. In the interim, another nursing mother (Irene Balderston) volunteered to supply breast milk for the newborn. The baby, also named Eleanora eventually went to live with her grandmother Graham in Toronto. It was here that she grew up, was educated, met



and married Bob Murdock and raised a family of her own.



RT - Bob & Eleanora (Graham) Murdock

One of Nurse Johanna's greatest accomplishments was keeping tiny Gilda Mae (May) East alive once she arrived – all

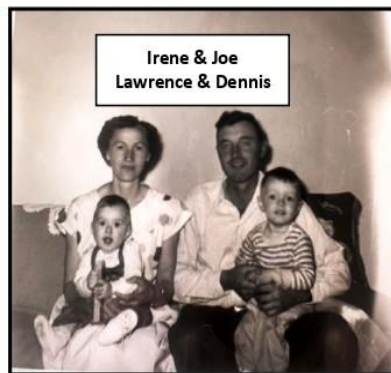


one pound fourteen ounces of her. Harold & Ethel East, from Dawson Creek, BC were visiting in the area when Mrs. East went into labour. She was taken to the nearest hospital which was Johanna's. The baby was placed in an incubator but continued to lose weight until she only weighted 1 ½ pounds. Johanna wrapped her in cotton batting and placed her in a blanket heated with hot water bottles. Once the little one was five days old, she was able to tolerate nourishment by means of an eyedropper. Soon thereafter, Gilda Mae gained regularly and was soon released to go home. Unfortunately, Gilda Mae (May) who was born on December 5, 1947 passed away on April 22, 1948 due to bronchopneumonia and nutritional anemia.

Midwife Johanna's reputation as the "Nightingale of the North" quickly spread and she even garnered the interest of HRH Princess Alice who, accompanied by her husband His Excellency the Earl of Athlone (who was sworn in as the Governor General of Canada for 1940-1945), made a trip to Grande Prairie where Princess Alice requested a meeting with Johanna. Princess Alice complimented Johanna on her success and expressed best wishes for the continuation of her invaluable work.

In 1948, the Peace River Country paid tribute to Johanna by means of an "Appreciation Day". All the mothers who had been cared for by Johanna contributed \$1 for each baby born in the hospital.

In 1958 at age 73, Midwife Johanna retired and the "Maternity Home" retired with her. The last scheduled baby born in the hospital was a girl who was named "Joanne" (October 1, 1958) to Rose (Smith/Delany) and John Fitzsimmons. She was named after the lady who had brought her into the world. Rose passed away in 2006 and John in 1990. Joanne married Leo Perry and currently resides in Grande Prairie.



The last baby; however, was born on October 2, 1958 to Irene and Joe Vavrek. Irene went into labour suddenly and as she did not think she could make it to Grande Prairie, Joe dropped her off at Johanna's. Joe quickly headed back home to complete harvesting. Once inside, Irene was asked to sit and wait as they needed to prepare the birthing room. Nevertheless, baby "Lawrence" was not in favor of waiting and everyone ended up scrambling to deliver him. Joe passed away in 2023 and Irene Vavrek currently lives in Grande Prairie. Lawrence and his wife also live in Grande Prairie.



Midwife Johanna had worked alongside many doctors in the area: Dr. Shaw, Dr. McCrum, Dr. Nixon and Dr. Lyman Gamey. Moreover, Johanna had many hard-working individuals who willingly assisted her over the years. Once retired, Johanna eventually moved to Buffalo Lakes to live with Thelma and Bob until her death from malignant melanoma in 1964.



Northfield Cemetery, LaGlance, Alberta
"Nightingale of the North"
Johanna R. Haakstad 1885 – 1964
"Never will your memory fade"

Midwife Johanna's legacy will live on through the over 3100 children she brought into the world.

In 1937, the "Justamere Ladies' Club of LaGlance" gathered donations which were then presented to the Grande Prairie Municipal Hospital to be used in furnishing the pediatric ward. A large photo of Johanna holds a sacred location in the ward with a plaque that reads:

"Johanna Haakstad, the Florence Nightingale of the Peace"

Johanna Haakstad "Family Time"

Carmen Haakstad, nephew of Johanna, spoke glowingly of his aunt. He recalls that his mother told Johanna that she could name her fifth child. Carmen Miriam (named after Moses' sister) was the name of choice for the new baby boy. Carmen spoke of how he was teased at school as his name sounded rather feminine.

Carmen's sister, Gail Sherman, recalled that their family always spent Christmas Eve and Christmas day with Johanna, Thelma and Bob. The traditional Norwegian dish of lutefisk was always served and enjoyed. The Haakstad children eagerly awaited the arrival of Thelma and Bob as they always brought large amounts of candy from their Buffalo Lakes Store. As well, the Haakstads also celebrated everyone's birthday with big parties that included all the Haakstad family members.



All of the Haakstad children were born at Aunt Jo's Maternity Hospital and one of Carmen's brothers was named "Johan" after Johanna as he was born on Johanna's birthday and another brother was named Lyam after Dr. Lyam Gamey.

Johanna loved birds and was very particular about their care. You may even have found her in conversation with them!



Gail went on to note that Johanna loved the carnival that was held in Sexsmith every year. Jo was very creative and adventurous with costumes and in fact she went one year dressed as a “man”. Gail said her aunt was a very “prim and proper” dignified lady who would always be wearing her pearls on special occasions.



The “Hospital” moved several times over the years but the exemplary care Johanna provided never wavered. It grew from a small three room shack in 1928 to a six-bed hospital in the 1940’s. The last location (rt) was on 97th street (Lot 25 & 26, Block 5, Plan 642 CL) and operated until Johanna retired in 1958. The Hospital was known variously as the Sexsmith Maternity Home, Stork Hospital, and Johanna Haakstad Maternity Home.



Over the years, it received support from local community organizations such as the Anglican Women’s Association and the Sexsmith Women’s Institute along with a grant of \$40.50 from the Alberta Treasury Department in 1934.

Sexsmith Maternity Hospital



Many times, Johanna tore up her own undergarments to make diapers for new babies. One baby almost arrived before Jo. In a hurry, she grabbed the closest garment off the wall to place under the mother only to find out it was the mother’s fur coat.

On one occasion, Johanna & the hired girl were allowed very little food, but when Jo baked donuts she would put several in her pocket so when they went to the barn to sleep, they could have a snack.

Johanna was a great storyteller & could always inject humor into situations such as having to sleep on the sod floor in a homestead shack, sleeping on a bench by the wall and crawling into bed with the mom & new baby in an attempt to keep them warm when it was -50F.

PCHS Member Doug Spry was
born at
Johanna's Maternity Hospital
1942

A picture of Johanna Haakstad's
headstone can be found on
"Find-a-Grave". A copy of this
article can be found on:
<https://www.glenleslie.ca>
(news section)

In the midst of the economic hardship and social constraints of the 1930's, Johanna Haakstad stood as an example of resilience and leadership by opening a small maternity hospital in Sexsmith. At a time when women's professional ambitions were often dismissed, she used her midwifery background and unshakable determination to transform an old shack into a safe haven for expectant mothers. With limited resources but boundless resolve, Johanna's Hospital not only reduced the maternal and infant mortality rate in the area but proved that compassion, skill and courage could flourish under adverse circumstances.

Johanna's contribution to the development and progress of northern Alberta is immeasurable. **Miss Johanna Haakstad** was a true "*Pioneer Woman*" who stood as a beacon of compassion & resiliency at a time when both were desperately needed.

The Sexsmith Museum has accomplished an exemplary project where they have ensured Johanna Haakstad and her "Stork Hospital" will be remembered. The artifacts are interesting, engaging and tell a great story. If you have a chance, do not miss out on visiting this special section of the Museum.

Written by Wanda Zenner Fall 2025
Photos by Lawrence Vavrek, Joanne Perry, Susan Morrison, Carmen Haakstad, Gail Sherman

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October 24, 1985 issue of Western People insert in the Western Producer (featured people, small town, rural areas of Western Canada)
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