

# RELATIVELY SPEAKING

THE ALBERTA GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY  
QUARTERLY JOURNAL

AGS  
Celebrates 40<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary



*Logs stacked in a teepee shape between two log homes—which early pioneers did this?  
See page 69.*

# Visiting Alberta's Past

## Childbirth and Healthcare for the Pioneers

by *Miriam Roberts*

Can you imagine what it would have been like as a pioneer who was expecting a child in this district when the first settlers came in 1909—and if there was an illness in the family, they would have had to resort to home remedies?

There were women who had experience in delivering babies who were called 'midwives'. All went well as long as the delivery was normal. Having trained as a State Registered Nurse and State Certified Midwife in England, I can imagine what kind of complications could have arisen; I did part of my midwifery training in the patients' homes. The difference here was the fact the mothers lived at least 90 miles from the nearest hospital, on trails that were often impassable due to either mud or snow. Midwives in the UK practiced within short distance of a hospital on a paved road, and the luxury of a 'flying squad'—a trained team of midwives and doctors—to come to the rescue in an ambulance.

It became apparent there was a need for trained medical personnel when there were frequent accidents happening in the lumber mills of this area.

In the fall of 1936, 76 years ago, after much preparation and planning, The Lady Farren Memorial Mission and Nursing Centre was built under the auspices of the Anglican Church in Drayton Valley. This was built to provide some medical care and maternity care for the residents of this district, as well as providing for their spiritual needs if they wished.

Miss Sybil Groves came to organize a Sunday School and conduct church services. Miss Barbara Whittaker, a 24-year-old trained nurse/midwife, came to join her; she was paid \$25 a month and her room and board was provided by a local resident.

The two staff members of the Mission House visited the families in Violet Grove, Pembina, Rocky Rapids, and Moon Lake areas. Travel was done chiefly on horseback with occasional use of a Model T Ford when conditions permitted. Jensen Bros. of Moon Lake did provide transportation for people while bringing freight to Drayton Valley. A trip from the highway (what is now known as Highway 16) during spring breakup could take 12 hours.

A member of the Anglican Church found an April 1944 issue of *The Canadian Nurse* with some old books in the church. There is an article called Better Storks for Alberta by Mary H. Willis in it. This article covered a program that was in progress at the University of Alberta, in advanced practical obstetrics for district nurses. The program attempted to provide training for professional district nurses in rural Alberta. It addressed scenarios that clients could be faced with, such as living in an area bounded by a river that, when high in spring and logs coming down, could be unnavigable for days—leaving the district completely isolated as it did not have a telephone. The name of the river was not mentioned, but it could have happened in the area around Drayton Valley, as it is between two rivers.

The training of these nurses was tailored for mothers who had a normal obstetrical history, and the mother had to report to the nurse/midwife early in pregnancy. It was also a training which was designed for mothers who lived beyond a doctor's range. Mothers were mostly encouraged to have a hospital delivery. If a mother did experience difficulty during a home birth, the patient



*Sybil Groves (right) and Barbara Whittaker (left)  
with dog Bibs.*

had to be taken to the nearest doctor—who was at least 70 miles away from Drayton Valley.

As I read the article there was a familiarity running through it. At the end is the editor's note made by Mrs. Barbara Eden, the instructor for the course. She was a former district nurse who had a certificate conferred by the Central Midwives for Scotland. This was the same district nurse, Barbara Whittaker, who had worked in this area. I did meet her and had an interesting visit with her in later years at Creston where she had retired.

Iona Hutzal mentioned in her family history in *Trappers, Loggers, Homesteaders and Oilmen* that in 1948, she was delivered by her grandmother in the living quarters behind their store. In the same book, in Dr. Maclure's account, he states he arrived at the end of 1956. Although he mentions Dr. Brooks, he did not say when the doctor arrived.

The Drayton Valley Hospital was built in 1958 to accommodate the needs of this fast-growing community after the 1953 oil discovery. The obstetrical department became very busy; Dr. Maclure alone delivered 1,300 babies in the period he was there, until 1970. He also mentioned that he was able to practice beyond the scope of what general practitioners do now. The baby boom continued; I started working at the hospital in 1970, and while I was working it was not uncommon to have three or four deliveries on an eight-hour shift. My midwifery training did come in handy when babies came sooner than expected; before the doctor arrived I also went in the ambulance with maternity patients. In one instance I recall going in with a maternity patient who was 24 weeks pregnant, expecting twins. Although I



*The original Anglican church in Drayton Valley, and (inset) the new church.*

could have delivered the babies without much problem, the after care in an ambulance was very limited. I was thankful we arrived at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton in about an hour by ground ambulance. Fortunately the premature twins were delivered soon after the mother arrived at the hospital; sadly, they did not survive. I did breathe a sigh of relief that they were not in my care at that moment.

This year the Anglican church here in Drayton Valley is celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

*Endnotes:*

*Trappers, Loggers, Homesteaders, and Oilmen*

*To Trail's End by Dr. W.S.B. Loosmore*

*Memoirs of the Mission by Mary Burrows*

*The Canadian Nurse, Volume 40 No. 4, April 1944*

## At the End of the Victoria Trail

by John Althouse

The eventful history of Alberta is a composition of many separate chapters. These chapters, while often separate and distinct, can also commonly overlap, 'bleeding' into one another. These periods may contain advances, sharp declines, and even the occasional period of stagnation, rot and decay. Nowhere have so many of these varied historic periods played out than in the locale known as the Victoria Settlement. This site, which may be unfamiliar to some of you, nestles anonymously almost forgotten along the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River about eight miles almost directly south of the Town of Smoky Lake.

This site enjoyed prominence over a wide span of the history of the territory that now is a part of our province. It was long a seasonal encampment for the Cree who made this area home prior to the arrival of the Europeans. This nomadic people were able to not only survive but to thrive here. The area provided all the resources that they needed to live comfortably and contentedly.

In the early 1800s, the Europeans first arrived in the area as fur traders. One of the incarnations of Fort Edmonton, which had a tendency to relocate from time to time during its early days, was located just six miles downstream from the site at the mouth of White Earth Creek. This trait of the relocating the fort could be problematic for those traveling to it by river especially if the packet detailing the move had not arrived prior



to the departure of the travelers for the fort. This first flirtation with the fur trade in this area was a brief one as the fort soon returned up river and settled at a more permanent location.

Drawn by the fur trade, Métis people began to enter and settle in the area. When the land of Victoria Settlement was surveyed and divided into portions, it employed the river lot system in use in Quebec. In this system, the land extends far back from the river in long, narrow strips until it almost vanishes into the dark forbidding bush in the distance. This survey pattern is still readily visible when one travels along the trail today. One section along today's Victoria Trail within the settlement is known as Métis Crossing. It is the site of a large cultural festival for the Métis people during each summer.



*Signpost along Victoria Trail.*

In 1862, Methodist missionaries George and John McDougall arrived in the area and set up a mission to administer to the First Nations population of the site. The mission eventually came to be known as Victoria Mission. The year 2012 was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of that mission. The following summer George McDougall brought his wife and seven younger children to the site. Here, the missionaries developed one of the first Protestant schools west of Manitoba. They also would develop a large hospital on the site. A smallpox epidemic raced across the Canadian prairies having a particularly devastating effect on the native population in 1870. Victoria did not escape its ravages; over a hundred Cree people were known to

have died there, despite the best efforts of the Methodist missionaries. In fact, the entire McDougall family was stricken by the contagion. Mrs. McDougall, two of her daughters, Flora and Georgina, and their adopted First Nations sister Anna died from the disease. Today, if you take a short walk southward along a crude trail to the west of the settlement site, you will find their tombstones and gravesite within an iron fence near the river just a short distance from the mission where they spent their final years.

This tragic event was just one of the calamities that befell the First Nations people of the Canadian west for the next few years. In order to simply survive, these noble people signed a treaty and were removed to a reservation miles to the east of their traditional home area. This ended the need for a mission at Victoria. Gradually, the buildings on the mission fell into disrepair, were abandoned, or moved from the site. A black and white photograph captures the indignity of the mission hospital building being hauled to Smoky Lake where it would serve as the basis of its new hospital.

As the mission declined, the fur trade re-established a presence in area, right at the site. A new post named Fort Victoria was built there in 1864. The original fort consisted of a wood stake palisade and several buildings including a fairly substantial house for its factor. However, by this time, the fur trade in the area was already beginning to wane. Its life as a trading post would be relatively brief. When a post office was applied for in the area, the name Victoria was rejected by the Post Office Department as it was felt that there could be confusion with Victoria, BC. On June 1, 1887, the site received its post office named Pakan

*Painting inside the church showing Pakan at a more prosperous time.*



after a Cree Chief who had played a prominent role in the area.

As the fur trade was phasing out, settlers began to enter the area. These settlers had been attracted by cheap homestead land which they might own and farm. Many of these farmers were Ukrainians from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A second Methodist church building was established at the site to administer to their needs in 1906. With the presence of farmers, merchants, and craftsmen to serve their needs who moved to the site, Pakan became quite a busy agricultural service center. At one point, it could proudly boast five farm equipment shops. The settlement was also a hub of transportation as a ferry crossing of North Saskatchewan River for the major north-south route was at Pakan. This ferry remained in operation for many years. The future at Pakan indeed looked promising, prosperity was in the wind.

However, nothing is ever certain. When the railway was laid through the area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it did not pass through Pakan but eight miles to the north, where Smoky Lake would be established along the line and would become the pre-eminent settlement of the region. Pakan began its slide from prominence. The merchants gradually abandoned the earlier settlement either opting to relocate in Smoky Lake or simply going out of business. A bridge was built in the area in the 1970s. However, the new bridge crossed the river several miles upstream from Victoria Settlement. This was the final nail in coffin of the settlement as it lapsed into obscurity and virtually vanished from the landscape.



Today, little remains to attest to the rich history of the site. As you drive eastward from the bridge along the Victoria Trail, you pass Métis Crossing. Further on you see the sign indicating the road leading uphill to the area cemetery. As you drive along the road, you can still see the distinct pattern of the river lots. At the actual site, only two buildings remain: the factors house of Fort Victoria (1864), and the Methodist church (1906). Only the interpretive centre, role players, and a plaque on a stone cairn bear testament to the long and varied history of this site. Role playing interpreters will take you on a walk through time reacquainting you with Victoria Settlement's rich and varied history.

On the western edge of the actual site that today is the Victoria Settlement Provincial Historic Site, looking north, you will note a hedge. This hedge once defined the limits of the local school yard. If you look south,



you will see the trail that you can walk to the McDougall graves. Make that walk and stand for a moment and reflect upon the impermanence of all things. Sometimes, only the records that we keep and manage are all that remain to attest to a rich, vibrant, and varied past. This is the work that genealogists, family historians, and local historians do so very well.

It is this dedicated group that keeps the past alive and vibrant for those yet to come. They are our chroniclers who keep vibrant stories and legacy of our past. RS

*Above: The Methodist church, built in 1906, is a building with no roof trusses.*

*Left: The factor's house of Fort Victoria, built 1864, is the second oldest standing structure in Alberta.*