

Central Alberta Historical Society Newsletter



Spring 2008

4525 - 47A Avenue Red Deer AB. T4N 6Z6

People of the Mighty Big Horn

© Annette Gray

Looking back at the history of our west country, I can't help but think of some very special folks, the First Nation families who live in the valley of the mighty Big Horn River.

The Big Horn Reserve was officially established in 1948 by seven Stoney families from the Morley Reserve: the Abraham, Beaver, Dixon, House, Poucette, Wesley and Wildman families. Situated twenty miles west of Nordegg, the reserve appears to be a recent entity in the history of the brake-away band, yet in reality it isn't. This magnificent river valley with its clear, rushing water and towering mountains was home to Stoneys long before boundaries of a reserve were laid out.

Mary Schaffer, the famous female Philadelphia explorer/photographer, made several expeditions from 1889 to 1911 into the Canadian Rockies, and told of her visits to the families of Silas Abraham (for whom Lake Abraham is named) and Paul and Samson Beaver who were camped on the Kootenay Plains near the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Big Horn Rivers. Unfamiliar with the mountains to the north, Mary Schaffer was delighted when Samson Beaver drew a map for her party to follow. Later, as Mary scanned the rocky crags rising up from Maligne Lake, she named a majestic 3081 ft. mountain, Samson Peak, after the map-maker. Intrigued by the beauty of the land, Mary wrote, "There is no describing the Kootenai Plains. To appreciate them one must let the soft winds caress the face and allow the



1916 - Stoney Families

eye to absorb the blue of the surrounding hills and the gold of the grasses beneath the feet. To see the plains at their best, one should come over Pipestone in August and look down on the scene from the rolling hills to the south. Then the golden-brown of the ripened grasses flood the valley with light. For miles the

river winds and twists from west to east. An

occasional Indian shack comes to view. The faint ringing of a bell denotes that a few tiny specks on the landscape are really horses and the white dots are teepees of the Indians. No wonder the Indians from Morley come here year after year; I only wonder that the whole tribe does not attempt to move in one body."

Yet the Stoneys of Montana's Assiniboin race who spoke various dialects of Dakota (or Nakota), weren't ready to settle in one place in 1889. They were perfectly happy to wander, as they had done for centuries before, following game trails and gathering edible plants and berries when and where the changing seasons provided them. Nor were they ready to settle down when Grandpa Tom Gray first made their acquaintance in 1907.

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Tom had built a store and stopping house on the west side of the North Saskatchewan River near the site of the deserted Hudson Bay Fort. The Stoney used to camp near the store for several days at a time while they made their purchases of tea, flour, tobacco and other staples, and Tom enjoyed telling of Christmas 1916 when over a hundred Stoney men, women and children were dinner guests at his home. Stoney elder, Norman Abraham, also told of these celebrations. "We used to go to Tom Gray's store, and old Tom would dance all night," Norman said, laughing heartily as he recalled the days of his youth.

After the Big Horn Reserve was formed in '48, the residents were known as the Wesley Band after their leader, Peter Wesley Sr., whom they called "The Great Taotha." Peter Wesley was a venerable leader, but not a chief. The Big Horn has never had a resident chief, since the Wesley Band's affairs are administrated in Morley. However, the Big Horn elders select their own councilor, and a recent councilor was John Wesley, grandson of Peter Wesley Sr.

One of the first permanent buildings to be constructed on the reserve in 1948-49 was a log schoolhouse. This was built by Peter Wesley Jr. and his son, John. Recreation was also an integral part of reserve life: ball games, horseback riding, and as soon as ice formed on the river, the boys played hockey. Girls skated too, but they were expected to wear dresses until the early sixties when a change in policy allowed females to wear jeans and shorts if they choose to.

In the '40s and '50s the Wesley Band participated in Nordegg's sports days and parades. One former Nordegg resident recalls, "The Stoney Indians made a very colorful entry to these events, coming in full traditional regalia, feathered headdresses, and beautifully beaded vests, leggings and moccasins. And they always invited Nordegg folks back to 'Big Horn Days,' which is the name of their annual rodeo."

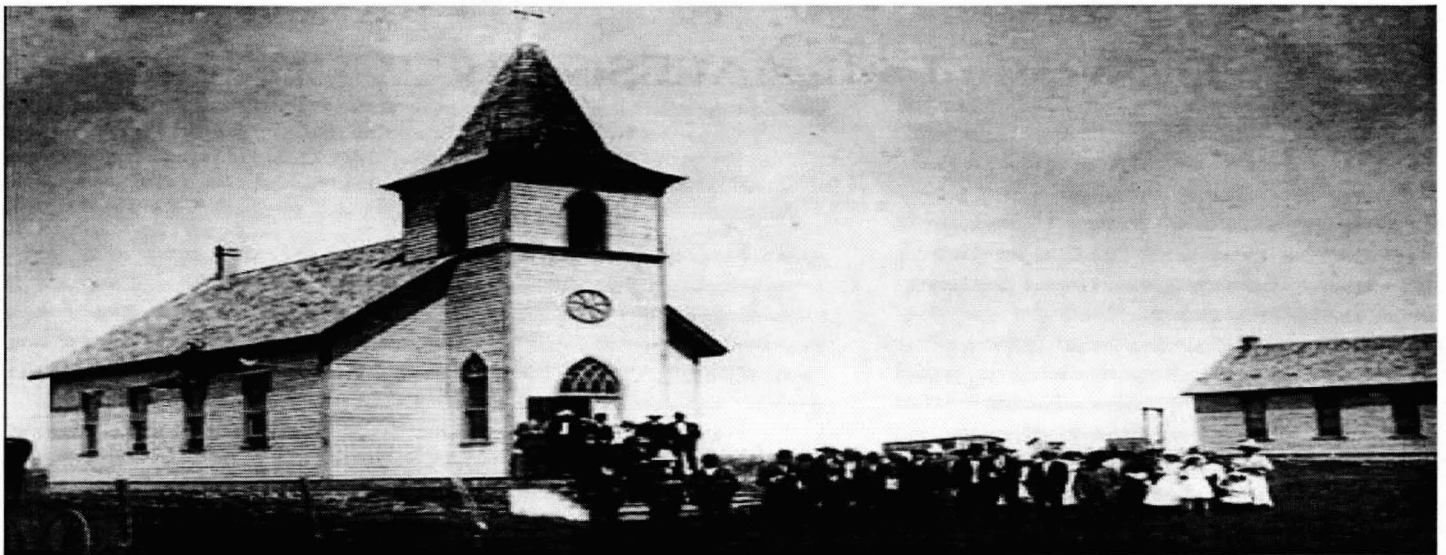
Until Nordegg mines closed in 1955, the men of the reserve worked in coal mines, then bush camps, and later helped build the David Thompson Highway. In recent years, both men and women have branched out into challenging careers in many walks of life, such as the oil industry and social services. Today's Big Horn youth spend a great deal of time in hockey rinks and arenas all over Alberta, and a good many trophies grace kitchen cabinets, due to native proficiency in sports.

When recording histories for *The Days After Yesterday*, the Rocky-Nordegg community history book, I was privileged to visit homes of the Big Horn families. Edna Penner who had lived on the reserve for over twenty years accompanied me, and we received warm welcomes wherever we went. Edna and her late husband had been employed by the Federal Government as teachers, and Edna remembers those years as some of her happiest. Her daughters, Faith and Gloria, were raised with the Big Horn children and quite naturally learned to speak the Stoney language. The Penners were also actively involved in the Big Horn Store and Service Station operated by the band. When Peter Penner died in 1999, his Stoney friends requested he be buried in the Big Horn Cemetery, an offer gratefully accepted by Peter's family.

Although population was slow to increase in the early years due to high infant mortality, today with improved health care facilities, over two-hundred people make their home on the Big Horn Reserve. A religious Sun Dance is held at the summer solstice, and competitive native dances are held as separate events with young and old participating. On a personal note, a new generation of Grays and Stoney people still enjoy each others' company just as their great-great-grandfathers did so many years ago.



Abraham family on route to Kooteney Plains in the early 1900s



2008 Historic Churches Bus Tour, May 30, 2008

This year's Historic Churches Tour will take us west to the pretty little blue and white Markerville Community Church, 1907, and on to Craig Christ Lutheran, 1941. By noon we will be at Bethany Lutheran Church, Dickson, 1968, where we will hear about the congregation started in 1903 and the first church built in 1910. We will have lunch in the church hall, which was the Dickson School. The old Dickson School built in 19—stands beside the church and now is a Scout Hall. After a quick walk across the street to the cemetery we will proceed west to the little log church on the highway, Raven Union Church, 1926. Next we go straight east to Innisfail to see their oldest church, St. Marks Anglican Church, Innisfail, 1892.

The bus will leave Red Deer Museum at 9:15 am and arrive back at about 4 pm Tickets- \$20 on sale at the Red Deer Museum.

Limit of 24 participants.

CAHS Program Summary

February 21, Red Deer Museum and Archives

Dr. Sarah Carter now at the University of Alberta told the stories of women homesteaders in western Canada. In keeping with her reputation for setting historical events in the social conditions of their time, her talk gave details of how Mildred Williams became a homesteader near Kindersly Saskatchewan in 1908. As a single woman she did not qualify to file for land. Widows with minor children, single men and married men were eligible as well as script holders. Script for land was given for military service and retiring NWMP. Four thousand scripts were issued in Saskatchewan. Mildred Williams got her 320 acre homestead by buying script that had been issued to a Boer war veteran of the Lord Strathcona Horse Regiment. The price was about \$20.00 an acre. She lived on her land the required 6 months a year for three year and proved up on her homestead. One of Doctor Carter's pictures showed three single sisters who filed on adjoining land and built their homes near the corners that touched.

Some of Sarah Carter's research into Great Plains women of Canada and the United States resulted in a 2006 reissue of Georgina Binnie Clark's book, *Women and Wheat*. An autobiographical book first published in 1914 it tells the story of an English journalist who left her country where there was a million more women than men and came to Canada in 1905 for a livelihood as a homestead farmer. Susan Jackel wrote the introduction for the 1947 edition of *Women and Wheat* and the latest edition include both the Jackel introduction and Dr. Carter's introduction.

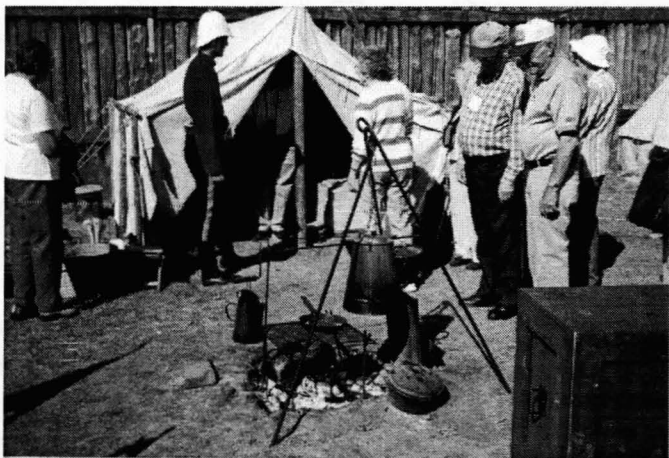
...cAHs...CENTRAL ALBERTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mountain Heritage Tour

June 3, 4, 5 and 6, 2008

When we think of our western mountains we think of grand scenery, a place of incredible beauty and pristine wilderness. National and provincial parks do indeed protect much of our natural heritage. But the mountains have a rich history, too. Fur traders followed trails and passes known to Aboriginal people since ancient times to link such places as Fort Edmonton and the fur outposts of New Caledonia; a coal mining empire developed along the front ranges; silver mines dotted the cliffs of the Kickinghorse valley; railways and highways were pushed through the mountain wilderness; a collection of colourful guides and mountaineers started a tourism industry that today brings millions of visitors to the mountains every year. And before any of that, there was an important First Nations presence in the mountains for thousands of years.

For four days in June, we will travel by deluxe motor coach through that mountain grandeur, and find out as much as time allows about the history of the mountains and mountain parks.



Fort Battlerford



Bannock at Grouard

Scenery, yes! And history too! Plan to join us *Itinerary on page 5*

Cost of the tour is \$490 per person, based on double occupancy; \$590. Single Occupancy.

Registration forms are available at:

Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery, 4525 – 47A Avenue, Red Deer AB T4N 6Z6.

For further information phone Don at 342-2245.

Mountain Heritage Tour

Here's the plan:

Day One – June 3rd – We'll make an early start from the Red Deer Museum and Art Gallery and head west on the David Thompson Highway. We'll stop at the Nordegg national historic site, and pay a visit to the Bighorn Reserve of the Stoney First Nation before stopping for lunch at the Goldeye Centre on Goldeye Lake. In the afternoon we'll stop at the Columbia Icefields, the mass of ice that in Mary Schaeffer's day still blocked the valley where the highway runs today. We'll stay overnight in Jasper at the Pallisades Training Centre, located on the site of the historic homestead where Lewis John Swift was producing a crop of potatoes a hundred years ago.

Day Three will start with a "Sulphur Mountain morning", first with a visit to the Cave and Basin national historic site, the original hot springs that triggered the development of tourism in the mountains. Then we're off to the mountain top on the Sulphur Mountain Gondola Lift. Energetic souls may want to take the boardwalk across to the historic weather station atop Sansom Peak. We'll take a lunch break at the summit, enjoying one of the two restaurants available there and their spectacular views.

After lunch we'll take a guided tour of the famous Banff Springs Hotel, the "Castle of the Rockies". Then we're off, along the scenic Bow River Valley Parkway to Lake Louise, past Silver City, past the Castle Mountain internment camp to Lake Louise. Dinner will be at the old Lake Louise railway station, now restored. Then back to Banff again for the night.

Day Two will begin with a tour of sites in and around Jasper before starting down the Icefields Parkway through some of the country's finest mountain scenery on our way to Banff, passing the access trails to the Athabasca and Howse passes, so important in fur trade days. We'll have a picnic lunch at Athabasca Falls and a coffee and rest break by Bow Lake at guide and outfitter Jimmy Simpson's famous Num Ti Jah Lodge, and then go on through the Kickinghorse Pass Field in Yoho National Park where a local historian will "show and tell" us about the Big Hill and the spiral tunnels and the old silver mines in the area. We'll end the day in Banff, ready for a night's rest at our accommodations at Irwin's Mountain Inn.

Day Four, all too soon, is the day to head for home. But not so fast! First, we'll pay a visit to the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies for a special tour, followed by lunch at the Banff Centre. Then we'll start on our way home. We'll travel east along the old Banff Coach Road past the Chiniki First Nation and the McDougall Mission as far as Cochrane, stop for a look at the remarkable Cochrane Mural Mosaic, and return to Red Deer following Highway 22 through the foothills, maybe taking one last rest stop at the Dickson – Stephenson House rest stop near Airdrie, close to the trail that was used by the first automobile that travelled from Calgary to Edmonton in 1906. We should reach Red Deer by suppertime.

President's Column for Spring Edition of CAHS Newsletter

Janet Walter

Activities of the Central Alberta Historical Society seem to increase with our years as a society. The dedicated board members have wide ranging skills but many of us are challenged by the depletions of ageing. In this context the contributions of new younger members such Sarah Stuebing are especially valued. While we engage in our planned spring events we can invite those we contact to join our society and become part of revealing central Alberta history. We have many partners in our endeavors but the number of direct CAHS members is not as large as when it reached the 100th member. It seems to remain at just under the 100 mark. The cost of CAHS events that have a fee, is reduced for CAHS members and congenial friendships are often formed among our members.

Sue Bornn, who is the coordinator of Red Deer Historic Week, 2008 is another young woman who has skills that we need. Along with the committee Sue is organizing this growing annual celebration of local sites and events. Those who enjoyed the tour of early churches, east and north of the city last year will be able to register for a tour of churches west and south of Red Deer, this year. Don Hepburn arranged last year's tour of old churches and Shirley Dye will conduct the 2008 church tour. Look for another one room school event as well.

Local district churches remain open and able to host guests only because local people work to preserve them and cherish them as a continuing focus of their community. In the homestead era when walking or horses were the transportation, families worked together to organize and fund their own churches and schools. Many of these early buildings served as both church and school as well for as centres for entertainment, sports, clubs, weddings and funerals. Occasionally the community building served as a health clinic. An adjoining cemetery was common as well. Often a single name was used for church, cemetery and school.

Registration of school names was done by the territorial or provincial government.

Duplicate names were avoided and there were specific requirements about number of pupils

otherwise decisions were local and made by elected local boards. The school name denoted both the district name and an identity for the people in that community. Funds were raised and spent locally.

During the settlement era local initiative and cohesive purpose to meet social needs created communities where mutuality and proximity were integral features. The current dynamics of how common social needs are met are radically different than they were a century earlier. Funding is collected on a provincial basis and dispensed back to communities by provincial policies that now prescribe public private partnerships, for schools and health facilities. Decisions have become remote from the local community and without the single focus of meeting local needs.

In this context of change perhaps Historic Red Deer Week events are a present day example of persisting community endeavors. The official launch is scheduled for May 26 at the Red Deer County Centre. The city and county mayors will jointly recognize the significance of our common heritage and the events throughout the week will reveal how people within our communities preserve history of the past for people in 2008.

The preliminary events of Historica Fairs, April 16 in Olds and May 2 and 3 at Parkland Mall in Red Deer and the Historical Society of Alberta Annual General Meeting May 16—18 in Red Deer are both events to enjoy how our history is being recognized and enjoyed. While the H.S.A. AGM is a provincial event, when CAHS are the hosting chapter the conference functions are open to local people as well as delegates from elsewhere. Full conference registration is \$90.00 (before April 16) a tour to Rocky Mountain House is \$30.00 for members and \$35.00 for non members. Additional or for only the Saturday evening banquet is \$30.00. Contact Marian Hives, 403 347 8267, for registration information.

The June spring bus tour to the mountains will be a great chance to relax and enjoy the sites and stories of the past events of the big hills west of us.

Electronic Distribution

We would like to distribute the CAHS newsletter by email. It saves money and a lot of volunteer time folding and stuffing. It will be sent as a pdf and seldom be more than a megabyte. Please forward your email address to sadd@shaw.ca if you are able to help out in this way. If we do not hear from you, your newsletter will continue to be sent snail mail.