

MAPLE CREEK'S **UNIQUE LEGACY**

Story by

Judith Wright

Photos by

James R. Page



Maple Creek

A steampunk horse, charging up a corridor lined with fine bone china, promises visitors this is no ordinary museum. The stories told by Donny White and the Jasper Centre are not only about Maple Creek, but also about a western heritage rich in surprises.



Donny White, chairman of the board and full-time volunteer at the Jasper Cultural and Historical Centre, knows how to tell a story. Take for instance the story of the portrait, *Affair of Honour*, in the Centre’s Victorian Parlour Gallery. Two women in 19th century garb are seen dueling in the woods, surrounded by female spectators. The painting comes from a local home, as did the expensive French clocks and candelabra on display. As Donny points out, although Maple Creek was first established as a North-West Mounted Police post in 1883, eastern Canadian land speculators came west simultaneously—and they came with money. “We sometimes forget,” he says, “that the original citizens tried to re-establish what they left in Eastern Canada and Europe—not what was south, across the border.”

One version of the painting’s origin suggests that a well-to-do rancher and businessman, tasked by his wife to buy paintings for their impressive home, bought it while on a business trip back East. The picture had a sojourn in their home, but his wife took a dislike to it and banished it from the house. Another version, predating the first, has the

painting pilfered from a French landowner’s mansion in the hills after he was called back to England in the First World War; the pilfered painting eventually ended up, via well-intended connections, in the businessman’s home. It is unknown whether the businessman shared the painting’s true provenance with his wife.

In twelve themed galleries, the Jasper Centre shows and tells what’s unique about Maple Creek in the context of familiar topics such as the Mounted Police, the railway, and the cattle industry. Like the painting, the story of the Southwest is full of twists and turns. Donny doesn’t skirt around the “other” side of the story. Early town citizens may have been predominantly white and of British background, but he is quick to credit the Métis as the founders of the settlement. “The Métis had homes along the creek into the hills. When Fort Walsh was closed in 1883, the

▲ (Left) The *Affair of Honour* painting is prominently displayed in the Victorian Gallery. The painting’s provenance is somewhat disputed.

▲ (Right) Donny White, Chairman of the Board and full-time volunteer at the Jasper Centre.



▲ NWMP “A Division” at Maple Creek Barracks, 1889. Constable David White from Donegal, Ireland, is second from right in back row.

➤ The steampunk horse sculpture, by Grieta Krisjanson, was originally part of a Steampunk Exhibition at the Jasper Centre. The China tea cups, locally donated, are for sale as part of ongoing fund-raising efforts.

North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) Division moved here. By that time, many of the Métis houses were empty and the policemen with families moved into these houses.”

Considering the potential for culture clash—eastern Canadian merchants, British officers, European settlers, Blackfoot and Assiniboine bands, Métis, and American cattle-trailers—there was surprisingly little friction in the community. That was likely because of the NWMP, first established in the then North-West Territories to control whiskey traders and the border country. The Centre’s Mounted Police gallery features photographs of the barracks and area. One of the pictures shows Donny White’s own great grandfather, Constable David





White from Donegal, Ireland, puffing confidently on his pipe in a group of staunch-looking NWMP officers and constables.

The Western Gallery houses local ranch history, and pays tribute to, among others, the first official rancher in the area, Michel Oxarart, a Basque from France, who built his ranch with lumber from the dismantled Fort Walsh. Oxarart came to the Maple Creek area via San Francisco and Montana, trailing horses—a livestock mainstay in those days—from the expansive Conrad Kohrs ranch, south of the border. “He once walked into a bank in Regina and they thought he was going to rob it,” says Donny. “He came in with spurs, full beard, dusty, and one of the clerks went to call the police. The manager intervened, and Oxarart simply wrote a cheque and left.”

Donny can date almost any photo of cowboys and ranchers by what they are wearing. “The American influence came up around 1900. The British influence—white shirts and ties — was already here,” he says. “Many of the old ranchers in the old round-up photos wear a tie, as they did in Eastern Canada. These are rodeo riders,” he points to one photo of a young cowboy in a suit jacket and vest. “The influence shifts by

post Second World War with Roy Rogers and the radio programs, then television, Bonanza, all-of-a-sudden we get this.” He gestures to a more conventional-looking cowboy.

The Western Gallery also features photographs and riding equipment of some of the West’s best-known horsewomen. Adeline Braniff was the first local woman to ride in rodeos, and the first female jockey to ride the Calgary race circuit. Another horsewoman, Anne (White) Niasmith, was a well-known equestrian who worked with Grant MacEwan at the University of Saskatchewan to improve her horses’ bloodlines. “She was as comfortable in the boardroom as she was in the barn, ran the ranch, did the breeding and training. At first, her husband showed the horses, as she felt he would be treated more fairly than a woman, but later she competed widely herself.”

Fort Walsh, 30 kilometres south of Maple Creek, now the Cypress Hills Massacre National Historic Site, was the scene of a treaty-adhesion by the Stony and Assiniboine First Nations bands of 1877. A picture of the Maple Creek “Indian Farm,” built in 1880, has a compelling story, as told by Donny.

▲ Part of the Dixon Brothers display in the Boardwalk Room. The Dixon Brothers, merchants and civic leaders, set up shop in Maple Creek in 1883.



▲ The Victorian Gallery is one of the most popular theme rooms at the Jasper Centre. Late 1800s Maple Creek citizens tried to re-establish the refinements left in Eastern Canada and Europe.

“The late 1870s saw thousands of starving First Nations people camped around Fort Walsh, and they occasionally crossed the border into Montana to kill cattle. A small band of Assiniboine were doing very well on the farm, adapting to the new life, then Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney believed there would be trouble and ordered the NWMP to move them out of the area. If you read the NWMP reports, they were very sympathetic to the group.”

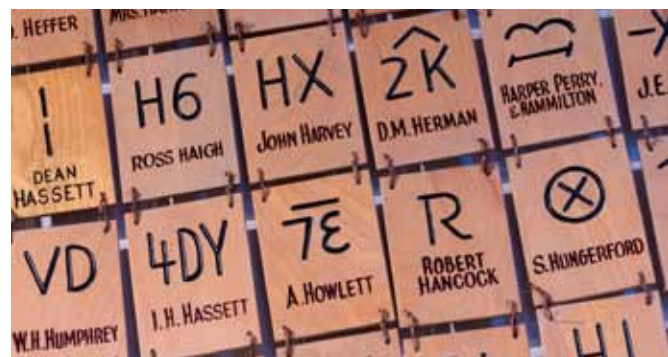
It is a grim reminder of the past that, later, the farm was owned by a mounted policeman, and finally passed through the hands of a cousin of Horace Greeley, the presidential candidate and editor of the New York Times who coined the phrase, “Go west, young man.”

Donny, who grew up on a ranch in the Maple Creek hills, is passionate about the Jasper Centre, and several stories touch him personally. Creating personal “connection” is part of the Centre’s modus operandi. “Maple Creek people will always tell you they are from Maple Creek,” says Donny,

“even if they haven’t lived here for decades. It’s not spoken, but assumed, that we have a connection to our past. A lot of our guests say there is something special here, a spiritual connection, one that many of us feel who come back here to retire.”

After curating and directing the Medicine Hat Esplanade Museum for 30 years, Donny returned to Maple Creek to retire, and was soon involved with the Jasper Centre. At that time, the 1910 former school house at 311 Jasper Street had run for thirty years as a museum but had stagnated. It had been purchased by a group of local citizens in 1986 when the school closed, and was opened as the Jasper Centre in 1988.

The Centre is presently run entirely by volunteers. Maintaining the funding to keep the doors open is something of a personal quest for Donny—that, and programming. One of the Centre’s main goals is to foster inclusiveness, and programs like Newcomers to Canada, Women’s History Month, and the Local Opportunities group home, whose artwork is showcased annually, ensure the Centre



◀ (Left) The side-saddle belonged to Harriet Dixon, and is part of the new Geraldine Moodie Gallery. The boots were commissioned by Addie Braniff's father when she went to ride the race circuit in Calgary.

◀ (Right) The spinning wheel, in one of the two Fleming Family Galleries, was donated by well-known rancher and long-time collector Irvine Fleming. The portraits in the background are his parents, Isaac and Margret Fleming.

▲ (Top) Queen Victoria is the second longest reigning British Monarch after Queen Elizabeth II. She is associated with Britain's great age of industrial expansion and economic progress.

▲ (Bottom) A display of local cattle brands and their owners in the Western Gallery.

remains relevant to the community. Besides the themed galleries, the building also houses a small auditorium that serves as the Prairie Skies Gallery, and a gift shop that sells books and other items that help keep the Centre going—such as the Royal Albert china, donated by people for resale.

Fundraising has been especially challenging during COVID-19, says Donny, which severely limited foot traffic to the Centre. "We couldn't do events, so we did a letter-writing campaign



▲ The Jasper Centre at 311 Jasper Steet in Maple Creek was formerly a school built in 1910.

➤ This stone wall-hanging came from the home of Elizabeth White nee Russell, originally from Scotland. It made its way to Canada along with many other treasures from her Scottish home.

to the town and then 100 kilometres and beyond for a legacy campaign—legacy meaning we are reaching out to the people who used to live here, who want to leave something in memory of themselves or their parents.”

One donor, who left Maple Creek in 1958, still gets the *Maple Creek News*. Another, who has never lived here but feels drawn to the Cypress Hills, has donated very generously. His donation helped to purchase the steampunk horse sculpture at the entrance, part of a fund-raising event. The legacy campaign has been successful, says Donny—and a good thing too, since infrastructure costs to the building have escalated, complicated by COVID-19.

The Centre works hard to attract audiences, old and new. This year the Women’s History room will feature Geraldine Moodie, granddaughter of the famed writer Susanna Moodie, and one of the first female professional photographers in the

area. In the late 1800s, Moodie photographed the Sun Dance, First Nations women and children, and other subjects of historical importance.

Not all the theme rooms in the 22,000 square foot building are completed. Donny likes that. “I don’t believe museums should be static,” he says, “but they usually are because of limited funding. My goal is to take existing exhibits and tweak them, and always to show what’s unique about Maple Creek—and boy, there are a lot of things that are unique.”

