

THE CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON FAMILY 1905 - 1922

by daughter Daisy Gooding

In 1905 Christopher Johnston came to Canada from Distington, England, and joined a crew surveying the railroad right-of-way from North Battleford to Edmonton. From there he went to Athabasca and worked as a lay missionary and trader in the then "New Frontier".

The following spring Elizebeth^a Johnson left Distington to join him in marriage.

When she arrived in Edmonton she stayed at the Alberta Hotel on Jasper Avenue until the stage coach was ready to leave for "the North". Her introduction to the Canadian Frontier was rather abrupt and terrifying. Arriving in Athabasca she was met by Henry Robinson, preacher of the Athabasca Industrial Mission, and was informed that her fiance was down north at Pelican Portage.

As luck would have it, one of the passengers sharing the stage coach with her, met my Dad at Pelican Portage and the similarity of the names caused him to ask if Dad had a relation newly arrived in Canada. "No" was the reply, "but she soon will be." Leaving Pelican he sped to Athabasca by canoe, and, where necessary by walking. He arrived dirty, ragged, and sporting a red beard, and it was quite a shock to mother, when this tall blonde stranger claimed to be the neat ex-policeman who had courted her in England. However, a good bath, a shave and clean clothes reassured her he was the same person she had known.

Plans were made for an early June wedding. Alas, however, the best laid plans had a few unexpected developments in them. Their application for a marriage certificate, which had to be sent for in Edmonton, was duly acknowledged at the Register Office on May 5, 1906 but was not issued until the 28th of June. Mother had brought all the ingredients with her to make her wedding cake, which was baked, iced, and ready in early June for the big event. But no certificate - no wedding! All the guests had arrived to help the happy couple celebrate the big event. Eva Robinson, the preacher's wife, with whom mother was staying, asked if it would be all right to serve a little of the cake as a token of hospitality. Sad to relate, not only just a little was served but all of it. A later date was set, but, when that day arrived, the preacher was unavailable as he was away from Athabasca attending his far flung parish, so again, the wedding had to be postponed. Finally on July 2nd my Dad was given permission to write out the marriage certificate which had not arrived, and the ceremony was about to start, when it was discovered that the ring had not arrived by stage. The best man, Colin Johnston, a very large Indian, took a brass ring from his finger, and, after it had been cut and bent to fit my mother's finger, the ceremony was duly performed. The wedding feast consisted of bannock (a kind of biscuit, made of flour, some lard, a dash of salt and little if any leavening). This bannock was really special, as it was liberally sprinkled with raisins. So on July 2nd, 1906, Christopher Johnston and Elizebeth^a Johnson, began their lives together in Athabasca.

As my mother was a baker by profession, she and Dad decided to open a bakery in town shortly after they were married. Dad also prepared and cooked meals for the Royal Canadian North West Mounted Police, whose barracks was located near the bakery. As the business grew they found it necessary to hire another baker, an Austrian. His recipes were short and to the point. No matter what he baked everything was "come a little sugar", "come a little butter", "come a little flour" and whatever else was required to turn out cakes, cookies, buns, etc; but, by careful observation, Dad was able to learn the trade under the supervision of mother and the other "expert". The bakery was located behind our house on Skinner Street (now ⁹48th St.). The house was demolished in 1980 to make room for expansion of the "Athabasca Echo". (It is also interesting to note that the house directly south of ours was the residence of Major MacDonell, superintendent of the R.C.N.W.M. Police, and still stands to this date(1981)).

My eldest sister Letitia (Letty) was born in Athabasca in July 1907. She was the first white baby born there and, because of her mass of soft curly hair, she was a great favorite of my people's Indian friends. In April 1909 my twin sister Violet and I arrived, but, I must admit, some of the Indians did not look so favorably on us, as they believed we were a divided spirit and, therefore, an evil omen. Our only claim to fame was that we were the first white twins born in the town. Later, my sister's blonde hair won the approval of the Indians but alas, as my hair was

dark brown, I was just tolerated.

My Dad used to make bread for the trappers and traders who travelled out of Athabasca in the winter. To make it easier for them to handle on the trails, he sliced the bread and wrapped it in brown paper, so his customers could use the amount they needed without having to thaw the whole loaf. This leads me to believe that the first sliced bread retailed in Alberta came from Johnston's Bakery in Athabasca as early as 1907 - 1908.

I remember the fire in 191³₂ that leveled a great many of the business establishments. My two sisters and I were awakened by the brightness in our bedroom and started talking, only to be told, by our parents, to go back to sleep. When we complained that our room was too light, we were informed that it was just the sunrise, and then it dawned on them that, as our bedroom was on the west side of the house, they had better investigate. When they walked in they could see the reflection of the flames on the walls. Looking out of the window they were horrified to see the buildings on the north and west of our home engulfed in flames. My sisters and I were bundled up and taken up the hill to the home of Frank ^{Falconer} Falkner, the owner of the hardware store, where we were put on the living room floor, along with the other children who had been evacuated from the centre of town. Dad and Mother then rushed back home where, with the help of willing hands, our furniture and possessions were carried to the street. Using wet blankets, Dad, and some of the town's people, were able to extinguish the live sparks that landed on the bakery and the

store. For some unknown reason these potential fire hazards did not land on the house roof, and when, with the help of the bucket brigade, the fire finally burned itself out, our buildings were intact. However the Police Barracks, immediately north of us, was completely destroyed. All that remained of several business establishments, the main hotel, located where the present hotel now stands, and everything for nearly a half block south of this building, were blackened skeletons. For years some of the basements bore witness to a disaster that practically wiped out the town. After the fire the R.C.N.W.M. Police was moved out of Athabasca and in later years the Provincial Police took on the job of keeping "law and order".

For a few prosperous years Athabasca experienced a real estate boom helped along with the coming of the C.N.R. All freight northbound from the town was shipped by scows or motor boat, and, in the winter, by dog team. New comers came to take up homesteads or to open new businesses.

A very pleasant memory comes back to me of a horse, owned by Captain ^{DENT}~~Mills~~, a veteran of the Boer War, who brought back with him his faithful companion to live out its days in peace. This animal had the run of the town, and no one objected to it nibbling on a few choice tidbits from their gardens. It was not uncommon to see three or four youngsters at a time "going for a ride" on the back of this battle scarred old veteran.

Mr. Bill Day owned a team of young moose with which he used to travel around the country. He made a trip to Edmonton where he caused quite a sensation. All would go well until the moose decided to go their own way across country instead of travelling on the road. Nothing stopped them; no fence too high for them to take in their stride, and Bill had many a spill and spent hours tracking his team and mending his sleigh.

Dad filed on a homestead approximately six miles north of Athabasca, on the old Peace River Trail. In order to be eligible for his title, Mother and we girls lived there in the summer. Dad still kept his business going by living in town and coming out on the week ends to clear land. After the First World War we took up permanent residence there for a short period of time.

During the Flu epidemic of 1919 my two sisters and I were very sick and Dr. Meyers persuaded our parents to bring us into town where we would be near medical assistance. We were bundled up and taken to Athabasca in Mr. Pettiford's democrat. (He was the telephone lineman.) As he had the fastest team in the district, it was imperative that he get across the river before the ferry had to be taken out because of the ice floes. It was a hectic trip for three very sick young girls, and, it was the last time we were to be outdoors until the early spring. It was due to our Mother's excellent nursing that we recovered with no serious after effects.

In the winter of 1920, another flu epidemic broke out but not as many people were effected and Dr. Meyers asked Mother to help care for his patients who lived about nine miles north of our home. So Dad and we girls had to manage on the homestead for a few long weeks. My mother was one of those fortunate people who, although exposed to the "Flu", never took sick, and was able to leave her family in Dad's capable hands, and move into an area rampant with the disease and nurse those who so badly needed help.

During the summers of 1920 and 1921 Dad took on the job of Ferryman. He lived in the "ferryshack", a two room building provided by the government for the employee and his family, located on the north bank of the Athabasca river. Mother and we girls stayed on the homestead in the summer of 1920, but moved into the "ferryshack" for the 1921 season.

In 1920 when the new ferry was launched the cable broke, and Dad and the partially submerged ferry floated down the river. By running back and forth from side to side of the ferry he was able to keep it from totally sinking. Fortunately he was able to use a rope, that had been left on the ferry, to snag a tree that was quite close to the shore. When rescuers arrived by motor boat they dubbed him "Captain Chris Johnston" for his efforts in saving the new ferry.

In the winter of 1922 we moved to Edmonton where my parents operated a bakery on 111 Ave. close to 95 A St. Dad died in the fall of 1934 and Mother passed away in 1960 in her eighty-fifth

year.

This is my small tribute to two of Alberta's pioneers who helped to make our province one of Canada's "Best".

Five photos enclosed in separate envelope. Please return when finished with them.

D. P. Gooding