
Colourful Characters

Notable People from
Edson & Area

Galloway Station Museum

Wop May (1896-1952):

Captain Wilfrid Reid 'Wop' May was a WWI flying ace and a pioneer in the aviation industry. His family moved from Manitoba to Edmonton in 1902. In 1916, May joined the Canadian Army and when his battalion was shipped to England in 1917, he and a friend applied to join the Royal Flying Corps. By February 1918, May had completed training and was moved to a fighter training squadron.¹

On April 21, 1918, May was involved in one of the most famous air battles of WWI. He was given the task of watching for enemy planes – avoiding engagement in any direct fighting – but when he spotted another plane doing the same thing, he decided to attack. Unknown to him at the time, this plane was piloted by Wolfram von Richthofen, cousin of Manfred von Richthofen – a German fighter pilot who is better known as the Red Baron. He is credited with eighty air combat victories during WWI (more than any other pilot), and is arguably the most famous flying ace of all time.²

May attempted to shoot down his target, but was soon forced to try and leave the fight when his guns jammed. The Baron, who had witnessed his cousin being attacked, began to chase May. Roy Brown, May's squadron leader, noticed the chase and intercepted, shooting at The Red Baron. Manfred von Richtofen was killed that day, and while what actually happened is still a subject of dispute, it is believed by many that Australian soldiers on the ground were actually responsible for shooting down the Red Baron.³

After the war, May returned to Edmonton and started May Airplanes Ltd with his brother, Court.⁴ In September of 1919, May was hired by the RCMP during their manhunt of John Larson, who was wanted for a break-in and two counts of murder. May flew Detective James Campbell to Edson, briefly landing on Main Street, in what was the first aerial police chase in Canadian history.⁵ Wop May was also involved in a number of other significant aviation events in Canada. He was a founding member of the Edmonton and North Alberta Flying Club in 1927, and eventually helped established Commercial Airways. That company eventually became part of Canadian Pacific Air Lines – the president of which was Grant McConachie, a business partner of Prince Leo Galitzine.⁶ May was also involved in the manhunt of the infamous Albert Johnson - also known as The Mad Trapper of Rat River.⁷ For more information, see *Flying Into History*, [here](#).

¹ Sheila Reid, *Wings of a Hero: Canadian Pioneer Flying Ace Wilfrid Wop May*, (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing Limited, 1997), 10.

² Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 12.

³ Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 20.

⁴ Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 25.

⁵ For more detailed info about the manhunt for John Larson, see *Flying Into History: Wop May and the First Aerial Police Chase in Canada*, a report by the Galloway Station Museum.

⁶ For more information about Prince Leo, see *Royalty in the Muskeg: Life of Prince Leo Galitzine*, a report by the Galloway Station Museum.

⁷ Reid, *Wings of a Hero*, 72.

P.A. “Baldy” Robb (1887-1955):

Peter Addison Robb was born in Scotland, though his family moved to Manitoba when he was still very young.⁸ As a teenager, he started a ranch near Edson (closer to what was once the town of Wolf Creek), but it would be accurate to say Robb was a man of many trades. As well as being a rancher, at one time or another he was also a prospector, big-game guide, and lumberman. He also freighted supplies for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway on the Coal Branch line, and carried mail and passengers on his stage on the Grande Prairie Trail.⁹

Robb and his business partners, Dr. A.E. Porter and Joe Morino, were responsible for the claims and subsequent development of several mines, most notably those which would come to be known as Minehead and Bryan on the Coal Branch.¹⁰ The camp at Minehead (which shared a name with their business – the Minehead Coal Company), eventually became reincorporated as the hamlet of Robb.¹¹ Although it is generally agreed upon that the site was named after P.A. Robb, he himself insisted that it was named for “some fellow down East”.¹²

As a big-game guide, Robb attracted many visitors to the area. With a guarantee that customers would have the opportunity to bring home a moose or other game, people from all over Canada and the United States arrived to take advantage of this promise. Out on the trails, when a customer was preparing to take aim at an animal, Robb would stand behind them with his own gun, and shoot at the same time. This more or less guaranteed that the paying customer would “shoot and kill” their target, and help to ensure more business. If the expedition ended without finding any game, Robb would have a moose already killed and packaged at the train station, ready to take home when the visitors departed.¹³

Robb’s interests included politics as well, and his passion led him to trouble with the law a time or two. In the mid 1920s, he spent a term at the Prince Albert Penitentiary after being convicted of tampering with the ballots. However, in the end he served less than a year of his five year sentence – perhaps due in part to the petition signed by hundreds asking for his early release.¹⁴

The nickname “Baldy” is somewhat ambiguous, since Robb was known to have boasted a full head of hair well into his later years.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Baldy Robb is undoubtedly one of the most famous characters of the Coal Branch.

⁸ Daniel Kyba, and Jane Ross, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch: A Guide To Jasper's Front Ranges*, (Calgary, AB: Rocky Mountain Books, 2001), 52.

⁹ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 52.

¹⁰ Toni Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, (Edmonton, AB: D.W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., 1976), 324.

¹¹ Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 324.

¹² Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 10.

¹³ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 52.

¹⁴ Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 324.

¹⁵ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 52.

John L'Heureux (1870-1956):

The Edson area was home to many interesting characters who are not well-known outside of the local population. John L'Heureux, better known as Jack the Frog, was one such person. Local criminals are not often remembered fondly by the general population of a town. L'Heureux is an exception to this.

Jack the Frog - given this nickname due to his French heritage - moved to Alberta from California during the early days of the Coal Branch.¹⁶ He and his wife, Mamie, started a restaurant in Coalspur, which quickly gained a good reputation due to excellent food and generous hospitality. L'Heureux also ran the stagecoach between Edson and Coalspur for a number of years, but that business ended with the opening of the Coal Branch highway in the 1940s.¹⁷ He was known as an entrepreneur due to his varying professions, not all of which were legal. Although well known because of his restaurant, Jack the Frog's true fame came from his status of being the Coal Branch's preeminent bootlegger.

John L'Heureux's moonshine was famous throughout the Coal Branch, and even after the Prohibition ended in 1923 people continued to buy his illegal liquor. Although L'Heureux's moonshine business began shortly after his arrival in Alberta (it was up and running during the days of his restaurant), it didn't become a primary source of income until several years later. Mamie began to lose her eyesight, and as a result the couple's restaurant was forced to close soon after. They relocated to a home in the Weald area, and the bootlegging business began in earnest.¹⁸

Jack the Frog is said to have manufactured, produced, and sold 'quality moonshine'.¹⁹ It was distilled twice, was most likely over 100 proof alcohol, burned clearly, and could also be used as fuel for lamps and speeders.²⁰ The railway workers in the Coal Branch acted as L'Heureux's guardians. There was a period of time during which the only way the RCMP could reach Weald and the surrounding areas was by train. If there were police on board an approaching train, the whistle would be blown in a certain pattern. This would warn L'Heureux and give him time to hide his still and other evidence of moonshine production.²¹

Even after the closure of his restaurant, L'Heureux was still well-known for his generosity and hospitality. He gave candy to children, and liquor to their parents. It was also said that L'Heureux never spent any silver coins he earned, and instead gave them away to children. One woman remembers that as a child she was able to afford her very first dress because of the money that Jack the Frog had given her.²²

¹⁶ Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 68.

¹⁷ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 35.

¹⁸ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 35.

¹⁹ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 35.

²⁰ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 35.

²¹ Kyba, *Exploring the Historic Coal Branch*, 35.

²² Margaret Kidner, interview by author, Edson, AB, 2011.

Jack the Frog was caught by the RCMP in 1928.²³ A police officer recognized Dobbin, L'Heureux's white horse, in town one day and cut it free from the hitching post. Without a rider, the horse simply walked home, and the police followed it directly to the bootlegger's still. L'Heureux was sent to the Fort Saskatchewan Gaol, and upon his return the first thing he did was shoot Dobbin.²⁴ He continued his moonshine business for several more years, buying new still parts under other men's names and setting them up in a different location.²⁵

Stanley Spencer

The tale of Stanley Spencer is one of a true pioneer. Stanley moved to the Wolf Creek area in 1930 to a piece of land alongside the creek.²⁶ He had spent most of his life in southern Saskatchewan where it was constantly dry. He dreamed of building his homestead near water to make up for all of those years.²⁷ Mr. Spencer was most famously known for 'driving' his car to Edson. More commonly known as a bennet buggy, this car was modified to be pulled by a team of two horses. After he originally purchased his car and drove into town, he realized how expensive gasoline prices were and vowed never to pay again to drive his car around.²⁸

Stanley made his income by selling cabbages to the local store for two cents a pound. The store would typically buy 2 tons of cabbage! He tended to his garden using hand tools he had forged and carved himself. The gallons of water that were needed for the cabbages was hauled by Stanley using a yoke carrying two buckets.²⁹

He lived by himself in a small handmade cabin for his entire life in Wolf Creek. It wasn't until he was 79, that he was forcefully removed from his cabin when Wolf Creek flooded leaving him stranded in the 2nd story of his home. He was rescued by RCMP on a speed boat, who retrieved Mr. Spencer from a window on the top floor.³⁰

Stanley never returned back to his house and spent the rest of his years in a retirement home. Some years later, the new owner of the property, Heide Toner ventured into his cabin to find an array of items left exactly where Stanley had placed them. Legend has it that Stanley buried thousands of dollars in coffee cans throughout his property. He only revealed this secret to his healthcare aid in his final days. Stanley's lost riches have never been found.³¹

²³ Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 78.

²⁴ David Jones, *Feasting on Misfortune: Journeys of the Human Spirit in Alberta's Past*, (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 1998).

²⁵ Ross, *Oh! The Coal Branch*, 223.

²⁶ Yellowhead Publishers, *Pinedale Wolf Creek Memories*, (Edson, AB, 1981),136

²⁷ Yellowhead Publishers, *Pinedale Wolf Creek Memories*, 136

²⁸ Yellowhead Publishers, *Pinedale Wolf Creek Memories*, 136

²⁹ Yellowhead Publishers, *Pinedale Wolf Creek Memories*, 136

³⁰ Yellowhead Publishers, *Pinedale Wolf Creek Memories*, 136

³¹ Heidi Toner, interview by author, Edson, AB, 2014

John (Jack) Gregg

Although it is not officially known who was the first person to come across coal on the Alberta Coal Branch, one of the earliest prospectors in the area was John Gregg, who would later stake the original claim that would begin the Coal Branch's prosperity in the early to mid-1900's.³²

Prior to his arrival in Alberta, John Gregg led a truly fascinating life. At the young age of six years old, Gregg's mother was murdered in a raid while his family was making their way west to Oregon. When he was just 10 years old, he left home and made a living as best as he could working for mining outfits and on ranches.³³

In his teenage years, Gregg joined General Custer's Scouts and was later involved in a major battle with Geronimo, in which he was wounded.³⁴ During the infamous 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn years later, Gregg was recruited by General Custer to deliver messages some 150 miles away from the battle site³⁵. In the end, Custer, along with every man in his battalion, was killed³⁶, yet Gregg made it out alive due to this expedition, albeit with seven gunshot wounds.³⁷

Gregg moved to Canada in 1894³⁸, travelling up north to the Northwest Territories where he took up trapping and prospecting.³⁹

Near the turn of the century, Gregg partnered with N.H. Jock, who he had met during his travels, to run a trading post at Prairie Creek, which is known as Muskuta Creek today. The post was later sold to an early Grand Trunk Pacific Railway survey team in 1904.^{40 41}

It was in 1904 that Gregg married Mary Cardinal—daughter of Stoney Chief Cardinal—who often accompanied him on his prospecting trips.⁴² Mary led Gregg and fellow prospectors to

³² Northern Rockies Highway Guide by Fred Pollett, Robert Udell, Peter Murphy and Tom Peterson of the Foothills Research Institute (page 36)

³³ Edmonton Journal, January 13, 1911 (page 6). "Once Custer Man; Now at the Pass"

³⁴ Edson-Jasper Signal, July 3, 1941 (page 1). "101-year old-timer revisits Jasper haunts".

³⁵ Edmonton Journal, January 13, 1911 (page 6). "Once Custer Man; Now at the Pass"

³⁶ History; www.history.com/news/little-bighorn-battle-facts-causes

³⁷ Edmonton Journal, January 13, 1911 (page 6). "Once Custer Man; Now at the Pass"

³⁸ Edmonton Journal, January 13, 1911 (page 6). "Once Custer Man; Now at the Pass"

³⁹ Edson-Jasper Signal, July 3, 1941 (page 1). "101-year old-timer revisits Jasper haunts".

⁴⁰ Edmonton Journal, May 29, 1930 (page 13). "Young Fellow of 89 Roamed West in Old Days When it Was Wild, Woolly"

⁴¹ Edson-Jasper Signal, July 3, 1941 (page 1). "101-year old-timer revisits Jasper haunts".

⁴² Exploring the Historic Coal Branch by Daniel Kyba and Jane Ross (page 188)

coal deposits in the Nikanassin range of the Canadian Rocky Mountains, although the Indigenous tribes were aware of ‘the stones that burn’ for many years prior.

Either way, Gregg did not immediately stake the coal because at the time there was no demand for the product. But when the railway began to reach the area several years later, and as there was an increasing demand for coal, Gregg returned to these deposits in 1909 and marked his claim, thus establishing what would later be known as Mountain Park—the first mining town on the Alberta Coal Branch. Gregg was also responsible for staking another claim in the area in the summer of 1911, which would ultimately become Luscar.^{43 44}

Gregg was a witty character throughout all his life. At the ripe old age of 105, Gregg was dancing at a social function and slipped and fell on the floor. When people anxiously rushed to his side, he shouted, “What’s the matter with you people? I’m just turning a somersault!”⁴⁵

After the death of his wife, Gregg moved to Florida in 1920 and died there at the age of 105 in 1945.⁴⁶

John Gregg was the first of many intriguing people to be involved in the rich history of the Alberta Coal Branch.

Please contact the Galloway Station Museum at manager@gallowaystationmuseum.com or call 780-723-5696 for a list of references.

⁴³ Oh! The Alberta Coal Branch by Toni Ross (pages 7-11; 31)

⁴⁴ The Luscar Story by N. Allen Maydonik (page 13)

⁴⁵ The Miami News, September 25, 1945 (page 11). “Ex-Miner, 105, Dies in Miami”

⁴⁶ The Miami Herald, September 25, 1945 (page 8). Obituary of John James Gregg.