
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

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 extreme 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

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Other people worth mentioning:

Charles Melville Hays (1856-1912) was the president of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railways. He died aboard the *RMS Titanic*, and Edson Joseph Chamberlin (for whom our town is named), took over the position of GTPR President.

Father Louis Etienne Culerier

Raymond Brutinel

Robert Wesley Jones

“Black Frank” Knezevich

John Gregg