

# TELLING OUR STORIES

Volume 13

DECEMBER 2021

Issue 1

## YOU'VE GOT MAIL

## SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED

DELIVERY METHODS IN  
THE SOUTH PEACE

— — —

## ESCAPE BY MAIL



A PUBLICATION OF THE SOUTH PEACE REGIONAL ARCHIVES

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Cover: Edward Croken and ?, drivers of the Grande Prairie post Office mail vans ca. 1980 (SPRA 112.02.41)

Note on Photographs: Photographs featured in *Telling Our Stories* are unedited, apart from minimal cropping. In cases where substantial cropping may impact the context of the photograph, this will be noted in the caption.

## A Publication of the South Peace Regional Archives

**Our Vision:** Preserving and Sharing the Past.  
**Our Mission:** The purpose of South Peace Regional Archives is to gather, preserve, and share the historical records of municipalities, organizations, businesses, families, and individuals within the region, both now and in the future.

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### Mailing Address

Box 687, Grande Prairie, AB T8V 3A8  
Telephone: 780-830-5105

E-mail: [director@southpeacearchives.org](mailto:director@southpeacearchives.org)  
[www.southpeacearchives.org](http://www.southpeacearchives.org)

# Letter from the Editor

As I sit here typing this letter into my computer and answering various phone calls, emails, and messages, it is impossible to ignore the impact that communication has on our lives every day. In our busy world of technological innovation, we wanted to take a moment in this issue to reflect on non-electronic forms of communication and how people have connected with each other throughout our history.

This issue explores many different methods of communication from “Plains Sign Talk” to airmail. Join us as we explore how the postal system was established in the Peace Country and some of the hiccups that occurred along the way. See how the non-electronic communication impacted livelihoods, love lives, and even an escape from a First World War POW camp. And of course, test your skills with our Postal Puzzle!

This issue also marks my first contribution as editor. I would like to thank all of the staff, volunteers, and guest contributors without whom this publication would not be possible. I would also like to thank all of our members and subscribers for their continued support of the South Peace Regional Archives. We wish you all happy holidays and look forward to more *Telling Our Stories* in the new year.

Ellyn Vandekerkhove  
SPRA Executive Director

## TAKE NOTE: Holidays at the Archives

Once again, the Archives’ Elf on the Shelf, **Fred Fonds**, will return from the North Pole on **December 1st** for another holiday season. **Like and follow us on Facebook** to see Fred’s naughty and nice adventures at the Archives all month!



During the month of December, the Archives will be operating with reduced staff; as a result, there may be a delay in service. Archives staff will be **unavailable** from **December 18, 2021** until **January 3, 2022**. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Health and safety remains the Archives’ top priority. **We hope to partially reopen to the public in January**, pending provincial health regulations. Watch the Archives Facebook page and blog for details.

From all of us at the South Peace Regional Archives, we wish you a safe and happy holiday season!

## Territory Acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect that the South Peace Regional Archives is located on the ancestral and traditional lands of many Indigenous peoples. This territory is covered by Treaty 8, signed in 1899. The continuing relationship between Indigenous peoples and this land contributes to the rich knowledge and culture of the South Peace region.

We are grateful to serve the people on this land and honor the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

# Welcome, Ellyn

## SPRA’s New Executive Director

*The South Peace Regional Archives is pleased to introduce our newest team member, Ellyn Vandekerkhove. Ellyn is a long time Peace Country resident who has recently moved to Grande Prairie and begun work as our Executive Director. Please join us in welcoming her to the Archives!*

Hello everyone! My name is Ellyn Vandekerkhove and I am thrilled to join the South Peace Regional Archives team! Having grown up in Fairview, the Peace Country has always held a special place in my heart. It was on a field trip to Historic Dunvegan Provincial Historic Site in the second grade that I first fell in love with history, but it was not until I was working on my undergraduate degree in history at the University of Lethbridge that I began to appreciate the importance of heritage preservation to a community. This fascination with historical and archival preservation continued as I began working in the heritage field and continued my education through the Graduate Diploma in Heritage Resource Management through Athabasca University.

I began my career working at Historic Dunvegan, first as a costumed interpreter, petticoats and all, and then as the Program Coordinator. During this time I

also worked in several short-term contract positions, completing projects for various Fairview area museums. More recently, I took a brief detour from human history into the pre-historic past to work at the Philip J Currie Dinosaur Museum as the Content Communication and Marketing Coordinator.

I am incredibly excited to return to human history and to begin working with the amazing team here at the South Peace Regional Archives. We have big plans for the next few years and I can’t wait to get started. I look forward to meeting you all in the future!



## I want to hear from you!

Do you have a favourite collection at the Archives or a project that you’ve completed using records from the Archives? Which of our services do you find the most valuable? I want to hear from you! Your feedback will help me familiarize myself with the collection and organization and succeed in this position. Call the Archives at 780-830-5105 and ask to speak with Ellyn, or email [Director@SouthPeaceArchives.org](mailto:Director@SouthPeaceArchives.org).

# Facts & Firsts

## Post Offices, Postmasters, & Mail Delivery in the Peace

*The following information was taken from Isabel Campbell's "Postal Service History of the Peace River Country" which we have in our reference files (510.05.03). Much of the information in that document was reported in the Herald Tribune newspaper.*

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The first official mail carrier for the North was J.K. Cornwall who carried in the first mail from Edmonton on his back. Before Cornwall, the Hudson's Bay Co. "considered mail for the North its private domain" (pg.3). J.K. Cornwall brought mail at established intervals to trading posts for later distribution.

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According to A.W. McQuarrie, the first post office established in the Grande Prairie district was established by the "Bull Outfit" near the Beaverlodge River in 1909 (pg. 4). However, this may not be true, as other sources state that when the Bull Outfit came to this area, they encountered a settlement at Lake Saskatoon which had its own post office (which was called Beaverlodge at the time).



The first post office at the original Beaverlodge settlement was called Redlow. It was established in 1910 and was located in R.C. Lossing's home. Mr. Lossing was the first postmaster there (pg. 2). The post office was moved to I.E. Gaudin's Store in June 1915.

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On May 15, 1911 the first post office in Grande Prairie was opened by J.O. Patterson in his caboose. Patterson was sworn in as postmaster of the Grande Prairie post office before he left Edmonton. Later that year, the Patterson family (including J.O.'s father, Alphaeus) built a two story frame building which they used as a store and post office. The Union Bank of Canada also shared that space with them (pg. 6). Patterson, in addition to being postmaster, served as the Assistant Post Office Inspector for this region from 1912-1919.

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Mr. Church and Mr. Weatherly were in charge of the Edson Mail Route which brought mail in to Grande Prairie via the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail during 1913. The mail was rarely late even though the conditions were very wet and disagreeable. During that time an average of 30 sacks of mail came up the Edson mail route to Grande Prairie twice weekly. Although their service was commendable, this contract changed hands in December 1913 to "Baldy" Robb which left residents quite unhappy. By May 19, 1914, the *Herald Tribune* was reporting that the mail service was in a

*Left: The J. O. Patterson family camping and running their store and Grande Prairie post office from their caboose. 1911 (SPRA 032.08.08.1096)*



"deplorable condition" and that hardly any mail comes through—instead "passengers apparently come first" (pg. 10).

The Edson-Grande Prairie mail route was discontinued on April 27, 1915. Mail coming to Grande Prairie would instead come from McLennan on the ED&BC (Edmonton, Dunvegan, & British Columbia) Railway (pg. 13).

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The Parcel Post System went into effect on February 10, 1914 which allowed parcels to be sent by post. In February, March, and April of that year, parcels weighing more than six pounds were not accepted. After that time, the maximum weight for parcels changed to 11 pounds (pg. 9).

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A new post office in Hermit Lake opened on May 1, 1915 at Mr. Cranston's home with Mrs. Braybrooke serving as postmistress (pg. 13).

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William Leonard was appointed as postmaster at the new post office in (Old) Bezanson in December 1915 (pg. 14).

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In February 1916, the Grande Prairie Post Office added locked post boxes for the first time (pg. 15).

*Above: Buckskin Charlie driving the Mail Team across a river on the snowy Edson-Grande Prairie Trail. ca. 1912 (SPRA 024.01.09.15)*

By the end of 1917, The Grande Prairie Post Office served as the central distribution point for 21 other post offices. Every month an average of 700 sacks of mail were sorted there in addition to 1,500 items of registered mail (pg. 18).

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In January 1919 the Goodfare Post Office was officially opened with J. Third serving as postmaster (pg. 21).

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A new post office was established in Rio Grande in May 1919 with Mary Scully serving as postmistress (pg. 21). The Rio Grande Post Office was later reduced to ashes on December 13, 1955 (pg.112).

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The first person to receive air mail in Grande Prairie was Mayor G.A. James in August of 1920. A Mr. Fraser from Sexsmith also received a letter from the same aircraft (pg. 23).

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October 1939 saw the establishment of a post office in Grovedale. Helen Bain was the first postmistress (pg. 81).

# Mail Mishaps

## Damage & Delays in the Postal Service

*The following information was taken from Isabel Campbell's "Postal Service History of the Peace River Country" which we have in our reference files (510.05.03). Much of the information in that document was reported in the Herald Tribune newspaper.*

The delivery of mail to this region was not always an easy, smooth endeavor. Delays and mishaps could be caused by any number of reasons including weather, happenstance, and human error.

Ferries appear to have been a key place where mishaps and delay occurred. On June 5, 1913 a mail stage was crossing the Smoky River on the ferry when the cable broke. The ferry (and the mail stage) was carried 18 miles downstream before they were able to beach it (pg. 8). Later, in October 1917, mail driver Williamson encountered "considerable delay and inconvenience" when attempting to cross the Smoky River because the ferry was completely frozen in. They had to "chop out the ice around the ferry and

make a channel near shore before the mail could be taken across" (pg. 18). Our last mail related ferry story was reported in the *Herald Tribune* on June 7, 1934. The ferry was not running on the Friday previous which held up the mail driver from across the river. This resulted in driver A.K. Watts walking to Wembley while carrying the Pipestone mail sacks (pg. 61).

Mail delays and mishaps were sometimes caused by the mail carriers themselves. The *Herald Tribune* reported on May 18, 1915 that a prominent farmer "found the mail rig a couple of miles out of town, the horses were feeding along the road with the driver helplessly drunk in the wagon...This is not the first instance of drunken mail drivers on this service that has been drawn to our attention and it is little wonder that the citizens are asking themselves whether the mail service is used for the transportation of booze or not" (pg. 13).

Stories also abounded of intentional mishandling of mail by the mail carriers. According to A.W. McQuarrie, the volume of mail had increased so much during settlement that "at least a ton of mail was sent out from Edson twice a week. Much of the increase was due to parcel post" (pg. 4). The drivers believed that most of the parcels contained women's hats and to **(Continued next page)**

*Left: Taft's Mail Stage is stuck in a mud hole on the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail. Men are trying to free the wagon using logs. 1912 (SPRA 024.01.09.17)*



discourage this practice, the drivers would put the parcels at the bottom of the wagon and pile the other, heavier sacks on top. On another occasion, McQuarrie noticed that one driver was intentionally trying to break something in one of the sacks because he didn't believe that type of item should be sent by post and he wanted to discourage that behaviour (pg. 4). McQuarrie also heard stories of how some mail drivers dealt with catalogues and other advertisements. One driver allegedly stopped the mail wagon on a bridge over a river and "opened the sacks which

contained catalogues which were not sealed, and dumped the contents into the river" (pg.5). This was the same man from the previous story.

Sometimes mail going missing had nothing to do with weather or mishandling by post carriers, instead theft was the cause. On June 5, 1934 a Grande Prairie youth (between 17 and 18 years old) was sent for trial for two counts of stealing a post letter. He pled guilty and was sentenced to three years in Prince Albert penitentiary (pg. 61).

## Plains Sign Talk

*The following article was contributed by Victoria Wanihadie. Victoria is a student and educator of traditional Indigenous knowledge. She is a volunteer member of the Indigenous History Committee.*

For the past three years, I have been studying Linguistics within the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) at the University of Alberta. One of our past discussions included endangered indigenous languages. Imagine my surprise to find out that Plains Sign Talk was also included as an endangered language. I thought, if I ever have an opportunity to participate in a Plains Sign Talk workshop, I'll jump at that chance.

Within that same time frame, I was invited as a guest to attend the Indigenous Performance Festival in Poundmaker, Saskatchewan. It was there, that I also registered in a Plains Indian Sign Language Camp. Our instructor (Dr. Lanny Real Bird) spoke of the im-

portance of our language and that it defines who we are as a Nation, where we thrive and exist as a people. Dr. Lanny Real Bird brought humor to the language camp and made it fun!

While we were making these signs with our hands to communicate

with each other, it reminded me of my younger days, when I witnessed my dad make these exact same signs as we were trapping and hunting on our ancestral land. My dad learned this form of communication from my great-grandparents and then he shared his knowledge with me and my siblings.

My great-grandparents were Tsaa Dane (Beaver), Tse khene, and Dakelh. My tribes are a part of the great Dene Nation and my ancestors, communicated with the visiting tribes using Plains Sign Talk. Plain Signs Talk is just one of the many forms of communications on haw-gluk-a-naw-chee (Grande Prairie), that my ancestors used to communicate.



*Above: Photograph contributed by Victoria*

# Post Office Memories

## Jennie Croken's Experiences as a Postal Clerk

*Some of our long-time readers may recall having read Jennie Croken's post office memories in a past issue of Telling Our Stories. However, we thought they fit the theme too well not to include in this issue and hope you enjoy Jennie's stories, whether you are revisiting them or reading them for the first time. (SPRA fonds 112, Croken Family fonds)*

Before moving from Clairmont to Grande Prairie in 1954, with my experience of nearly four years in the Clairmont Post Office, I asked Post Master Bond [at Grande Prairie] if I could be hired. He told me that, as yet, married women were not accepted. Near Christmas 1955, however, he phoned and said yes, I could be hired, but only as a temporary clerk, at \$250.00 per month. I accepted.

In the 1950s, mail came in by truck to the south door. Parcels also came by truck, 1st class off the train, and locally the Herald Tribune (which sold for 10 cents a copy). We worked every day of the week, in shifts. On Sunday, if I was on duty, I was allowed two hours to go to church—this was Labour Law. A bin, installed in the north side of the building, was for mail to be dropped in afterhours and Sundays. Some Sundays I found odd things in the mail drop, including, one day, a chicken. I asked the Chinese cook from the Café in the Bus Depot across the street for help. He caught it and was happy.

Christmas was unbelievable. Parcels were stacked high in the middle of the room. Letters, registered and parcel cards to be sorted into boxes. Mail for



*Above: Edward "Mike" Croken sorting mail in the Grande Prairie Post Office on the corner of 101 Avenue and 100th Street, ca. 1980 (SPRA 112.02.40)*

those people without boxes, 1st class, papers, etc. went to general delivery in front.

At the post office, we didn't just receive parcels. Once there was a burial urn, another time a box of bees—some escaped and got into the men's bathroom. Clerk Grant Haiste had a surprise.

One day, I took in a paper parcel over the counter for Edmonton, not knowing there were \$20.00 counterfeit bills. Traced back, it was discovered that I was the clerk at that time, who accepted it.

Another time, as we were putting letters through the cancelling machine, some powder was spotted. We reported it to Post Master Edgson, and he in turn reported it to the RCMP. For the next two days, one of them hid in the Post Master's office, facing General Delivery. We were told to face the office when giving

out letters, and to be slow. This I sometimes forgot to do, even so, the police were out after him. When he was caught, he told police it was for a friend.

At one time, letters were being delivered with \$25.00 cheques from the Provincial Government (perhaps Aberhart). Most of these were thrown (as junk mail) into the garbage bin in the lobby. Then someone caught on that it was for real—what a scramble to the waste paper basket. I cashed mine, bought a high stool and still have it.

A few years later our wickets were busy with customers wanting to buy our 25 cent coins. The old ones now were valuable as the new ones had another metal added.

In 1956, I wrote an exam at the Legion, an application for promotion as Postal Officer 2 or Postal Clerk 2, and to be on permanent staff. I passed and was now qualified to be on rotation, even as Post Master if needed.

The City was growing fast—oil, lumber, etc.—and more room was needed. Carpenters came and began knocking out walls, re-constructing the inside. The federal offices moved into their own buildings, and Janitor Haiste, whose family lived upstairs, also had to leave. All of this happened because Grande Prairie was becoming a City in 1958. On the great day, as cold as it was, supervisor, Jim Turner and I went to the door as the letter was handed in. Our stay was short, it was very cold.

In April 1959 I took maternity leave (without pay) and Edward "Mike" was born August 4, 1959. When the baby was six months old, I was told, "Come back to work or resign," so in January 1960 I came back. I had no other choice, as I had a sick husband and there was very little social assistance. A man from an office

*Right: Jennie Croken's last day at the post office, 1980 (SPRA 112.02.44)*

in Edmonton came up. He laid out a budget—10% for food, 10% for clothes, etc. and if I had a trip to Edmonton, they'd say, "where did you get the money?" He said, "My advice is go back to work."

To get a live-in babysitter wasn't easy. Through a friend I was able to get Mona Norman from Buffalo Lakes. She stayed until Ed went to kindergarten at Avondale School. His teacher there was a classmate of mine in Grade XII at the Grande Prairie High School, Grace Stewart.

Back at work in January 1960, the Canada Post Carriers were now sorting alongside of us. We didn't dare make a mistake, we soon would be put straight. Then the Carriers were moved upstairs, a conveyer was set up, and we would put the Carriers' mail up the conveyer in trays. However, they had to come downstairs to the front to get registered letters, postage due stamps, and letters to be re-addressed, etc. Taxis would take the mail carriers to their routes.

In April 1961 my husband passed away. Shortly after that I had exams—Postage Guide exam as well as the Case exam. I had to know all of the post offices in each town that the train stopped on all lines in Alberta and British Columbia. An examiner from Edmonton



came up. He had been on these routes at one time. I did O.K., so the Post Master was happy, as was the examiner. Not until I finished did I realize that he had worked with both Pat and Rudy Croken in 1916 on the railway out of Rycroft.

The Postal Union was formed in 1968. It was needed at that time, however, in not too many years it was out of hand. Postal Codes came in the 1970s, so we had to learn those, and in 1972, Thunder Bird Air Services started. All mail was put on 1st class air service to Edmonton as it was the Distribution Centre. Parcels and papers still went out on the trucks. We had to fill postal meters with the time and day, didn't dare make a mistake, as the Post Master had to report letters here, the time and arrival in Toronto and England and it was a matter of a few days.

Rural Route boxes were set up in the country. We sorted mail for those separately. The Rural Couriers would come in, do their own sort to take out to their Routes. Proctor & Gamble Pulp Mill mail we sorted into a bag and Dave Hartman picked it up and delivered that.

In the early 70s, I remember mail put in a bag for the silver-coloured Air Stream Caravan groups that were



coming through from the USA to Alaska. Roger Field remembered them here already about 1956, when they came in groups and parked where the Swa-navon School is now. After the Rotary Campsite was opened, they would stop there to rest for a few days and get their mail here. They were entertained by our City.

Some carriers left when the Proctor and Gamble Mill came in because there was higher pay at the mill. They were being replaced by lady carriers—Post Master Edgson was happy about that. The first lady carrier was Linda Muir. The City was growing rapidly and when there were 19 walks, a couple of trucks were brought in, about 1974 or 75.

My son, Ed, while in High School, came early in the morning to dump bags. After graduation, when he was 17 years old, he came in as a carrier. When the two trucks were purchased, he and Brian Boyd took drivers tests, as did the other carriers. Even I did, with no intention of driving one. Ed drove one of these.

When Ed would be going downstairs for registers, etc., he'd say, "Wonder what mom has for me." One day one of the carriers said, "Is she really your mom?" After that they all called me Mom.

In 1980 I retired, as 65 was the retirement age. The following year the post office became a Crown Corporation. Inside staff and Post Master Ron Hemmingway had a great party for me. Another day, the Carriers and their wives had another party—we had fun, entertainment, music, etc. My son Ed attended and did a presentation.

I enjoyed my work and on my last day I said: "I'll travel to all the countries I've sorted mail to." I believe I did.

Left: Jennie Croken sorting mail in her Ukranian dress, ca. 1980 (SPRA 112.02.42)

# Respect des fonds

## *This issue's Archiveology*

This issue's Archiveology is focusing on one of the most fundamental principles of archival theory — provenance and respect des fonds. Provenance is defined as the origin or source of something. It is also defined as "information regarding the origin, custody, and ownership of an item or collection" (Society of American Archivists dictionary). Respect des fonds is defined as "the principle maintaining records according to their origin and in the units in which they were originally accumulated" (SAA dictionary).

Records in an archives are organized, in part, based on these two things. The result is called a fonds. A fonds is all of the records from an organization, family, or individual that have been created and/or accumulated during the course of their life and set aside for later use. The idea behind these principles is that we can see how an organization functioned organically or perhaps how a person or family made decisions and lived their lives based on the records they left behind.

Only records created or collected and then kept by a particular person, family, or organization belong in their fonds. Records about someone

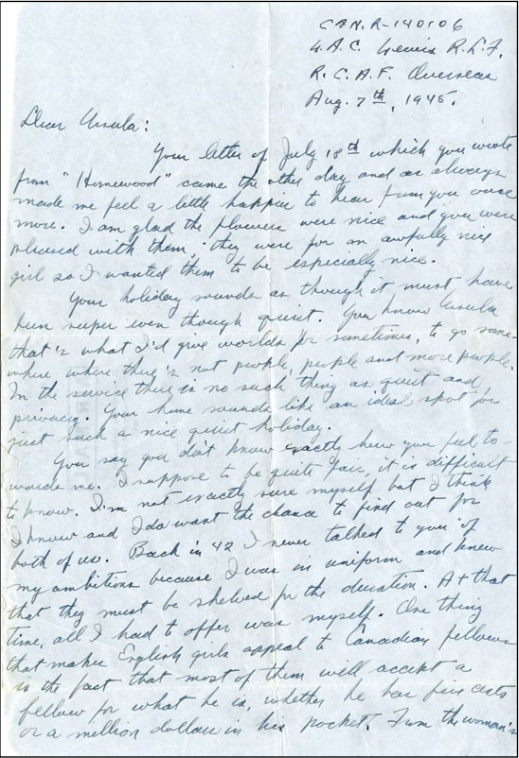
but not kept by that same person do not belong to their fonds. Instead that record may belong to the person who created or collected it in the first place.

An example of this can be seen through records like correspondence. Often, an individual's fonds contains letters written *to* them by various people and organizations but does not contain letters written *by* them (unless they kept a draft copy). Instead, letters written by the first individual may be found in many other people's fonds. This means that we usually have an incomplete picture of what is occurring since we only have half of the letters! If a researcher is lucky,

the other half of the correspondence chain is preserved in the other person's fonds. However this is not guaranteed since not every record is saved (nor should they be) and not everyone gets a fonds.

Even if both sides of a conversation are preserved in an archives, it may be difficult to find them since there are many archives in the world, and not everything is fully described or available online.

Left: Page one of an August 7, 1945 letter from Dick Lewis to Ursula (SPRA 195.01)



# Olwen's Own Words: Getting the Mail

In 1933, Olwen Sanger-Davies travelled from East Sussex, England to the Peace Country to visit her younger brother, Morgan. Olwen documented her visit in two personal scrapbooks, containing approximately 500 drawings and paintings. “Olwen’s Own Words” features excerpts and illustrations from these scrapbooks.



Friday, July 7th

*We motored in to fetch the mail; we, fortunately, had a box so could go late, after the Post Office was officially shut.*

*One square mile has been allowed for the town and the roads all ran at right angles. With the exception of the main street the houses were just dotted about in the grass; some with small gardens round them and with trees right up against the windows.*

*Most of the buildings were just wooden but some: the hospital, schools, and one or two banks, were brick.*



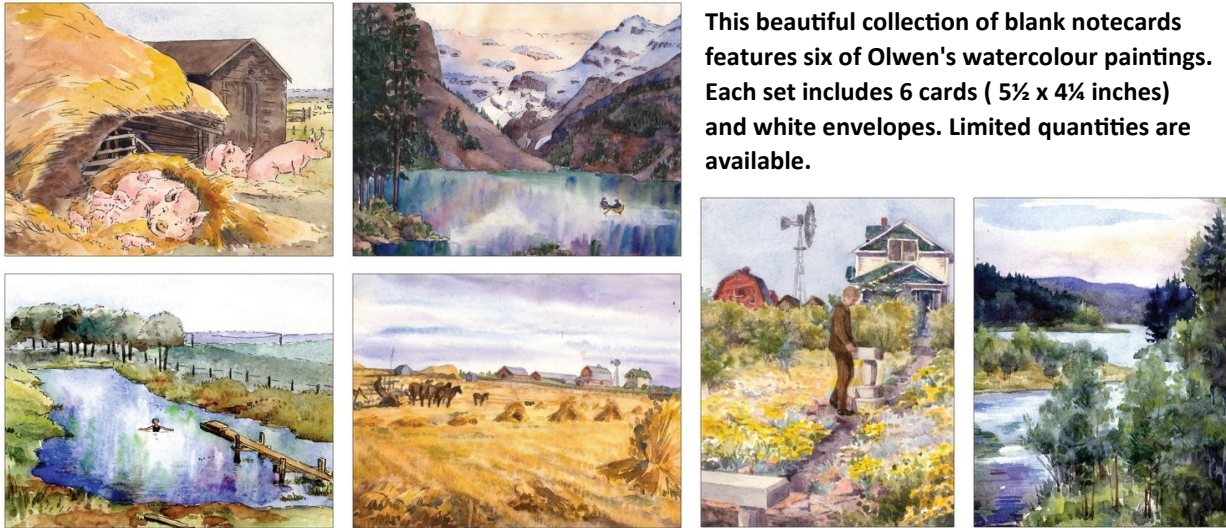
*In one corner of the square mile ran the “creek” or river, which had cut a very deep valley and so was invisible unless one looked down onto it.*

*The water tower with the bell tower nearby—for use in case of fire and curfew—towered above the town, and the elevators near the station were, as usual, the highest erections.*



**Available Now!**  
**Olwen's Card Collection**

**\$10.00**  
Price Includes GST  
Curbside pick-up available



**This beautiful collection of blank notecards features six of Olwen's watercolour paintings. Each set includes 6 cards ( 5½ x 4¼ inches) and white envelopes. Limited quantities are available.**

# Escape By Mail

*During the First World War, receiving mail from home was essential to soldiers' morale. Letters and parcels not only served as a lifeline between the troops and their loved ones, but the packages from home often contained necessities like food to supplement the men's rations and additional clothing to keep them warm in the trenches. The Canadian Postal Corps operated many mobile field post offices to ensure that the men in the trenches could communicate with those at the home front; however, because of the long distance that had to be covered, a letter could take well over a month to reach its destination.*

*For those in prisoner of war camps, the delivery of mail depended on the Prisoner of War Agency established by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Agency was responsible for locating prisoners, inspecting camps, sending care packages, and forwarding letters to prisoners. Private Mervin Cecil Simmons, a South Peace veteran, was held captive for just over a year before finally escaping on his third attempt. Following is an excerpt from his memoir, *Three Times and Out*, that describes just how important mail was to him and his fellow prisoners.*

All the time we had been in

retirement, we were not allowed to write letters or cards, and I began to fear that my people would be very anxious about me... Many parcels had come for me from other friends, too, and the big problem before me now was to find some way to acknowledge them. A card a week, and a letter twice a month, does not permit of a very flourishing correspondence.

A decent German guard consented to take Bromley and me to the building where the parcels were kept for men who were in punishment, and we, being strong in faith, took a wheelbarrow with us. Of course, we had received a number of parcels through our friend the spy, but we hoped there would be

many more. However, I got only one, a good one from G. D. Ellis, Weston, England, and that saved me from a hard disappointment...

A letter came to me from my sister... saying they were worried about me because they had not heard from me, and were afraid I was not receiving my parcels. Then I decided I would have to increase my supply of cards. The Russian prisoners had the same number of cards we had, but seldom wrote any. Poor fellows, they had nobody to write to, and many of them could not write. So with the contents of



*Above: Portrait of Private Mervin Simmons, featured in the frontispiece of *Three Times and Out**

my parcels I bought up a supply of cards. I had, of course, to write them in a Russian's name, for if two cards went into the censor's hands from M. C. Simmons, No. 69, Barrack A, Company 6, something would happen.

So cards went to my friends from "Pte. Ivan Romanoff" or "Pte. Paul Rogowski," saying he was quite well and had seen M. C. Simmons to-day, who was grateful for parcel and had not been able to write lately, but would soon. These rather mystified some of the people who received them... My cousin... wrote a letter back to the Russian whose card they had received, much to his joy and surprise.

One of my great desires at this time was to have a compass, for Bromley and I were determined to make another attempt at escape... At last, after considerable thinking, I sent the following card to a friend of mine with whom I had often worked out puzzles...

DEAR JIM: — I send you this card along with another to come later, which please pass on to Fred. In next parcel, send cheese, please.

Yours as ever,  
M. C. SIMMONS

In the address I slipped in the words — "Seaforth Wds." This I hoped the censor would take to mean — "Seaforth Woods"; and which I hoped my friend would read to mean — "See fourth words"...

After I had sent this away... I wrote a letter to my brother Flint, at Tillsonburg, Ontario, in which I used these words, "I want you to look into this for me"; later on in the letter, when speaking of quite innocent matters which had nothing to do with "compasses," I said, "Look into this for me and if you cannot manage it alone, get Charley Bradburn to help you."

I took the envelope, which had a bluish tint inside and

steamed it open, both the ends and bottom flap, and when it was laid open, I wrote in it in a very fine hand, these words: "I tried to escape, but was caught and my compass taken away from me. Send me another; put it in a cream cheese."

When the envelope was closed, this was almost impossible to see. I knew it was risky, for if I had been found out, I would have been "strafed" for this, just as hard as if I had tried to escape. However, I posted my letter and heard nothing more about it.

I had, through the kindness of friends, received a number of books... and as many of the parcels of the other boys' contained books, too, we decided to put our books together, catalogue them, and have a library. One of the older men became our librarian, and before we left Giessen I think we had a hundred volumes.

The people who sent these books will never know the pleasure they gave us! The games, too, which the Red Cross sent us were never idle, and made many a happy evening for us...

The parcels were an endless source of delight, and I was especially fortunate in having friends who knew just what to send... bacon... fruit-cakes... oatmeal... candy... tobacco...

The distribution of the mails was a time of thrills. One of the Sergeants called it out, while every one crowded eagerly around...

I put in many hours making maps, being as careful as possible not to let the guards see me. I got the maps in a variety of ways. Some of them had been smuggled in in parcels, and some of the prisoners had brought them in when they came...

Just before Christmas Day we got overcoats from the Red Cross, dark blue cloth, full length and well lined.

They had previously sent each of us a blanket.

The treatment of overcoats was to cut a piece right out of one sleeve, and insert a piece of yellowish-brown stuff... We knew that coats were coming for us, and were particularly anxious to get them before they were disfigured with the rings which they would put on or with this band of cloth. If we could get the coats as they came from the Red Cross, they would look quite like civilian's coats, and be a great help to us when we made our next escape...

Larkins, one of the boys who worked in the parcels office, watched for our overcoats, and when they came he slipped them into the stack which had been censored... We had a tin of cocoa, saved from our parcels, and with it we painted rich brown rings on our new coats...

On Christmas Day we had the privilege of boiling in the cook-house the puddings which came in our parcels, and we were given a Christmas card to send instead of the ordinary cards – that was the extent of the Christmas cheer provided for us...

A box of Players' Cigarettes had been sent to me, which I had not yet broken into. I carefully removed the seal, being careful to break it so that it could be put back again without detection. Then I cut my map into pieces corresponding to the size of a cigarette, and, emptying out the tobacco from a few, inserted the section of map instead, and put them carefully in with the label showing. I then

*Right: An embroidered card from World War I, "To my dear little friend Jeannie from Bob Leslie with best wishes for a merry Xmas and Happy new year." Private Robert Leslie was killed in action at Hill 70 on August 21, 1917. (SPRA 1996.5.3)*

closed the box and mended the band so that it looked as if it had not been broken...

It was about May, I think, that a letter came from my brother Flint, telling me he was sending me some of the "cream cheese I was so fond of" – and I knew my compass was on the way.

In about three weeks the parcel came, and I was careful to open the cheese when alone. The lead foil had every appearance of being undisturbed, but in the middle of it I found the compass!

After that we talked over our plans for escape. Edwards and I were the only Canadians in the camp, and we were determined to make a break as soon as the nights got longer. In the early summer, when the daylight lasts so long, we knew we should have no chance, for there were only four or five hours of darkness, but in August we hoped to "start for home."

*Private Mervin Simmons' book, Three Times and Out, is among the many memoirs in the Archives' reference library. It is also available online through Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12880/12880-h/12880-h.htm>) if you are interested in reading more about Private Simmons' prisoner of war camp experiences and escape attempts.*



# Love Letters

## Marriage & the Mail

While the postcard featured on the right appears to have been sent as a joke, the existence of a proposal postcard in the first place makes one wonder about the links between the post and marriage.

The story of Miss Sandra Stenrons, published in the *Daily Herald Tribune* on July 25, 1916, gives one clue. Miss Stenrons had travelled alone more than 2,000 miles from New Hampshire to marry a Grande Prairie area rancher whom she had never met. It is likely that these two were introduced through a marriage club.

As the west opened for mass settlement, newcomers were often single men, leading to a shortage of suitable spouses in the region. Businesses stepped up to address this shortage, selling personal advertisements and creating catalogues to try to match men out west with eligible young women. Interested couples would correspond through letters before deciding to marry. Of course, such mail matches did come with a level of risk, as Miss Stenrons discovered. Upon arriving in Grande Prairie she found not a well-to-do rancher as advertised, but a man who "could support only a bare living." And so, Miss Stenrons returned home alone to New Hampshire.

Mail romances were especially prevalent during the war years, as young couples were brought together and separated by the conflict. After meeting briefly in 1941, Ursula and Dick Lewis wrote letters throughout the war that progressed their relationship from May 16, 1942 when Dick apologized for going "a little romantic on [her]" to November 6, 1945 when he wrote "I know it is late but I just can't go to bed without telling the most wonderful girl in the world how much I love her" and to express his joy she had agreed to marry him (SPRA 195.01) Another young man, Arnold Dryer, even proposed to his sweetheart, Vi, in a letter,



*Above: "A Leap Year Proposal" postcard addressed to Miss Carrie Ward, 1909 (SPRA 1969.60.397)*

writing "as for asking you properly I don't know about that, no fooling, dear, will you marry me at the first chance we get?" (October 8, 1944, SPRA 259.02).

These examples show some of the ways that mail could lead to marriage. Given these links it does seem fitting that the Grande Prairie Herald reported on March 3, 1914 that the first parcel to arrive in Grande Prairie under the new parcel post system was in fact two boxes of wedding invitations.

# Mail Call

Before emails and texting, a hand-written letter was often the most accessible way for people to send a message. Pictured here are some of the people, post offices, and methods of delivery that helped keep South Peace residents connected with each other and with friends and family around the world.



Above: The inaugural flight of the Edmonton to White Horse airmail route refueling on a lake near Grande Prairie on July 5, 1937, watched by a crowd on the shore. (SPRA 1998.08.05)



Left: Dale DeBolt, Winnifred DeBolt, Dorothy DeBolt (alternately Jack DeBolt, Dorothy DeBolt, Margaret Jordan) and postmistress Laura DeBolt outside the DeBolt post office. Used in Across the Smoky, p. 27 and 285. (SPRA 116.09.01.01.0267)

Bottom left: Pipestone Creek Store and Post Office showing an animal skin and equipment hanging on the front porch. Ca. 1940 (SPRA 1991.01.03)

Bottom right: Eric Rycroft and his daughter Heather with the Bad Heart mail truck in winter. Skis have been attached to go under the front tires for easier movement on the snowy rural roads. Ca. 1950 (SPRA 2012.009.01)



Top left: A little girl and baby moose in front of a post office, 1923 (SPRA 630.08.006c)

Top right: The mail stage, a wagon pulled by two horses, leaving Beaverlodge. Log buildings are visible in the background. Used in Edson to Grande Prairie Trail, p. 122. Ca. 1911 (SPRA 116.09.01.01.0818)



Bottom left: Mr. and Mrs. Harback at the counter inside the Post Office. Mr. Harback was the Postmaster from July 1, 1947 to June 18, 1965. Reproduction available from South Peace Regional Archives. Original photograph belongs to Joan Plaxton. N.d. (SPRA 175.093.3)



Above: Walter Peterson, Jim Hughson, Tiny Voshall, and Elmer Nystrom attempt to push the mail wagon out of the mud. Used in Across the Smoky, p. 345. 1941 (SPRA 116.09.01.01.553)

Bottom right: The Grande Prairie Post Office, 1952 (SPRA 2014.039.06)



# Signed, Sealed, Delivered

## Changing Delivery Methods in the South Peace

**Mail Stage** When J.O. Patterson was appointed the first post master of Grande Prairie in 1911, the post office operated out of the caboose that was also his family's home and mail was delivered by stage over the Edson Trail. He notes in Isabel Campbell's "Postal Service History of the Peace River Country" that although the Edson Trail improved with time, "the mail got rough handling. Fourth class mail was left along the Trail; it got wet, parcels got crushed" (p. 6). An article in the January 20, 1914 *Grande Prairie Herald* describes the arduous journey of the mail stage:

"The carrying of the mail into the Grande Prairie district has always been a very difficult undertaking. It is a proposition that presents to the contractor many difficulties, most of which are unforeseen.

"Reviewing the situation we find that a little over a year ago the contract was let to Messrs Church & Weatherly who have filled their position in a very capable way. The summer has been a very wet, disagreeable one, the roads in the worst shape possible, still this firm have pushed the mail forward and only a very few times during the whole season did the mail arrive late and that during the early fall. They have battled with the situation in a very capable manner, suffering the loss of many head of valuable stock in their endeavors."

Right: Church & Weatherly's six pack horses being loaded with mail at Edson for the trip over mud and mire to Grande Prairie. 1912 (SPRA 1969.59.167)

**Mail by Rail** The Edmonton, Dunvegan, & British Columbia (ED&BC) Railway arrived in Spirit River in 1915 and Grande Prairie in 1916, providing a new means of carrying mail to and from the South Peace. An article in the August 8, 1916 *Grande Prairie Herald* provides details about the quantity of mail sent north from the ED&BC Railway station in Edmonton: "There were in the last mail going north 15 bags and parcels of registered matter, containing 304 registered articles, 20 sacks of papers and parcels, 5,805 letters unregistered." The relative regularity of the railway schedule, with occasional delays that were mostly caused by poor weather, ensured the delivery of mail to Grande Prairie twice a week. Deadlines for dropping off outgoing mail were listed in the *Grande Prairie Herald*: "The public are requested by the Post Office officials to have all registered mail in the office by 5 p.m. and ordinary mail by 6 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays owing to the change in train services" (May 7, 1918).



Left: Bird's eye view of the Grande Prairie Train Station in winter, crowded with people and cars. The horse-drawn dray unloading the Royal Mail from the mail car in the foreground belonged to Mr. Alex Wishart. Ca. 1930 (SPRA 1997.13.07)

Although the coming of the train made mail delivery to the South Peace easier, the system was not flawless: "We wonder if the good people of Sexsmith realize that all the mail that should be put off at Sexsmith from Grande Prairie is sent to Spirit River and then sent back on the next train. Enquiries made at the Herald show that the postmaster at this end has done all in his power to have this state of affairs altered; it is now up to the Sexsmith people to put in a kick." (*Grande Prairie Herald*, April 19, 1921)

**Air Mail** Less than fifteen years after the arrival of the train in Grande Prairie, an airport was opened and a regular air mail service was established. The *Herald* pointed out that this service was not inaugurated by the Canada Post Office Department. Rather, it was a privately established and "mail intended to be carried by this service must bear the special stamps provided by the Commercial Airways Ltd which have been issued with the approval of the Post Office Department." (*Grande Prairie Herald*, May 17, 1929)

Right: "First air mail into Grande Prairie, March 17, 1937. L. to R. are Postmaster Cameron; Postal Inspector Reilly; Barney Phillips; Emil Kubicek, Pilot; Percy Tooley and Hector Morrison." A United Air Transport plane is in the background. (SPRA 032.08.08.1082)

The following the *Herald* reported that "the first air mail arrived in Grande Prairie on Tuesday last when the big plane piloted by Wop May landed on the new flying field at 12:10...

"As soon as the mail was unloaded from the plane it was put into an automobile and switched away to the post office where a snap was taken of the post office supervisor handing the mail to Mr. Bowyer, acting postmaster.

"The big plane hopped off for the capital city at a few minutes after three, carrying between five and six hundred letters.

"The two forestry patrol planes happened to be on the field at the same time as the big plane. The scene was almost inspiring. As one old-timer stated 'It is hard to believe one's own eyes. We are living in a great age. This country is sure travelling.'" (*Grande Prairie Herald*, May 24, 1929)



# Postal Puzzles

Searching through the Bert and Miriam Tieman fonds (SPRA fonds 039) reveals that they enjoyed a broad range of activities, including archaeology, amateur videography, and travel. Among their records are 624 postcards, some gathered by the Tiemans in their travels and others sent to the Tiemans by similarly adventurous friends, portraying dozens of destinations around the world. Can you match these images to their locations?

Find the solutions on page 26.



- |          |   |                 |
|----------|---|-----------------|
| <b>A</b> | ① | Australia       |
| <b>B</b> | ② | Barbados        |
| <b>C</b> | ③ | Belgium         |
| <b>D</b> | ④ | Canada          |
| <b>E</b> | ⑤ | France          |
| <b>F</b> | ⑥ | Germany         |
| <b>G</b> | ⑦ | Ireland         |
| <b>H</b> | ⑧ | Japan           |
| <b>I</b> | ⑨ | The Netherlands |
| <b>J</b> | ⑩ | United Kingdom  |

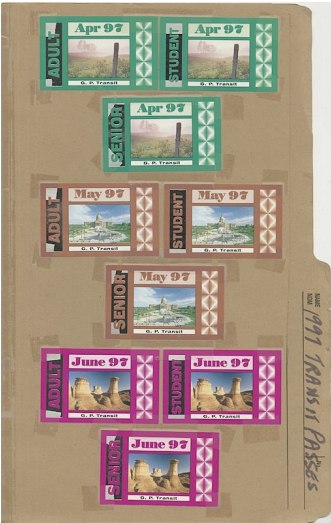
# New at the Archives

These last few months seem to have flown by. In late September we welcomed our new Executive Director, Ellyn, who immediately jumped into writing several grant applications. It was all hands on deck to complete them on time.

Our Archivist, Stephanie, has been spending the majority of her time working on our database conversion. Our old database is struggling to keep up with current demands and so we are slowly but surely moving information from the old into the new. This is very time consuming and meticulous work but necessary for our move into our new home in Centre 2000.

Teresa has been very hard at work digitizing the entire Carlisle family photo album (fonds 399). This project will allow us to see and use the contents of the entire album (and all of the photographs) without having to physically handle the delicate pages.

We have also received several new donations in the last few months and we thank all donors for their contributions. One donation came from the City of Grande Prairie's Transportation Department. It contains 7 scrapbooks, a sound recording, and many photographs.



The scrapbooks show the history of public transit in Grande Prairie and how it has changed.

Left: Page showing several examples of Grande Prairie transit passes from 1997 (Accession number SPRA 2021.023)

## Thank You

- Marvin & Frances Moore
- Alberta Genealogical Society
- Capistrano Holdings/Bill Bowes Family
- Gordon Mackey
- Wayne & Paulette Patterson
- D.R. Sales & Woodworking
- Dr. Edward Welsh
- J&G Murphy Holdings Ltd
- Wayne Building Products
- Lux Architectural Products Inc.
- Dennis & Tina Dale

We thank all our donors for their contributions. The work we do would not be possible without your generous support. A special thank you to those who have contributed to our Building Fund. To donate visit [CanadaHelps.org](http://CanadaHelps.org)

### Pages 24-25: Postcard Matching Solutions

- A,6: *Bad Ems an der Lahn, Germany (SPRA 1985.3.103N)*
- B,8: *Famous place of Enoshima, Japan (SPRA 1985.3.103E).*  
*Digitally edited for this feature to hide the text.*
- C,5: *Notre-Dame, Paris, France (SPRA 1985.3.54UUU)*
- D,3: *Brugge. Stadhuis. Hotel de Ville. Town-Hall. Rathaus. (SPRA 1985.3.54I)*
- E,10: *Windsor Castle, United Kingdom (SPRA 1985.3.104MM)*
- F,2: *Careenage Scene, Bridgetown, Barbados (SPRA 1985.3.54CCC)*
- G,4: *Banff National Park, Canada (SPRA 1985.3.106UU)*  
*Digitally edited for this feature to hide the text.*
- H,1: *Australia. 1980 (SPRA 1985.3.54XX)*
- I,7: *Upper Lake, Killarney, Ireland. 1980 (SPRA 1985.3.54UU)*
- J,9: *Montelbaan Tower, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (SPRA 1985.3.55H)*

## South Peace Regional Archives Society Membership Application/Renewal Form

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This membership is \_\_\_\_\_ new \_\_\_\_\_ renewal

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*Thank you for supporting*



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