

VALLEY HISTORY

AND THE WINDERMERE VALLEY MUSEUM

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KOOTENAI BROWN

from North West Farmer
December 5, 1922

There are many Browns in the early days of Southern Alberta. There was John at Pincher Creek and Jebb on the Belly River. Another Brown was known as "Diamond R" because his cattle brand was a diamond and an R. Then there was "Poker Brown" who loved to shuffle cards, and "Bull" Brown who owned 70 head of working steers. "Jungle Handle" Brown's name is a mystery.

But before them all was the Brown who tells this story, "Kootenai" Brown. Of all the glorious band of cattle men that rode the plains of Western Canada when it was a wilderness, but few remain, and each year sees the number of these survivors of an almost forgotten past, diminish. Soon they will all have passed over the Great Divide, and only the imperishable record of their deeds will remain.

John George Brown came in 1865, and because he traded with and spoke the language of the Kootenai Indians, he was dubbed "Kootenai" Brown, and by this name he was known throughout the 51 years of his life in Western Canada.

He is understood to have been a graduate of one of the British universities, and an extremely well educated man who loved the adventurous life, and came to Canada very early in his youth. He spent some years in the American Army.

He was twice married; first to a half-breed woman in North Dakota whose remains lie on the shore of Waterton Lake, on the first homestead ever filed on in the far west; then to Chee-pay-tha-qua-ka-soon, a Cree woman of more than ordinary intelligence, who nursed and cared for the old man in his declining years. He called her "Neech-e-moose," meaning "My loved one."

In 1865, the placer miner (Brown) from Wild Horse Creek in B.C. saddled his horse, and packing three other horses, made his way through the South Kootenai Pass of the Rockies to the plains of Western Canada. He was going to "diggings" on the Saskatchewan, so he thought, but as he had no one to direct him and did not know the way, he found himself at Seven Person's Creek (now Medicine Hat). Continuing his journey along the river, he came to Duck Lake where he found about fifty families of half-breeds hunting buffalo. Staying with them for one winter he continued on his way east and in 1866 arrived in Fort Garry (Winnipeg). His trip constituted the first journey across the plains of western Canada by pack-horse.

After a short stay in Fort Garry, Brown "crossed the line" into Uncle Sam's domain and worked for a year or so as scout and dispatch rider for the U.S. Government. Returning to Canada he hunted buffalo with French half-breeds for several years. When the buffalo began disappearing he went into the wolfing business and while "wolfing" he settled on what was to be his home in S.W. Alberta.

To get from Wild Horse Creek to the prairies of the West, took the prospector around the shores of Waterton Lakes in the southwest corner of Alberta. The more than ordinary grandeur of the scenery and the rich abundance of prairie grass on the plains adjacent to the water made the traveller wish for a home on the shores of the lake.

Returning from the United States, where he had taken a wife, John George Brown "squatted" on what the surveyors afterwards marked as Section 31 in Township 1, and range 29, west of the 4th meridian.

Out of logs cut in the mountains, a house and barn was built and the first homesteader in the southern district of the Western Canada plains began ranching and farming.

Not many homesteads in the West have as interesting history attached to them as the SW quarter of 31-1-29. It was taken up before anyone thought of surveys, and all the improvements were made long before it was filed on. On it a store was built and trade with the Indians of British Columbia and the Flathead country in Montana was carried on for many years. The property is now a part of Waterton Lakes National Park.

The old house has fallen into the Waterton River on the shores of which it was built.

After the old days of homesteading, "Kootenai" Brown was Game and Fish Guardian, a Warden and afterwards the Superintendent of Waterton Lakes National Park. He died in the summer of 1916 and his body lies beside that of his first wife, on his first homestead, by the shores of Lower Waterton Lake.

In his recollections, recorded before his death, John George Brown remembered the beginning of the stock industry in Western Canada. "Some time in the early eighties (1880's) the buffalo disappeared. They were exterminated, ruthlessly slaughtered for their hides, and the western plains were no longer profitable to the traders in hides. I have heard that fur traders in the U.S. sent men into Canada to burn the grass so the buffalo would not return to Canada to breed. This is not so, but it is a fact that buffalo did not come into Canada from the other side as they once did. Of course, to my knowledge, there never was any great migration of buffalo as has been supposed."

"Well, with the disappearance of the buffalo, cattle men began to use the prairies of Western Canada as ranging grounds. Senator Cochrane of Montreal, was one of the very first, in fact, was the first big rancher in what is now Southern Alberta. His stock ranged between what is now the city of Calgary and the town of Cochrane."

"Riding on the range one day I met a man driving a buckboard and a team of broncos. He began to ask questions about grazing and said: 'We're going to bring several thousand head of cattle here. They ought to live where buffalo lived, and we should not need to feed them hay in a mild climate like this, where you have so little snow.'

I explained to the man, who proved to be Senator Cochrane himself, that this was a delusion;

that buffalo ate grass close as sheep, right to the roots, and that when they ate a range down they moved off to another range, travelling thousands of miles in a season. Then too, a buffalo faces into a storm while a cow or steer goes with it regardless of where it leads. But the Senator thought he knew better! He found, however, that the first winter he lost fifty per cent of his range stock. They perished in the winter for lack of feed.

"Billy Cochrane, a son of the Senator, had the first automobile west of the Great Lakes. It was propelled by steam, and there is an interesting story about a cow-puncher trying to rope it one day as Billy was driving over the prairie."

The Hard Winter

"I remember 'The Hard Winter', and 'The May Snow Storm'. The hard winter was in '86 and '87. The country was full of cattle that had been driven in from Montana, Wyoming and some even shipped by rail from Ontario. They were in bad condition; some of them very poor. It took cattle from Eastern Canada a long time to get used to the bunch grass and open range, and in the fall of '86 these cattle were as poor as crows. The winter was very severe, and a large percentage of the cattle perished. there were no fences at that time, and the "doggies" (cattlemen's name for Eastern cattle) just drifted into coulees and over cutbanks and piled on top of one another until hundreds of head were found in one bunch in places after the storm."

"Things went along very nice until 1903 when what has been known as "The May snowstorm" gave cattlemen another jolt. After a mild winter and a hot spring, a warm rain started in May, about the middle of the month. It turned colder during the night and in the morning when I got up it was snowing to beat the band. I was living on my first homestead then, and it usually snows harder in the foothills than on the prairie in a storm of that kind. I said to Neech-e-moose, "We're in for it this time. Did you ever see the like of this?" She began telling me about snowstorms she had experienced when travelling with her Indian tribe in the early days."

"Well, it snowed all day Sunday, all day Monday, all day Tuesday, and all day Wednesday. Literally all day. Then on Wednesday evening it cleared up, but when we got up Thursday it was at

it again, and snowed all day Thursday, all day Friday, till Saturday noon.”

“May was the month when a lot of new cattle were shipped in. Many of these were from milder ranges - most of them from Ontario. Many head were still on the train when the storm began and as no feed was available they were unloaded and just hunched their backs around the stock yards and starved or shivered to death. It is estimated that fifty per cent of the range cattle in Alberta perished in that snowstorm in May 1903.”

This information is from B.G. Hamilton files.

*From B.G. Hamilton file
November 2, 1923:*

Mr. John H. Taynton says that “Pierre” an old Shuswap Indian (Chief Pierre Kinbasket) related to him that what is now Sinclair Hot Springs (Radium) were discovered about 125 years ago by a Shuswap who while hunting in the neighborhood killed a goat which fell over the rocks and lit beside the spring. From that time on the Indians knew of the springs but not the white men. Taynton first saw the Sinclair Hot Springs in 1887 when engaged in packing for the NWMP. He went up to the site and had a bath in them. He stated the first visit of a white man that he knew of to them must have been about 1886. He said Malcolm Cameron, Charlie Copeland and James Fowler built the first cabin at the spring, this about 1888. He said that Charlie Lewis, J.F.’s partner entered for land about there and that he and Lewis were partners, that they disposed of their interests in the land to Stewart.

He said the old Indian trail from the North in that neighborhood used to cross what is now the fields of East Firlands and pass out by way of John McCullough’s on the Sinclair Creek bottom. What was known as the Sinclair Indian trail from the east lead for a distance (and could not be

travelled in high water - June 15 to July 15.) down the bed of Sinclair Creek then turned north over the high rocky part east of the now know Sinclair Hot Springs and passing over “high clayey hills” came down and joined the Indian trail from North to South on what is now the flat field of East Firlands.

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newsclips from the past

Golden Star April 26, 1929

“Early on Friday morning last Wong Tuck, for many years as the factotum of His Honor R.R. Bruce, passed peacefully away and was gathered unto his fathers. For over twenty years while His Honor resided here in a private capacity, “Old Tuck” served him faithfully and well. Of late years he has continued to live on in the old home as a pensioner of His Honor. During that period he has been faithfully attended by his son “Young Tuck.” (nee Wong Chong) Beside this young man he leaves a wife and some children in China. He age was 67 years. A stroke of paralysis was the incidental cause of the old timer’s death. His burial took place in Windermere Cemetery.”

Golden Star December 27, 1929

“A large number gathered to hear a most excellent concert given on Friday the 20th by the pupils of Miss Beale’s and Miss McQueen’s classes of the Athalmer-Invermere consolidated school. The programme was as follows: Song, “In The Fashion” by the girls of grades 1 and 2; Recitation by Eileen Docking; Santa’s Boys - grade 4; Irish Lilt by Mary Frater; Recitation by Lucy Pennington; How the Donkey Engine Helped; Star Drill by the girls in grades 5 & 6; Recitation by Betty Mitchell; a play, “Santa’s Key”; Song, Christmas Bells by the girls in Grades 4 and 5; God Save the King. Dr. F.E. Coy acted as chairman throughout. Some of the mothers very kindly helped with tea. After the tea presents were given out. Subscriptions in aid were given by the business firms of Invermere to buy candy and oranges. The money remaining was spent on a gramophone for the school.”

Golden Star April 6, 1928

