

Naming Time¹:
Mountains, Trails, Rivers, Rails,
and Ours
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Discovery²

Ghosts. I see ghosts when I think of Lac Ste. Anne. Manitou Sakhahigan³ is still there of course – lakes tend to stick around for a while - but the town is long gone. The few remaining buildings are boarded up and worn by decades of Alberta weather. Most people I knew are long gone too. The cemeteries are still there – overgrown by time and neglect. I return to the lake every year to keep four of the graves fresh: Mom, Pete, Jess and the baby. They were the first to go – all young. Others have died since – young as well. John died in the first war – he’s buried in France⁴. Dad died in ’27 just before the depression⁵, and then Grace in ’39. Now it’s Mac, my dear brother Mac, born at the turn of the century and dead at fifty five^{6 7}.

I have outlived six of my siblings. There are only four of us left. We die young in this family. I have mother’s asthma, but I’ve outlived her by a few decades. My turn could come at any time, so I’d better tell my story now. Perhaps one of my grandchildren will find it one day, hidden in a photo album, or a trunk in the attic, when its secrets won’t hurt as much.

Back in the early 1900’s they were all very much alive, just like the town. If I close my eyes I can see them strolling down the street, and I can picture the men on the porch of the hotel, wearing their Cowboy hats and Sunday vests, watching my father drive by with his new cart and ox team⁸.

In the early years Lac Ste. Anne was a bustling place – especially in the spring and summer. Some say it was too busy; too much drinking; too many women getting into trouble⁹. Lac Ste. Anne was on the main trail from Edmonton¹⁰. In those days everybody came through our little town. We were on the frontier, and the frontier was for explorers and pioneers.

Surveyors, mountaineers, prospectors, and homesteaders came through on their way further north and west. For many years, Lac Ste. Anne had the only post office around and it was also on the trail to Jock and Gregg's¹¹, a trading post at Prairie Creek, where supplies were replenished and packed to the mountains and points further west. Half-breeds and trappers came from the west for supplies and to sell their furs to Dad at the Hudson's Bay Store. Sometimes the store was so full of people you could hardly get in¹².

From 1900 to 1911 Lac Ste. Anne was my home. Father was the Clerk in Charge for the Hudson's Bay. We moved there from the post at Lesser Slave Lake when I was eight, and we had lived in Dunvegan¹³ and Fort St. John before that. The post office was in the back of the whitewashed Hudson's Bay Store. The town also had a pool hall, a Roman Catholic Church, a hotel, an ice house, a livery barn, a North-West Mounted Police station, and a legion hall¹⁴.

We lived in the Hudson's Bay House. It was a two story log house with eight large rooms, four with clay fireplaces in them¹⁵. The four bedrooms were upstairs. Mother and father were in one room. I shared mine with Ab and Jess, and also with Grace when she came along later. John and Pete had their own room, and Mac, Buster and Tom shared the other¹⁶. Before 1909, we sang a lot in that house. In December, with the fireplaces to keep us warm, the Twelve Days of Christmas was our favourite; although back then for us Scottish folk it was a poppingo-aye instead of a partridge in a pear tree, and everything came in threes, including the three goldspinks¹⁷.

Years later, Ab and I would joke around about our names. I had a mountain named after me, but she had a whole province named after her. We decided to claim Lac Ste. Anne our own

after they named the Town of Gunn, and then Alberta Beach¹⁸. The nice coincidence that Ann was my middle name didn't escape our clever minds either.

I worked for my Dad in the Post Office. That is where I met Milton Mckeen and John Yates. Milton and John both arrived in the area in 1906, Milton in the spring, and John a few months later. They came for the land and were part of the first group of homesteaders in the region. Milton was from New Brunswick – he had an education. He was proud that his great grandfather was a United Empire Loyalist¹⁹; he said they saved us from the Americans. John and his brothers came from California.

Milton owned the livery barn and the stage to Edmonton. He also had the mail contract to Whitecourt. I sorted the mail for him. He became good friends with Dad.

John and his brothers owned a homestead about five or so miles southwest of Lac Ste. Anne. It soon became known as the Hobo Ranch²⁰. They were known to take in a few strays every now and again, sometimes to the chagrin of the North-West Mounted Police. John and his brother Bill packed supplies and delivered the mail to construction camps for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad as it moved west from Edmonton to Tête Jaune Cache²¹. Ever the adventurer, John also became a Rocky Mountain trail guide.

Milton and John didn't seem to get along that well. John said Milton was pissed at him because he won the mail contract for the railway construction camps through to the mountains. Later, Milt admitted that he had been swindled²².

I was only fourteen when they arrived, so I didn't get much of their attention; that came a few years later. At the time, I thought of them as big brothers more than anything else. In 1906 Milton must have been twenty one, and John twenty six.

Mom always seemed to be around when they were. Looking back, I suspect it was to keep them at bay. She thought John was a scoundrel; “Too much like Dad,” she said²³. Dad didn’t seem to mind John, but only when Mom wasn’t around. Both Mom and Dad thought highly of Milton. “He was a good man”, they’d say, “Responsible. Educated. Will make something of himself. The marrying kind.” He was quite handsome, but I found him to be rather dull.

John had all of my attention – not as handsome – but certainly charming and very exciting. In the summers he explored the mountains and came back with wonderful stories. He was a trail guide for those he insisted were famous mountaineers: J. Norman Collie, George Kinney, and Arthur Coleman.

I dreamed about his adventures. He even said he could take me on one someday, but I didn’t raise my hopes; I knew Mother would never let me go.

Everything changed in 1909. In March, Dad became the first Member of the Legislative Assembly for the new District of Lac Ste. Anne²⁴. Then on May 5th, Mom died. She was only forty three – she always said the asthma would be the end of her²⁵. We were devastated. We never ever got over it. Then in the fall, Pete – just thirteen – was accidentally shot while duck hunting with a friend²⁶. Our family was rocked again.

That winter was the most difficult of my life. It was a typically dreadful Alberta winter, but with Mom and Pete gone it was even more so. Dad was away most of the time in Edmonton dealing with the laws of Alberta (it was a two day ride away), while I stayed home to care for the family and run the post-office. I was only seventeen, but I was the oldest. Ab helped a bit, and

Dad paid for some help, but it was I who the kids came to. Family is what they needed, and that is what I gave them. We all shared the chores, but I was the cook²⁷, and I was the boss.

Both Milton and John were there for me. They stopped by quite often to make sure things were okay. John more so because he was only a few hours ride away and he wasn't that busy in the winter. During his visits he told me more about his adventures. He claimed that he was front and centre in the race to be the first to climb Mount Robson, the tallest mountain in the Canadian Rockies. In the summer of 1908 he was the trail guide for Arthur Coleman and George Kinney²⁸. He said they almost made it to the top but had to turn back because they were running out of daylight and his feet were frozen. The next summer, he was the trail guide for Arnold Mumm, Leopold Amery and George Hastings. Unfortunately, this team was also unsuccessful at the climb²⁹. John said they were planning to try again next summer, but this time with J. Norman Collie. While he was telling this to me over the supper I had cooked, he got a strange look in his eyes and said, "You can come with us. We could use a good cook, you're great with horses³⁰, and you can talk to the Indians³¹. Might come in handy." I thought it preposterous and laughed as loud as I could. That night I dreamed about snow capped mountains and camp fires and a certain trail guide with mischief in his eyes.

John didn't give up, and I was glad. When spring arrived I decided I was going to be a part of history. Mom wasn't here to stop me, and there was only Dad to break down. I spent weeks preparing my speech and when he came home from his latest foray into Alberta government complexities I let him have it.

He was aghast. However, I was ready for all of the arguments he could throw at me. "Mom came over from Scotland by herself," I began, "and she spent three weeks on a ship with a

bunch of sailors, and another four weeks traveling by train from Montreal to Edmonton, where she met you. Then you took her in a cart on a mucky trip to Athabasca Landing, where you then proceeded to Lesser Slave Lake by steam boat. From there you took her down another godforsaken trail to Lesser Slave Post and on to Peace River Crossing where you finally got into another steam boat that took you up river to Fort St. John where you lived with the Indians for eight years. What do you mean, “These kinds of adventures are not for women!” Mother would be disgusted with you.”³² He slapped me, but after a few weeks of nagging and other well planned arguments he gave me permission. Mainly I think he did so because he felt sorry for me, and maybe a little guilty; it had been a long harsh winter without him and mother.

I became a member of Mr. John Yate’s pack-train, a team that eventually also included Fred Stevens, Alan McConachie and George Swain³³. I made sure we had all the right spices and other goods to make most meals acceptable, including some dried goat meat, smoked fish, desiccated potatoes, rice, and bannock for a bouillon my mom taught me to make³⁴. I understood there would be a lot of fish. John helped with the menu, as it was. He was apparently a good cook as well. As we prepared to leave, Dad repeated the appropriate warnings, primarily to John (something about being a man and staying a man), and then we headed off to Wolf Creek where we would meet Mr. Collie and the rest of our party. It was July 10th, I had recently turned eighteen, and I wouldn’t be home for almost three months.

John’s dog Hoodoo³⁵, a bull terrier, came along with us. He was a great companion and added warmth for the lucky few he chose to lay beside. We followed the trail to the mountains for about three days before we arrived at Pembina where the railway construction crew had recently finished the bridge, and for some reason had also changed the name of the town to Entwistle³⁶. This was our first major river crossing, albeit the river was quite shallow. We

traveled another few days before meeting up with Mr. Collie, Mr. Mumm, and Moritz Inderbinen. It was July 17th. They had taken the train from Edmonton to Wolf Creek, a day east of Heatherwood. This was currently the end of the line for the Grand Trunk Railroad. Mr. Collie was a charming man. He was a chemist and a mountain climber, and throughout our journey he told us all sorts of stories about his adventures in the Himalayas on the other side of the world.

After camping overnight at Wolf Creek, we headed to Heatherwood where we came across the MacLeod River. This time there were no shallow spots, so most of us ended up quite wet. John even fell, losing his balance while carrying Hoodoo. We eventually dried out and about five days and a few mud bogs later we arrived at Prairie Creek, a small town fed by the great Athabasca River. We had arrived in God's country. To the west, the Rockies spanned the horizon. The snow capped peaks shimmered magnificently in the bright summer sun.

The blue-green Athabasca River and its lakes became our friends for quite a while. We kept to the Athabasca's south bank for a few days before coming upon the very large Brule Lake. Just after this lake we came upon Roche Miette and Fiddle Creek, where, according to John, a trail led up to the Miette Hot Springs. We didn't have the two days to waste to get there and back, so we passed on by. We crossed the Athabasca River and spent another two or three days traveling along it as it twisted south and west through the Rockies, before arriving at the Miette River that spilled into it from the west. We camped overnight near Fitzhugh, where railway construction crews were building its railway station³⁷. We then headed due west along the Miette for another day before we reached the point where the river tumbled down from the north and branched into two rivers; an eastward river which we had followed to this point, and now also a

westward river (although it was really just a trickle). It was here that John informed us that we had arrived at the Yellowhead Pass, the continental divide where rivers can run both ways³⁸.

We took the Miette's westerly route which eventually dribbled into the Fraser River. It took us another two days before we came to Moose Lake and another eight before we arrived at the base of Mount Robson. It was August 9th.

It was a wonderful trip. Tiring sometimes, but always exciting, and the food was extraordinary. The mountains and rivers of this land are breathtaking. John saw the land again through my eyes. He couldn't wait to show me the flowers that only grew in these mountains, and the creeks and the waterfalls he had seen before, and the way the sun reflected off the blue green lakes at sun set. It was too beautiful. As I fell in love with the land, I also found myself falling in love with John. Beside Mount Robson he was no longer a big brother. Sitting around campfires for weeks on end, listening to his stories, and sometimes, when he drank too much, learning about his hurts and his dreams and his 'wish I weres', and his 'wish I wern'ts', I couldn't help but fall in love.

Unfortunately, as I was busy falling in love, the weather was busy wreaking havoc on the purpose of our adventure. We spent thirteen days at the base of Mount Robson waiting for the weather to improve. Rain at the base of the mountain meant snow at its peak, making it much too dangerous to climb. The clouds rarely subsided and it rained often. A few hours of sun in a day was all we could hope for. To kill time while we were waiting, Mr. Mumm and Mr. Collie climbed a few of the smaller mountains. One they named Mumm Peak and another Mount Phillips³⁹.

While they were away, John took me to a few of his favourite spots. Across the valley from Mumm Peak was Calumet Creek. We headed up a trail that twisted along the creek and came upon what John insisted was Yate's Torrent, a rush of water originating in the glacier above. He also bragged that we were walking upon the famous Yates Trail⁴⁰. I laughed and punched him in the arm and told him he was too big on himself. That's when I let him steal the first kiss. When he lowered his mouth to my neck I pushed him away and then I ran back down the trail as he tried to persuade me to give him another kiss. I told him he couldn't have more than one per day. I made sure we returned to camp before dark. The camp fire was extra warm that night and John was awfully quiet.

A few days later on August 22nd, after almost three days of poor weather and a foot of snow, Mr. Mumm and Mr. Collie decided to give up on Mount Robson, so we headed home.

This time we travelled north along the Smoky River. On the second day we came upon another glacier fed creek, meandering into the Smoky from the west. As we passed a grove of spruce trees to our left, a valley spread out before us and a beautiful snow capped mountain was visible in the distance. I gasped. That's when John lost his mind. He started running down the creek, and as he started bowing to the mountain he yelled back at us, "I christen thee Mount Bess the beautiful."⁴¹ I cringed and turned red as the rest of our party, including Mr. Collie, started laughing. Then I heard Mr. Mumm whisper to Mr. Collie, "That guy's crazy in love." Mr. Collie then replied, "He should be, the food on this trip is the only thing that's kept me going."

I thought nothing of it, but later discovered that the name had stuck. Elizabeth Ann Gunn, Postmistress of Lac Ste. Anne, had a mountain named after her.

That night after supper I made the mistake of going for a walk with John. I let him hold my hand as we walked along the creek toward this mountain of mine. John was acting funny again. About a half hour down the creek he declared “I’m going to marry you one day Bessie.” It sounded as if he meant it. I stopped, and told him not to joke about such things. Then he grabbed me and kissed me really hard. And I kissed him back. He started whispering, “I love you Bess, Oh God do I love you.” I almost didn’t have the heart to stop, but I found the strength somewhere. Perhaps it was a memory of Mother, and her insistence that the Ritch women must always maintain their dignity; “A lady in the heart of a savage land is admired,” she said, “A savage in a savage land is invisible.”⁴² I pushed John away and told him he’d have to wait. He was very disappointed, but he managed to recover. Hand in hand, we continued to walk along the creek, and in the shadow of this beautiful mountain, I turned to John and said “I love you too John.” We returned to camp an hour or so later.

The next day we continued our journey down the Smoky and then across a pass only John knew about⁴³. He said it led to the Stoney River. The weather was fine for a day or so, but just after we turned south along the Stoney it turned pretty gruesome. It snowed for most of the two weeks it took us to get back to Brule Lake⁴⁴. I don’t remember much of the trip – John consumed my thoughts – and I suppose like most trips the trail home doesn’t seem as exciting.

At Heatherwood we left the mountain climbers to catch their train home, and John and I headed back with the horses to Lac Ste. Anne.

* * *

The Forward March and Ever On

The next spring Bess had to face another tragedy with the death of her thirteen-year-old sister, Jessie. They say it was dropsy, likely caused by her first period.

Bess and John never did marry. On April 9th, 1911, Milton McKeen and Bess were engaged⁴⁵, and then later that year on October 18th they were married⁴⁶.

I believe John continued to love Bess. That summer he returned with Collie and Mumm to Mount Robson. Although they once again failed to reach its summit⁴⁷, they did manage to climb a ‘splendid snow mountain’ where upon its peak Mr. Collie left a note in a jar, proving to those who followed that he was the first to climb it, and giving him the right to name it Mount Bess^{48 49}. Although I can’t know exactly what happened on the trail to Mount Bess, I do know that like most things people name, this mountain was named for love.

John married a year later and started his own family. He eventually moved back to California⁵⁰. Once the railway to Jasper and Prince George was finished, pack trains were no longer necessary and trail guides were a dime a dozen. I couldn’t imagine that farming would be in his blood.

Bess moved to live with Milton on his homestead. As the wife of a future MLA and Magistrate, she eventually learned how to make fancy sandwiches without crusts for her lady friends⁵¹.

The homestead was to the north and west of Lac Ste. Anne in the Roydale area, just past Robinson’s Crossing, and between Deep Creek and Wanekville. It was a nice piece of land, smack dab between the Big and Little Paddle Rivers. The Roydale area became their home, their children’s home and their grandchildren’s home.

Alberta, her younger sister, married Hector MacLean in 1913⁵² and they moved to a homestead a mile north of sister Bess. Soon thereafter, John and Mac moved to a homestead between their two sisters⁵³.

Her father, Peter Gunn, eventually moved the rest of his family to Edmonton, across the river from the Fort, where he watched the construction of the Alberta Legislature Building and the High Level Bridge⁵⁴. Later, he would sometimes take the trolley across this bridge to work.

It wasn't really that long ago – only a hundred years – but it was certainly a different world. Instead of a twenty day journey, a trip to Fitzhugh (Jasper) is now a four hour drive down the Yellowhead Highway, first through Entwistle (Pembina), then Edson (Heatherwood) and then Hinton (Prairie Creek). The Stoney River is now the Snake Indian River, Wanekville is Rochfort Bridge, and Deep Creek is Sangudo.

It took the railway to kill Lac Ste. Anne. One railway was built to the north of the lake in 1912, passing through the new town of Gunn, then west to Sangudo, and eventually to Rochfort Bridge, Mayerthorpe and Whitecourt. The other railway was built about six miles to the south and eventually stretched from Edmonton to Jasper by 1912. Lac Ste. Anne was bypassed on both accounts.

Like the railway, the Yellowhead Highway bypasses the settlement of Lac Ste. Anne. A sign on the highway directs visitors to the Summer Village of Alberta Beach, a place Bess made a point of visiting several weeks every year with her family. As her children and grandchildren played on the beach, I imagine she would sneak away for a few hours to tend to a few graves down the road.

It was to the Rochfort Bridge-Sangudo area that Bess was always drawn. When she became ill while living in Calgary, she was moved to the Mayerthorpe hospital, likely to be close to her sister Ab. She passed away there on January 11th, 1960.

Roydale is gone, and Rochfort Bridge and Gunn are also now ghosts of what they once were. One day, like Lac Ste. Anne, I suspect that all that will be left of these towns will be a cemetery or two. Dunvegan is now a museum, and Capital View Tower now stands where Peter Gunn's Edmonton home once was. Edmonton has remained the gateway to the north for these hundred years, but like Grouard⁵⁵ and Lac Ste. Anne, once considered front runners for the title of Alberta's capital city, I expect time will change this too.

Now it is I who sees ghosts; especially when I think of Lac Ste. Anne. Manitou Sakhahigan is its Cree name. It held this name long before the Europeans arrived. It means 'Lake of the Spirit'. Before the Cree, it had no name. For the geese and the pelicans and for the buffalo it simply meant life. The lake was there 10,000 years ago, it was there in 1955, and it is still there in 2010. It will still be there thousands of years from now; possibly with a new name, or without any name at all – lakes tend to hang around a while. Mountains tend to hang around a while longer, but, like lakes and towns, their names eventually change as well. Time makes us lose things.

I never met my great-grandmother; she died the year I was born. After writing her story, I visited the old settlement. Nothing of the old town remains. They've built a new church though; for the annual Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage I would think. I found the cemetery – about half a mile west of the Catholic Church. It was freshly mowed; a pleasant surprise. I managed to find my ancestor's grave marker. It's a square, three-foot-tall, marble obelisk. The engraving on

one side reads: “Mother. Mary Ritch - Beloved Wife of Peter Gunn, who died at Lac Ste Anne May 5, 1909. Aged 43 years. A tender mother and a faithful friend.” Written on another side is, “Peter Gun. Accidentally shot, Sept. 15, 1909. Aged 13 years. No pains, no griefs, no anxious fear can reach our loved one sleeping here”, and below this: “Jessie Gunn. Died March 5, 1911. Aged 13 years. Just as the morning of her life was opening into day, her young and lovely spirit passed from earth and grief away.” They left room for more names on the grave marker – I suppose they were planning to hang around Lac Ste. Anne for a while. Two large bushes have grown over two of the graves; I wonder if big sister Bess planted them there?

Not much seems to last. Perhaps lurking in the dark corners of the internet, someone might find these words one day; although, despite Shakespeare’s ‘eternal lines to time’, when there’s no longer an internet (with no humans to feed it), even these words might get lost. Only the mountains will remain. These mountains will feed unnamed rivers, possibly the same ones we drink from today. Perhaps there will be new rivers, formed by new glaciers that grow over the land. Then maybe a Caribou or a Mountain Goat will find a certain snow capped mountain, and it will graze on its grass, and it will drink from its ice melted water, and it will breathe the fresh air – and the spirits will be pleased.

* * *

Personal Reflection

Writing is a magical thing. It leads me down twisting trails and into pristine lands where vibrant words and effervescent ideas are conceived, captured and given birth. I sometimes worry that when I start an essay or a poem I might not find this magic feeding spot that I have come to rely on. Luckily, I have yet to be disappointed.

Something important drew me to this story. I first thought it was a matter of pride; not too many people have great-grandmothers with a mountain named after them. As I became engaged in the research and I started to reflect on it, however, this journey became very personal.

For most of my life, and until only recently, I rarely felt or believed that it was okay to be me. This feeling always kept me on the outside; I never felt as if I belonged. Then in my mid-thirties, at a critical point in my life, I discovered writing. It was a godsend. Writing became a means for self-expression, a tool for self-understanding, and a bridge to a self-congruent faith. Writing became my tool for survival.

I began to understand how this process worked through the Athabasca University course ‘Writing the Self’. Through this course I confirmed that writing was self-actualizing and that it was emotionally, physically and spiritually therapeutic. Through preparing for and writing this paper, I have developed a stronger sense of belonging and connection. More importantly however, this process has also provided new and deeper insight about how and why the writing process works for me.

With the first version of this reflection I focussed on the progressive development of my sense of belonging and connection to Bess, my ancestral heritage, Alberta, nature, and then ultimately with the Universe. Although development of this sense of connection and belonging is important, and remains part of this reflection, the major epiphany I had was the realization that most of my essays end up on the subject of the ‘Universe’ — or something just as impressive. “Why not”, I thought to myself, “Isn’t the Universe the biggest and most important story there is?” Then, upon more careful reflection, I started to wonder why it is that I always want or need

my story to be part of a larger narrative. I found my answer to this perplexing question in the story of Lawrence (A. Herrington & M. Curtis, 2000).

Herrington and Curtis explain that Lawrence composed a self he could live with to the point where he became somebody else entirely. Like Lawrence, although not as extreme, I also recreated and continue to recreate myself through writing. As Lawrence's "own private plea for acceptance erupts in anthropomorphism" (p. 168), my plea for acceptance erupts in the need to place my 'self' into a bigger story. Like Lawrence, I have discovered the "value of writing to live" (p. 187). Writing has become a means of survival by helping me connect to something much larger than my 'self'.

I believe my instinct to survive, or desire for acceptance and belonging, has driven me toward writing about natural, ancestral, spiritual, and Universal connections. I don't know if this means that I still don't really believe that it's okay to be me, but I do know that this path has led me toward a greater sense of self-acceptance.

We all have an instinctual drive to survive. Otto Rank, in Prohoff (1956/1973), labelled this drive the 'urge to immortality'. I call it the 'will to create'. Rank defines this 'urge' as "...man's inexorable drive to feel *connected to life* in terms of his individual will with a sense of inner assurance that that connection will not be broken or pass away" (p. 211). Creative writing, building a bridge to our ancestors, creating descendents, connecting to nature, and creating religion are all means of providing us with a sense of continuity and with a hope or feeling that despite our physical end we are part of a much larger story.

Through writing this narrative, the first connection I built was with Bess and other ancestors. To do justice to her story I had to place myself firmly in their shoes. Rita Charon

(2006) discusses the subject of attempting to dwell in another's presence, becoming invested in a person's singular situation, and the empathy that can result. She refers to this inter-subjective affiliation as a sort of communion (p. 149). As I prepared for and wrote this narrative about my ancestors I started to dream about them, I day-dreamed about them, and sometimes, I cried for them. It felt very much like a communion. Although we had never met, I eventually felt as if I knew Bess and some of my other ancestors intimately. I am certain that the empathy I acquired resulted in a narrative about my great-grandmother that would not have been otherwise possible.

When I started to conduct the necessary research, I learned that Bess's story was intermingled with the race to climb a mountain, and the building of a railway that would mean the end of a way of life and the beginning of another. Through my ancestors I then became connected to the history of humanity.

I discovered that Lac Ste. Anne, a now dead town, was at its peak in 1910 and within only a few years the railway would mean the beginning of its end. I travelled with Bess along the mountain trail from Lac Ste. Anne, and as the names of Alberta towns changed to what they were before the arrival of the railway, time did a funny thing to me. I started to feel its passage and I caught a glimpse of its immensity and incomprehensibility. Within it I began to see both mortality and immortality; I realized and started to come to terms with the reality that, in this physical world, immortality only exists within the continuity of time. Everything we create, everything the Universe creates, and all the places we name will eventually cease to exist; however, something else will always take their place. It is only the creative process that is eternal.

My story of Bess is a possible, perhaps even a probable history. I can't know what actually happened, but by writing this story I realized it was not important how or even whether Bess travelled to this mountain; what was critical was that I did, and that I learned something important along the way. This wasn't just a story about Bess; it was also a story about me. It became my journey to the mountain; a journey through time and toward a stronger belief that it really is okay to be me.

Keeping to my nature, I end with a poem about connections, adapted from 'Amsterdam', a poem by Reinekke Lengelle:

Alberta

Today, Alberta is so intensely dear to me.
As I cross the Athabasca, tears shoot to my eyes.
For a moment I consider its depth – our history.
Its water flows through my veins.
A 200,000 year old glacier dies for me.
But for it, my roots have grown deeper than the bedrock⁵⁶.

* * *

¹ Adapted from a paper written by Murray Walford for 'Narrative Possibilities', a course offered through Athabasca University's Master of Arts and Integrated Studies Program. Extensive endnotes have been added since.

² Although persons, places, names and dates are factual, this part of the paper is basically a fictional representation of the events that might have occurred.

³ Cree for 'Lake of the Spirit' (Wikipedia, Lac Ste. Anne).

⁴ John Alexander, Bess's younger brother, was born on January 27th, 1894 in Fort St. John. There isn't much said about him in the family history, likely because he died in the first world-war. He was 21 years old when he enlisted on July 15th, 1915. He died Sept. 6th, 1918, only two months before the war's end. He was buried in Cherisy, a village in Pas-de-Calais, France. (Dodd Clan, ancestry.ca).

⁵ According to his obituary in the Edmonton Bulletin, Sheriff Peter Gunn died at his residence, 10709 Saskatchewan Drive at 6 p.m., Tuesday June 21, 1927 after a lingering illness. Members of his family and a few intimate friends were with him when he died although at the last he lapsed into a state of coma and recognized no one (copy of obituary obtained from granddaughter Donna Babiy).

⁶ Significant dates (births, deaths, and other major events) and other family information were obtained primarily from family stories included in Holt (1979, pp. 506-507, p. 516, pp. 741-742, and 745-748). Other sources included ancestry.ca (through membership), and family memory.

⁷ Ewan MacDonald Gunn (Mac) was born on May 4th, 1900. He was possibly named after Peter Gunn's stepfather, William MacDonald, who married Peter's mother Barbara (born 1946) on Nov. 29th, 1878 in Scotland (Peter would have been 14). It is also possible, and perhaps more likely that Ewan was named after Ewan Macdonald, the Factor for the Hudson's Bay Post at Lesser Slave Lake from 1889 to 1899.

Mac became very ill and died October 15, 1955 at the age of 55 years (Norah Belanger, Mac's daughter, in Holt, p.742).

⁸ Scene derived from picture in Holt (1979, p. 507).

⁹ MacDonald (2005) provides an excellent description of Lac Ste. Anne in 1907 in *Rainbow Chasers*, pp. 105-108. MacDonald says, "In 1907, Lac Ste. Anne was a bustling community consisting of one small hotel, a livery stable, an ice house, a post office, two stores and a Mounted Police station with one lone constable. One of the stores belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company and was manned by factor Peter Gunn" (p. 106). He continues: "We could hardly push our way into the Hudson's Bay store, it was so crowded with people. Up on the counter a good-looking young man stood tipsily, singing at the top of his voice. He was a fine tenor and knew all kinds of songs in French and Irish, German and English. He was putting on a great show and everyone was enjoying it thoroughly. Later, the factor Peter Gunn told us that the singer was one of three remittance men who had just arrived from England.

Of course, the crowd in the store had not come just to hear the young man sing. They were trappers recently arrived from the Rocky Mountains with their winter catch of furs, and prospectors heading in the opposite direction. Women and children had come to meet their menfolk who had been away all winter. Gunn was busy buying furs, and selling liquor, while the men settled their debts and gambled and made love and generally let their hair down.

In this atmosphere it was hard for us to get any business done, but we finally bought the things we had come there for and returned to our camp. The next day we made up packs for the two new horses and got everything ready for an early start. Life at Lac Ste. Anne at this time of year was a little too rich for the MacDonald blood" (p. 108).

¹⁰ Remnants of the Lac Ste. Anne Trail can be found driving east on Highway 15 to Onoway. The road skirting the south side of Lac Ste. Anne is still named Ste. Anne Trail. Lac Ste. Anne Trail was the first part of what was also called the Mountain Trail (Holt, p. 748) or the Yellowhead Trail (Coleman, p. 162). Going the other way it was called the Edmonton Trail (Coleman, p. 158).

¹¹ Bess names this trading post 'Jock and Gregg's', but Wikipedia (see Hinton, Alberta) says it was the Jack Gregg Trading Post. Bess also refers to Jock's trail, named after this Jock of Jock and Gregg's. Charles McKeen included Jock's Pack Trail (from Island Lake to Shining Bank Lake, then along the MacLeod River to Whitecourt) in the map he drew of the area around Lac Ste Anne (Holt, p. 748).

¹² This is derived primarily from a quote obtained from Bess McKeen (nee Gunn). Copy of document provided by Donna Babiy, granddaughter of Bess. Original source unknown.

¹³ Joan Caithness (daughter of Alberta MacLean – nee Gunn) and Doris Gunn (daughter of Mac Gunn), in Holt, write that Mary Ritch and Peter Gunn were married in Grouard (Lesser Slave Lake Post) in 1891 (pp. 506-507). Peter Gunn's Hudson's Bay Company record states that he was a labourer in the Peace River district from 1883 to 1888 and then an interpreter from 1888-1891 (likely in various posts including Grouard, Dunvegan and Fort St. John). Peter's HBC record states that he was Post Master at Fort St. John from 1891-1893, and was the Clerk in Charge from 1893-1898.

Caithness writes that Alberta (July 7th, 1895) and Peter (Oct. 14th, 1896) were born while the family lived at the Dunvegan Post. This discrepancy is difficult to reconcile. Peter Gunn was clearly Clerk in Charge at Fort St. John

from 1883 to 1898 (Hudson's Bay Company Archives). Information obtained at the Dunvegan Historic Site also indicates that Peter Gunn was neither Factor nor Clerk in charge at the Dunvegan Post during this period. It is possible that Mary and/or Peter forgot where their children were born, or that the children mixed up the family stories. It is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that Mary traveled to Dunvegan to deliver her children where she possibly had the help of a midwife.

Caithness also writes that Jessie (Sept. 26th, 1898) and Mac (May 4th, 1900) were born while the family lived at the Lesser Slave Post. This is somewhat consistent with the HBC record that states that Peter Gunn was Clerk at Lesser Slave Lake from the summer of 1898 to 1899, or perhaps even to 1901. The record has Peter Gunn in the Peace River District from 1899-1901. On July 6th, 1899, Peter Gunn was interpreter for the Beaver Indians of Lesser Slave Lake for the signing of Treaty No. 8. On June 8th, 1900, he was interpreter for the Cree of Sturgeon Lake (near Valleyview) for the same Treaty, so it is likely that he was Clerk in Charge for Lesser Slave Post at this time.

The HBC record states that Peter Gunn was Clerk at Lac Ste. Anne from 1902 to 1911, and that he left the service in 1911. Caithness writes that the family arrived in Lac Ste. Anne in 1900, where Peter remained Hudson's Bay Factor until 1909 (another minor discrepancy – this may have been an assumption based on Peter's becoming an MLA in 1909). Since the Gunn family still resided in Lac Ste. Anne in 1910 (Bess was Post Mistress at the HBC Store in 1910), and the family was still there in 1911 (Barbara Jessie died March 5, 1911 and was buried there), it is likely that Peter Gunn was Clerk in Charge at Lac Ste. Anne from sometime in 1900 until 1911. Nora Belanger writes that Mac was six months old when the family moved to Lac Ste. Anne (in a brief history written for Gunn family reunion on Sept. 12, 1891). This would have been in October, 1900.

¹⁴ Names of buildings in Lac Ste. Anne were noted on a map drawn by Milton McKeen reproduced in Holt (1979, p. 748). This scene was supplemented by a description of Lac Ste. Anne provided by MacDonald (see Endnote #9). Coleman describes Lac Ste. Anne as a famous old Hudson Bay post "surrounded by a scattered French half-breed settlement, not far from the shores of Lac Ste. Anne" (p. 160). He describes it as a "quaint little village, with the pretty whitewashed buildings of the Hudson Bay Company against a background of still yellow poplars and the grey Roman Catholic church, toward which gaily dressed half-breeds were sauntering, the oldest Mission in this part of the west. There was brilliant sunshine and the whole scene was attractive" (p. 160).

¹⁵ Derived primarily from a quote obtained from Bess Mckeen. See Endnote #12.

¹⁶ Frederick (Buster) was born in 1901, Mary (Grace) in 1903, and Tommy in 1906. A baby (Barney) was born sometime in the period between Grace and Tommy's birth, but he died at about two months of age. He is buried in the Roman Catholic Cemetery at Lac Ste. Anne (there are two cemeteries at Lac Ste. Anne – Mary, Pete and Jessie are buried in the other). Peter and Mary had ten children together.

¹⁷ As described in Wikipedia.

¹⁸ The Town of Gunn was named after Peter in 1912 when the railway was built through it (Holt, p. 507). A railway (now long gone) was also built to a beach on the south east shores of Lac Ste. Anne. It would later be named Alberta Beach (Wikipedia – Lac Ste. Anne).

¹⁹ Charles Milton McKeen was born May 10, 1885 in Fredericton, New Brunswick. He travelled to Edmonton in 1905 and worked at a store in Leduc until the spring of 1906. He then bought a team of horses and a wagon and travelled to Paddle Valley (northwest of today's Sangudo). "He crossed the Pembina where Deep Creek runs into the river" (Holt, p. 745) and then chose the land for his homestead. He was granted the land on Oct. 10, 1907 (Holt, p. 17). Milton also opened a livery barn in Lac Ste. Anne and hauled freight and people looking for land. He spent part of his time in Lac Ste. Anne and the balance of his time on the homestead (Holt, p. 746). Milton also leased the Grande Cache coal mine in 1909, but then let the lease expire when he enlisted in the war in 1915. Joan Caithness, in Holt, writes that he also owned the stage from Lac Ste. Anne to Edmonton (p. 507). Charles Milton McKeen was a Member of the Legislative Assembly from 1921 to 1935.

Douglas McKeen (son of Bess and Milton) writes that his Dad had the contract for the mail going west (p. 746). Milton, quoted in the Calgary Herald, March 1955, "recalled driving pack outfits between Edmonton and Jasper

when the Canadian National and Canadian Northern railways were being built. “It took 20 days for that trip. Now it takes five hours”” (p. 747).

²⁰ The Hobo Ranch is described in Macdonald (2005). The three Yates brothers had a log shack and a small barn at the time – 1907 (p. 112). According to Macdonald, the “Yates were pleased to have company, for they led a very lonely life” (p. 112). The Hobo Ranch is also mentioned by Waugh. In Wikipedia, under Lac Ste. Anne (Alberta), it says Darwell, a town a few miles west and south of Lac Ste. Anne, “became known throughout Alberta as Hobo stop because of a ranch which never turned away anyone asking for shelter. Many a man out of work rode the rail to Darwell to get food and lodging in exchange for work. As the story goes many a man wanted by the law also found refuge and the North-West Mounted Police spent many a trip going to the Hobo Ranch”.

²¹ *Yates Trail* (Spiral Road) was an excellent source of information about John Yates and it also provides a description of the vicinity around Mount Robson. Tête Jaune is French for ‘Yellow Head’. It is a small town about fifty miles west of the Yellowhead Pass. Bess Pass is actually quite close to it.

As stated in *Yates Trail*, “John Yates (b. Blackburn, England, 1880) was called by mountaineer J. Norman Collie “the best guide in unknown country I have ever met.”

In 1884, Yates’s family moved to California, and Yates attended high school in San Diego. Around 1906 he homesteaded on Hobo Ranch, west of Lac Ste. Anne (about 45 miles west of Edmonton). With his brother Bill, he packed supplies for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railroad surveyors, and in 1907 he contracted to carry the mail to railroad construction camps between Edmonton and Tête Jaune Cache.”

²² Ted Hart, in Waugh, says John Yates “came into real prominence early in 1907 when he was able to outmaneuver, outdrink and outride his opponents in a contest for the contract to carry the mail to the railroad construction camps between Edmonton and Tête Jaune Cache” (Ted Hart, 1979).” Milton McKeen must have been one of those he outmaneuvered, although it appears they both had the contract during different periods of time.

Waugh also writes that Yates was a guide for Kinney and Coleman in a prior attempt at Mount Robson.

²³ Peter Gunn joined the Hudson’s Bay Company on February 26th, 1883 and he left for Canada soon thereafter with friends Charles Bremner, Frank W. Beaton, and John Sutherland. According to an article written about Frank W. Beaton, “Colleagues who accompanied him from Scotland were Peter Gunn, from whom he took over the post at Fort St. John; John Sutherland and Charles Bremner” (ExploreNorth). They arrived in the Edmonton area in late spring or early summer and they all worked for the HBC in the District of Athabasca (today’s northern Alberta). Charles and Peter both worked as labourers in the Peace River District from 1883 to 1887. Isabella Bremner, Charles’ sister, gave birth to Mary Bremner in Scotland on Dec. 23rd, 1883. Peter Gunn was the father.

It is possible that Peter and Isabella planned to marry (he may have even planned to return to Scotland), but circumstances changed, and instead, Isabella married William Omand on Feb. 24, 1887. It is also possible that Mary and Peter were betrothed before he set sail. This is stated in a letter written by Elizabeth Ann McKeen to her granddaughter Pat Underhill. Or, it is possible Peter made no commitments until later - apparently, in those days, arranged marriages were quite common.

²⁴ Peter Gunn was a member of the reigning Liberal Party and was an MLA for two terms, from 1909 to 1917. He likely had a home in Edmonton while also living in Lac Ste. Anne with his family.

²⁵ Asthma is the assumed cause of death. Mary’s daughter Bess had severe asthma, as did her grand-daughter Evalyn. Both died from related causes due to this life-long chronic condition. Debra Van Hees, Bess’s great-granddaughter also has asthma. Mary died in the spring which also adds credence to this theory.

²⁶ It is not known who young Peter was hunting with or how the accident happened.

²⁷ Carol Walford remembers her grandmother as a good cook.

²⁸ *Yates Trail (Spiral Road) and The Canadian Rockies – New and Old Trails* (2006), pp. 162-192.

²⁹ See J. Waugh.

³⁰ Shirley Stark, grand-daughter to Bess, says Bess broke wild horses in her younger years.

³¹ Bess spoke fluent Cree and was used as an interpreter (Holt, 1979, p. 746). Bess's granddaughter, Carol Walford, also recalls her grandmother talking to the natives while picking berries at Alberta Beach in the 1940's and 1950's.

³² Joan Caithness and Doris Gunn, in Holt, describe Mary's trip (p. 506). Part of their version includes a portion of the journey by dog team. This is most certainly a miss-understanding. Mary and Peter likely traveled back and forth between Dunvegan and Fort St. John many times by dog sled during the winter, but records indicate Mary's arrival in Fort St. John on August 14th, 1891, long before the winter snows.

The rail to Edmonton from Calgary was completed at some time in 1891. From there, it is assumed that Mary Ritch and Peter Gunn took the most likely route available to them to get to Fort St. John. This would be by 'red river cart' along Athabasca Landing Trail to Athabasca Landing, then by the S.S. Athabasca (an HBC Steamboat operating at the time) to Lesser Slave Lake. From the east side of the lake they would have travelled by cart to Lesser Slave Post (now Grouard) and then along the Peace River Trail to Peace River Crossing. Another steamboat would have taken them to Fort St. John. According to Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865-1935, Mary Rich was a passenger on the Peruvian, and the ship's records indicate Mary Ritch's arrival in Montreal on June 2, 1891. Peter Gunn's Journals (as Clerk in Charge at Fort St. John) indicate he left on July 1st, 1891 to meet Mary and that they both arrived back in Fort St. John on August 14th.

Apparently, Peter and Mary were so anxious to get married when they arrived at Lesser Slave Post, that they fashioned a horseshoe nail into a ring (Holt, p. 506). Peter then spirited her off to the post at Fort St. John before she got a taste of the northern Alberta winter.

³³ This is according to J. Norman Collie (1912, p. 225). All dates and the specific route taken are as described in Collie's narrative. On July 17th Collie, Mumm and Swiss guide Moritz Inderbinnen arrived in Wolf Creek on July 17th (p. 225). The team then arrived at Moose Lake on August 1st (p. 225) and the base of Mount Robson on August 9th (p. 226). According to Collie, they gave up on August 22nd (p. 226), and eventually followed the Stoney River, arriving at Brule Lake on September 16th.

Collie, however, does not mention Bess as a member of the pack train. Two other sources say she was. See Peakfinder - Mount Bess. And, in Bowles, Laurilla and Putnam (2006): "**Bess**: Mount [3216 m], **Pass** [1620 m]; 1910; Resthaven. This name is not from one of Curly Phillips's horses, contrary to some reports, but was given in honour of Miss Bessie Gunn, who was a member of the pack-train led by John Yates in support of Collie and Mumm." See also *Spiral Road - Mount Bess*, for more information.

Bess was somewhat of an enigma. In her later life she was very much a lady. However, she spent her first eighteen years living in remote Hudson's Bay Company Posts. She spoke Cree fluently, so she likely spent much of her time with Metis and Native children. In a letter to granddaughter Pat Underhill (Canadian speed skater), Bess says that her father, Peter Gunn, claimed that Bess "was the first female child of a 'white' mother; first all-white child to be born" on the Peace River (Davies, Ventress, Kylo, 1973, p.10).

³⁴ Coleman specifically mentions John Yates's "versatility in turning dried goat meat, smoked fish, desiccated potatoes and odds and ends of rice, oatmeal or bannocks into flavoursome "bouillon" or "Mulligan"." (p. 192). It is possible that he received the recipe from the Gunn women.

³⁵ John Yates' dog Hoodoo came along with the pack-train – as mentioned by Collie (1912) and Coleman (p. 162). Hoodoo was also with Collie, Mumm and Yates in 1911. They named a mountain after Hoodoo when he insisted on following them in their climb, causing quite a problem. Years later, Mount Hoodoo was re-named Monte Cristo Mount – Collie's naming must have been considered inappropriate.

³⁶ Pembina became Entwistle, Heatherwood became Edson, Prairie Creek became Hinton and Fitzhugh became Jasper as the railway made its way west (Wikipedia).

³⁷ There must have been a number of railway construction crews along their route. The rail had made its way to Wolf Creek by July, 1910 and Jasper (Fitzhugh) by 1912.

³⁸ The Miette flows into the Athabasca which eventually flows into the Arctic Ocean. The Miette also sometimes flows into the Frazer River which eventually flows into the Pacific Ocean.

³⁹ See Peakfinder.

⁴⁰ This area, including Yates Torrent and Yates Trail are described by Coleman as quoted in *Yates Trail* (Spiral Road).

⁴¹ Collie writes: “Following a large stream that came from the west, we discovered a splendid snow mountain that Yates named Mount Bess” (p. 226).

⁴² Carol Walford described her grandmother as a lady, and she couldn’t picture her as anything but.

⁴³ Collie (1912, p. 226).

⁴⁴ This is currently called the North Boundary Trail, a hiking trail for experts that takes more than two weeks to circle.

⁴⁵ Carol Walford lived with her grandmother for almost three years from 1950 to early 1953. Bess gave Carol her engagement ring revealing that April 9th, Carol’s birthday, was also the day she and Milton were engaged.

⁴⁶ Their marriage certificate is in the possession of granddaughter Donna Babiy.

⁴⁷ Mount Robson wasn’t successfully climbed until 1913 by Foster, MacCarthy and Kain (Peakfinder).

⁴⁸ Collie wrote his name on one side and St. Andrews Golf Course on the other, humorously indicating his intent to retire from mountain climbing (Williams, 2005, p. 80).

⁴⁹ Collie describes reaching the summit: “On August 24 we reached the pass, and on the 26th in most brilliant weather we ascended Mount Bess. On the summit there was not a breath of wind, and the atmosphere was magnificently clear. We could see mountains for 100 miles in every direction, and, for the first time, I saw through a break in the hills to the east the level pine woods stretching away to the prairie. The Caribou Mountains were as usual splendid, two peaks being especially fine. Far away to the south was a grand mountain somewhere in the Selwyn range. Robson and his satellites seemed quite near. Mount Geikie towered up, showing his grim precipices plainly through the clear air; and far away in the dim distance at the head of the Athabasca was a shapely snow pyramid that was almost certainly Mount Columbia. Never have I been on the summit of any peak in more favourable conditions, and as we gazed in every direction over peaks, glaciers, snowfields, and valleys, we recognized how much remained still to be done in this new land; as far as we were aware, out of the innumerable peaks that we could see spread out before us only two, Mount Columbia and Mount Robson, had ever been climbed by any one except by ourselves” (p. 231).

⁵⁰ According to the 1916 Canadian Census John Yates was married to Margaret, and had a three year old son named John, and a two year old daughter named Elisie. According to T. Hart (via a phone call to the White Museum), Elisie had lived in California and she was Hart’s primary source of information about her father.

⁵¹ Carol Walford remembers her grandmother serving these sandwiches to her lady friends when she lived with Bess in Westlock (1950). Bess encouraged Carol to perform the highland dance to entertain these lady friends.

⁵² Alberta named her first daughter Barbara Ann (Holt, p. 516) most likely in memory of her younger sister, Barbara Jessie.

⁵³ Bess, Alberta, and Mac were the oldest of the remaining siblings, and they were also the closest. They lived side by side for many years. In his Canadian First World War Record (July 15th 1915), John says his occupation was ‘Rancher’, so he likely owned the homestead that would later become Mac’s. Mac married Nora Barr on April 7th, 1921 at Lake Isle, and then they settled on their homestead in Roydale (Holt, pp. 741-742). In the 1916 Canadian Census, Mac was living with Alberta and Hector on their farm in Roydale. He was likely working John’s land while John was away at war.

⁵⁴ It is uncertain when Edmonton actually became Peter Gunn’s permanent home. He married Katherine Nicoll of Edmonton in 1915. However, John Gunn says in his Canadian First World War Record (July 15th, 1915) that his father resided in Lac Ste. Anne. On May 14th, 1918, Mac says in his Canadian First World War Record that Peter Gunn lived at 10709 – Saskatchewan Drive. He likely lived in both places until he married Miss. Nicoll.

⁵⁵ While auditing Alberta Vocational College in Grouard in 1987, I visited the Grouard museum and I was informed that Grouard was considered the front runner for Alberta’s capital city in the early 1900’s.

⁵⁶ The Athabasca River is birthed by the Athabasca Glacier in the Columbia Ice-Fields. From here it flows north to the Athabasca Falls. The Miette streams into it near the Town of Jasper, where it takes a turn to the east. The Snake Indian River meets up with the Athabasca before Lake Brule. Now past the Rocky Mountains, the Athabasca continues east for a while until it reaches Hinton, when it begins to head in a north-easterly direction. The MacLeod merges with it at Whitecourt and then it heads further north and east until it is fed by the Pembina (the Paddle River joins the Pembina between Barrhead and Westlock). The Athabasca veers north, is joined by the Lesser Slave, then it suddenly dips south to the Town of Athabasca before heading north to Fort MacMurray. Further north at Fort Chipewan, it spills into Lake Athabasca. From there the Slave River takes its waters onward to the Mackenzie and eventually to the Arctic Ocean.

Mount Robson, Mount Bess and surrounding glaciers feed the Fraser River, which meanders toward the Pacific Ocean. Their snow and ice also feed the Smoky River. From Mount Bess the Smoky heads north past Grand Prairie where it meets the Peace. The headwaters of the Peace are to the west of Fort St. John. It flows east through Fort St. John, then past Dunvegan to the Town of Peace River, where it heads north and then east, also to Lake Athabasca.

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