

Research by J. Ross and Associates in 2011 uncovered much about Bremner House, its owners and its agricultural context, but more could be discovered by accessing materials left unexplored due to time constraints.

Bremner House: Areas for further research

Seven months were spent researching the Bremner-Schroter house and the agricultural history of Strathcona County. Despite the fact that J.C.C. Bremner, the builder of the house, died in 1928 leaving no issue, a surprising amount of information was uncovered about him, his personality, his farming operation, his investments and his death. Only the reason for his suicide remains a mystery.

Fortunately for the historian, J.C.C. Bremner arrived in the very early years of the settlement of what is now Strathcona County. Edmonton, the closest urban settlement, was not even a town, but it had already attracted businessmen and entrepreneurs whose boosterism would propel Edmonton into a major centre in the following decades. One such booster was Frank Oliver who, along with Alex Taylor, established the community's first newspaper, *The Edmonton Bulletin*. In the early decades of the newspaper's existence, the population of Edmonton and the surrounding districts was small so any information on the comings and goings of its citizens, community activities and the farming prospects for the year were noted alongside national and international news off the wire. As a consequence, we know when Bremner arrived, how much fleece his flock of sheep produced, what prizes his livestock won at the Edmonton Agricultural Fair and when he travelled out of province. It is through the newspaper that we know something about his farm operation.

° One source that was not accessed were the fonds of the Fort Saskatchewan Agricultural Society 1887-1955, Acc. # M2360 (6.4 m) housed at the Glenbow Archives, Calgary. We know that Bremner took prizes for his horses at the Fort Saskatchewan Exhibition in 1895 and that by 1905 he was a shareholder in the society. More information on his involvement with the Fort Saskatchewan Agricultural Society might well be found in these fonds.

° There were unsubstantiated references found during the course of the research that Bremner hired British boys to work on his farm. Indeed, the Department of Agriculture did have such a program in the 1920s. Research into the Vermilion School of Agriculture 1924-1928 for the names of farmers where boys were placed for the summer months can be carried out at the library at Lakeland College, Vermilion.

Bremner was a wheeler-dealer. In the first decades after his arrival, he invested his inheritance in land. The best source of information on Bremner's land dealings can be found through a Land Titles search. It was through such a search that the extent of his land purchases—scrip, CPR and school lands—became evident. However, it was only practical to do such a search for those quarter-sections in the Strathcona County that were already known or suspected. Only in the probate of his will do we learn that Bremner had had land in Flying Shot Lake Settlement in the Peace River country. How many other scrip land or railway lands did he own in other parts of the province?

° More information on Bremner's land holdings might be possible through a search in local history books and local museums and archives around the province, including those oral histories at the Strathcona County Museum and Archives that have not been transcribed. If Bremner held some land in the Peace Country, did he own more there? Where else might he have sunk some of his money? A word of caution: Land Title searches are very, very expensive so one must be quite sure of the legal description before proceeding with the search.

Later, Bremner invested heavily in resource and technological companies. Some of these companies, such as the Edmonton Aircraft Company and Alberta Refineries, left no company records and did not attract attention in the newspapers. For other companies like Mountain Park Coal Company, there are a number of good sources of information.

° There may be information on Maple Leaf Oil Company at the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. An internet search into the Glenbow's archival holdings does not come up with anything. However, information on the company and its directors (Bremner was a director) may well be subsumed in other fonds dealing with the Wainwright gas and oil field.

Bremner was a joiner in those organizations that either appealed to an interest of his (e.g., football and cricket) or served as an entry into local social circles. He joined the prestigious Edmonton Club that, despite his antics, kept him on its membership role until his death. Its fonds were accessed for information. Another organization he joined was the Northern Alberta Pioneers and Old Timer's Association. Both of these clubs attracted the moneyed class and the power brokers in Edmonton and the surrounding districts. This was where Bremner probably made useful business contacts.

° The Northern Alberta Pioneers and Old Timer's Association has no artifacts or fonds at its cabin on Scona Road. A search by the staff at the City Artifact Centre turned up no artifacts that Edith apparently donated after her husband's death; they were probably discarded either by the association before it handed over its collection to the City Artifact Centre or by the City staff who culled the NAPOTA collection prior to accessioning the collection. There does not appear to be any other avenue that can be used to locate these artifacts. On the other hand, the Legislative Library has a collection (74.1/187-189) of Northern Alberta Pioneers and Old Timer's Association papers that was not accessed due to time constraints.

Bremner arrived with considerably more money than most homesteaders, and he fostered an image of a wealthy landowner who ran in certain moneyed circles and had friends in high places. As a consequence, it was to Bremner that the farmers in the township turned when they wanted a railway siding at Hortonburg; he obliged by seeking a meeting with the officials of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway that did in fact lead to a siding being built. Bremner tapped into and expanded his network of business associates through directorships on various companies. It was possibly through his brother Alexander Hamilton (Hampy) in Britain that Bremner was able to negotiate the financing of the Mountain Park Coal Company. This not only secured for him a position on the Board of Directors but introduced him to some of England's wealthier financiers, a cache that must have been useful when he looked to invest in other companies.

Bremner was brusque and dismissive of those he considered below his station. Yet, he was loyal to old friends, even those who did not have the financial resources that he did. One such friend was Archie Boag, who had encouraged Bremner to immigrate to the wilds of western Canada in the mid-1880s. There are a number of stories of the antics of these two men.

° Archie Boag and Bremner's friend and brother-in-law, Billy Fielders, was reputedly involved in the 1885 Riel Uprising. Context and more information might be found in the Provincial Archives of Alberta oral history tape 67.182/2 Col. Frederick C. Jamieson 10 Oct 1957 regarding the 1885 Uprising and Steele's Scouts.

After Bremner's death, his farm was taken over by Royal Trust. It sold Bremner's three quarter-sections, including the Big House and all the outbuildings, to William Schroter in 1929. He and his wife, Helen (or Nellie as she was most commonly named), had a large family of 10 children. William died in 1972 and

Nellie in 1992; many of their children were deceased before research on the Bremner-Schroter house began. However, three of their children, Robert, Allan and Helen, are still living in Strathcona County as is Maurine Schroter, the widow of the youngest child, Richard. These have all been interviewed.

Nellie managed a household of 10 children, kitchen help and hired farm hands. This apparently did not keep her busy enough; she became involved in the Farm Women's Union of Alberta and in the United Farmer's of Alberta Master Farmer program that saw her travel around the province.

° The Schroter's living children, now all in their 70s and 80s, do not recall any details of Nellie Schroter's involvement in these two organizations. There well may be more information about her particular involvement. The United Farmers of Alberta fonds are located at the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. They are extensive – eleven microfilm reels and almost 700 photographs: M-1745, M-1747, M-1748, M-1749, M-1750, M-2405, M-6019, M-7113 files 3-end, PA-2105, PA-2270, PA-3279, PB-71, PB-450, PB-521, PC-16, PC-40, PD-220, PE-43, PE-72, PE-132, PE-177, NA-3972, NA-4338, Microfilm-UFA The fonds of the Women of Unifarm (a successor organization to the FWUA) 1920 – 2000 are also extensive, five microfilm reels, photographs and 3.5 metres of documents M 8365, M 1718/1, M 1751 and Microfilm Women of Unifarm, PA 3606, PB 934, PE 20.4

The terms of reference for the contract state that, in order to contextualize the Bremner and Schroter farm operations, the research on the agricultural history should emphasize the first half of the 20th century. As the Department of Agriculture records are extensive, ranging over a number of fonds, only three of the earlier fonds were mined for information on swine, dairy and beef cattle, sheep, honey bees and poultry. What information was gathered on the last half of the century was gleaned mostly from the interviews.

° Alex and Dick Schroter operated the Schroter dairy farm until 1981 when they sold their dairy herd, split the land between them and went, separately, into grain farming. The Department of Agriculture records at the Provincial Archives of Alberta for the period 1960 – 2005 would hold a wealth of information on the decline in dairy herds and farms in the last half of the century and on the rise in grain farming.

° The Strathcona County Museum and Archives has a large oral history collection. Those interviews that have been transcribed were examined, but many other interviews have not been transcribed that may well have a great deal of information on the County's agricultural history.

° Other interviews about the general history and the agricultural history of the County should be conducted.

° Secondary sources on the agricultural history of western Canada and Alberta were not looked at due to the time spent in the Department of Agriculture records. A survey of this literature can give greater context to the Schroter farm operation.

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