

# Bremner House: Estimated year of build

Research conducted by J. Ross and Associates in 2011

There is, regrettably, no precise date known for the construction of J.C.C. Bremner's third house. Construction of the house was thought to be 1902 or 1903, but no justification or proof of these dates has ever been uncovered. We are left, then, with the basic question: When did Bremner build his Arts and Crafts-style house?

Newspapers are often an excellent source of information on local happenings. *The Bulletin* mentioned in 1887 that Bremner was building "a large dwelling" on his homestead to replace the log shack that he had thrown up in the autumn of 1885 upon his arrival. This house, though, was not the building that stands on the property today. As good luck would have it, Edmonton photographer Ernest Brown visited the Bremner farm in September 1910 and took a series of exterior photographs of the house that are now preserved in the Provincial Archives of Alberta. The house in the photographs is not the house that stands on the property today. The photos show a comfortable but small one-and-a-half storey house built very different style than the 5,400-square-foot brick house that survives today. The current house, then, had to have been built sometime after September 1910.

If *The Bulletin* reported the building of Bremner's second house, did it report on the construction of his third house? As bad luck would have it, *The Bulletin* and district newspapers are silent on this matter. *The Bulletin* makes no mention whatsoever of a large home being built in the farming district east of town. Whereas every new business, every coming and going of people and every reason to boast about Edmonton had been duly noted in the *Bulletin* in the 1880s and 1890s when Edmonton was not much more than a handful of buildings outside the gates of Fort Edmonton, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Edmonton was experiencing its first growth boom, and *The Bulletin* grew alongside. No longer needing the minutiae of detail that it did in its infancy to fill column space, *The Bulletin* neither had the interest nor the resources to report on every new building under construction, especially those outside the city's limits. Even Fort Saskatchewan's paper, *The Conservator* that began publication in March 1913, did not indulge in those types of details of even the Fort let alone the surrounding districts.

It is useful to remember the context of the times. As mentioned above, Edmonton and Alberta were undergoing explosive growth in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Good money was being made by merchants and people like Bremner who raised draught horses for re-sale to the thousands of newcomers flooding into the area. Bremner had made money on his numerous land purchases and re-sales, and in other ventures as noted below. The boom period came to a crashing halt in 1912-1913 just as the Hudson's Bay Company was putting its Reserve lands up for sale. The outbreak of war in 1914 further stymied cash flow, and resources and materials were re-directed to the war effort. The real estate bubble burst so dramatically and completely that Edmonton was not to experience its like again for three decades. If Bremner was going to build a large home that befitted his social position, it stands to reason that he built his home sometime before the outbreak of the First World War.

There is some good physical evidence for this claim. Some of the bricks in the living room fireplace in Bremner House are stamped "PA". Peter Anderson was a brick maker who had his kilns on the river flats by Gallagher hill in Edmonton. Like all brick makers, Anderson needed to identify his product from that of his competitors, hence, the "PA" stamp found on the living room fireplace bricks.

Anderson had started his business in 1899, and by 1913 was manufacturing 75,000 bricks a day; he, like other brick makers, was responding to and cashing in on the real estate boom. The real estate collapse and the outbreak of war, though, spelled an end to many of the brickyards in the Edmonton area. The Anderson brickyard closed at the end of 1913, and Peter Anderson joined the army and spent the next four years on overseas duty. He did not re-start his brick factory until 1929. Since the Anderson brickyard was closed from 1913 to 1929, and Bremner died in 1928, the bricks in Bremner's fireplace must have been installed sometime before the end of 1913.

The bricks and the Ernest Brown photographs place the building of the house between the spring of 1911 (Bremner would probably not have started building a new home in the autumn of 1910 after Brown's visit) and the closure of the Anderson brickyard in 1913.

The only reference to his home at all is found in *The Conservator* in the September 4, 1913 issue when, in the "Local News" column, an afternoon soirée at Bremner's home where 40 guests enjoyed races and games and luncheon in his "spacious dining room" was reported. Was this a house warming?

The newspaper item does not say and there is no evidence to suggest that the Bremners had just moved into their new home. *The Conservator* throughout the spring and summer of 1913 makes no mention of a large farmhouse being built south of Fort Saskatchewan, so the afternoon gathering could have been for a very different reason. The news item, then, tells us little except for the fact that his home was large enough that the Bremners could entertain 40 of their friends and associates, and the fact that their dining room was considered to be spacious. No further details were reported.

It was also at this time that Bremner had the money to indulge in the building of a large house. In the autumn of 1910 Bremner and his wife travelled to Scotland and while there, in February 1911, Bremner negotiated a million-dollar deal with Scottish financiers to start up the Mountain Park Coal Company. The Bremners returned home in May 1911. As a director of the Mountain Park Coal Company, Charlie was awarded \$75,000 cash and another \$50,000 worth of stock. He may have re-invested some of \$75,000 back into the coal company, or he may have taken \$11,000 of it to buy stock in the Maple Leaf Oil Company, an investment that gained him a directorship in the company.

He might have also decided to re-direct some of this cash to build a larger house. After all, he needed a gracious home in which to entertain the Scottish investors, an act that he carried out in 1913. In 1911 Bremner also negotiated the sale of land to the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway for the Bremner town site and railway siding.

We will never know exactly when Bremner built his third house. It is clear, though, that he was in a good financial position in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of the war to finance the building of a third, much larger house.

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