

Joe and Beth Robertson (1912-1946)

by

George Robertson

The purpose of this not-so-brief history of one family in the Strome area is threefold. Besides giving an account of the life of Beth and Joe, it is intended to give the reader some of the details of life on a farm in those early times as well as indicating some of the technical advances which took place to progressively make farming less laborious and less of a drudgery. In many cases the reader may be able to place other known personages in Beth's and Joe's places and envisage the general conditions and changes as applying to them as well. I wish to take this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude to my father without whose help and recollections much of the detail of this history would have been impossible, to my brother Leo for his valuable suggestions, to his wife Yvonne and to my wife, Lucille for their help in proofreading the manuscript.

Joseph D. Robertson was born July 26, 1885 on a farm near Highland Center, Wapello County (near Ottumwa), Iowa. His early schooling was at a small country school only a few hundred yards from his home. He attended high school at Highland Center and Mount Vernon and College at Iowa State at Ames where he studied electrical engineering. After several drafting and machining jobs at various machine works and a bridge factory he landed a job as electrical engineer in the power plant at Fairmont, Minnesota. Originally his work was wiring houses and installing power lines. In time he worked his way up to become chief engineer in the engine room of the power plant. Engines were of the internal combustion type, fueled by gas manufactured on the premises from coal.

It was in Fairmont that Joe met Beth. Elizabeth Mayme (Petrie) Robertson was born September 30, 1889 in Fairmont, Minnesota. Her father was a carpenter and built many of the houses in Fairmont. Beth was educated in Fairmont and after completing high school was presented with a teacher's certificate. She taught school in the country near Truman, just north of Fairmont for four years. She boarded with farmers where she gained first hand knowledge of farming and farm life. Joe and Beth were married in Fairmont on February 8, 1911.

About this time Joe began to find work at the power plant a bit dull and confining. Through newspaper ads by the CPR he had learned of the wonderful farming potential in western Canada. A close friend, Gus Teuchert (nickname-Two-Shirt) who had left Fairmont earlier and was working as a well driller in the Strome-Killam area, had written

glowing reports about the area and the opportunities there. In August 1912 Joe bought an excursion ticket from Fairmont to Strome for one-cent per mile on the railroad which had been completed just a few years earlier.

He found work with Allen McDonnell (SW 28-44-15) as a farm hand and at harvest time stoked grain for \$1.50 a day. In September Neil MacEachern north of Killam hired him to run a big Hart-Power kerosene tractor during threshing. It was a cold, wet fall and threshing continued into early winter. Before freeze up mosquitoes swarmed by the billions in black columns like telephone poles above the stooks.

After threshing was over Neil asked Joe to stay with him for the winter to do chores. Joe sent for Beth who arrived from Fairmont in November. It was cold and wet when she landed in Killam and mud was everywhere. She spent her first night in Alberta in the Killam Hotel with no heat. If there had been a train back to Fairmont, and the comforts of civilization, she would have taken it.

Next day, however, the sun was shining and things looked much brighter. She was given work as a cook at MacEachern's and she and Joe had the use of the bunkhouse for the winter. It was no mansion, but when the wood stove was stoked it was comfortable in the daytime. At night, stars could be seen through cracks in the roof, probably one of the first planetarium in Alberta. Rabbits and partridge were plentiful that first winter and there was no shortage of fresh meat. Cattle had to be saved to build up dairy herds.

During the first few weeks in the area, Joe had looked over available farm land including homestead land still available near Sedgewick. Four quarter sections interested him. These were located on section 28-44-15 and had all been homesteaded earlier: the NW quarter by Angus McDonnell; the SW quarter by his brother, Allen; the NE quarter by Alex McCulloch, a cousin; and the SE quarter by Mr. Jones. These four homesteaders built their houses, actually sod shacks, near each other at the centre of the section in hopes that the new town would be located here when the railroad was completed in 1907. Disappointment followed when Strome was selected at its present site. Soon afterwards Angus bought that part of Jones' land south of the track and Alex that part of Jones' land north of the track. Later on John Bechtold was to buy all of Alex's land north of the track.

Angus erected permanent buildings at the SE corner of his property and Allen at the SW corner of his. The reasons for the latter choice is obscure, but it might have been because it was high and dry and was the best land on the quarter. Improvements consisted of a small 4-room house, a barn and a good well; the standard items for homestead farms at that time. Joe finally decided on Allen's quarter which he bought in 1913 for \$24 acre.

It is interesting to note that, in 1905-06, the CPR had a large construction camp and overwintering site near the NW corner of section 28 of Angus' land. Just west of this camp, along the completed railway, Max Knoll erected a post office and store, another

prospective site for the future town of the area. When the present town site was finally selected, Max moved his store there and eventually sold out to W. T. Phipps. These must have been exciting and speculative times for homesteaders and business men with interests along the right-of-way.

In February, 1913, Joe returned to Fairmont to fetch their belongings. He bought at an auction sale: 3 cows and a calf, two dozen chickens, a cream separator, a plow, a buggy, and a harrow. He packed their furniture consisting of : a bed, two rocking chairs, a desk, a dining-room suite, china cabinet and Beth's preserves which she had canned the previous fall. All of these items were moved as settlers effects in a box car. The car rent was \$90.00 from Fairmont to Strome. Joe rode in the box car to attend to the livestock which needed feed and water during the week-long journey.

Joe arrived in Strome on March 15 for the second time. Beth came from Killam the next day and together they immediately moved their things to their new Canadian home. Beth drove the horse and buggy and brought along the chickens, while Joe herded the cows and calves. In this area this young couple: Joe, the electrical engineer and Beth, the city born school teacher were to make their home for the next 33 years and contribute to the development of their newly adopted country.



The Robertson's first home in Alberta
Taken in 1915

When Joe first came to Strome in 1912, he obtained room and board at a rooming house operated by Mrs. English. She had several young men as roomers. The accepted (and only) pastime on Sunday for these young men was to attend church where they would meet friends and welcome newcomers. It was the second Sunday at church that Joe first met Doc Carmichael who had just come from Ontario with his bride.

Doc Carmichael was to become family doctor and friend as he was to many families in the Strome and adjacent area. He assisted at the birth of Joe and Beth's two sons who were born at home: George on December 20, 1914 and Leo on November 21, 1917. He was always available when the boys had various childhood diseases and other ailments and of course provided services at the Great Tonsil Operation at the Strome High School in 1931.

It appears that, from an early age, both boys were destined for higher education. At any rate, Joe and Beth must have planned for this; realizing that education takes money, acquiring money means growing more for sale, and growing more means putting more land into production. The latter occupied much of their time for the next three decades.

There were only some 75 acres under cultivation on Joe's first quarter when he bought it. He set about to clear the bush which at that time was small and not difficult to handle. Before homesteaders arrived, natural grass fires, set mainly by lightning during the late dry summers, kept the prairies cleared of trees. After the railroad went through, it and

homesteaders protected the land from fires, thus giving trees a chance to grow. Indians from the reservation near Wetaskiwin were hired to cut the bush and breaking could be done without too much difficulty by means of a horse drawn walking plow. Where brush was heavier Guy Curtis was hired to do the cutting and breaking with his big steam tractor.

In 1916 Joe bought 120 acres of virgin land along the east side of section 29 which was then school land. Three other farmers (Jim Gordon, Andrew Nett and Jim McCullogh) were also interested in this school land. Since the NW quarter of the section was a large slough and useless for farming at the time, the four neighbors bought the best three quarters, each getting 120 acres for about \$20 per acre.

A few years later (in 1921) Henry and Mary Thomas bought Andrew Nett's farm (NE quarter of section 20 including his school land). Their home site was diagonally across the road from Joe and Beth and they became good neighbors. Both farmers had only six horses apiece, not enough to pull the heavy equipment needed for clearing and breaking land. Cutting trees by hand was too slow and expensive. Mechanical brush cutters were needed but these machines, pushed by steam engines, were too expensive to rent. Henry and Joe pooled their resources and talents (Henry was a



The Robertson family, 1920

blacksmith) and designed and built a horse-drawn brush cutter. Each contributed four horses and with this cutter and a large 24-inch breaking plow, also pulled by eight horses, cleared and broke most of their virgin land over the next 7 years.



Satellite image of Section 28.
Numbers indicate locations of 1st and 2nd home of Joe & Beth.

In 1929 Joe bought the remainder of section 28 south of the tracks from Angus McDonnell for \$30 per acre. He, Beth and the boys left their small home and moved to a much needed new and larger one just built by Angus

on the SE corner of the section. A few years later (1932) they bought the balance of section 28 north of the tracks from John Bechtold for \$16 per acre.



Joe and Beth's 2nd Home, 1929

Up to this time many of the farmers in the area hired their threshing done, mainly by Peter Spohn and his steam rig. However, with the increasing size of farms and more land coming under cultivation, more threshing machines were required in the area in order to complete work before winter set in. Again neighbors cooperated to solve the problem. Robertson, Thomas and George Borgel, Sr. (who had purchased all of section 21 just across the

road south of Robertsons from Mr. Scott and operated by Alex Scrimigeour) pooled their resources and talents to purchase and operate a threshing machine run by a gasoline tractor. This outfit served their threshing needs until combines came into general use about 1939.

The first half of the 20th century was a most interesting time in which to live and work. Farmers, as well as people in many other occupations, not only observed but were influenced by the many technical advances which were taking place although these must have seemed painfully slow at the time. When Joe and Beth started farming they, like many others in the area, had none of the mechanical or electrical labour and drudgery saving devices nor any of the electronic luxuries which today are taken for granted or considered essential.

Pumping water by hand was one such time-consuming drudgery. After pumping by hand for a year for 10 head of livestock, a few dozen chickens, and for household purposes, Joe decided to purchase a windmill for the pump. This served the purpose for the next 16 years, until commercial electric power was brought to the area.

In 1914 the telephone trunk line from Edmonton was extended from Daysland to Strome. It followed the main road between the two towns along the south side of Robertson's farm. Beth fed the line crew while they were working nearby. There were 16 subscribers on the party line and each could be called by a characteristic combination of long and short rings accomplished by cranking a magneto in the telephone box which hung in the kitchen. Central at Strome could be reached by pushing a black button on the box and cranking out one long ring. The installation of the telephone brought neighbors closer together and made life on the farm less isolated.



George & Leo, ready for school

Transportation for the most part was by horse drawn buggy, wagon or sleigh, or on horseback. Automobiles were just appearing when Joe and Beth started farming and Henry Ford was beginning to mass produce his famous Model-T. In 1918 Joe bought their first car, a Model-T, which served the family for the next 15 years.

Shortly after the success of the Model-T, Ford began production of a small gasoline tractor, the Fordson, which was much lighter and more mobile than the monstrous steam and kerosene tractors in use at the time by a few "mechanized" farmers. A year after buying the Model-T, Joe purchased a Fordson which was the equivalent of 4 to 6 horses. A year later he bought a belt pulley attachment which permitted the Fordson to be used for grinding grain and sawing wood. He mounted a feed grinder and a chop elevator on skids and with this portable equipment could grind grain anywhere on the farm as well as at neighbors farms. Joe did all his own engine maintenance work including valve grinding, replacement of pistons, honing of cylinders, and replacement of clutch and transmission parts.

Radios were not commonly in use until about 1920. Joe and Beth bought their first in 1921: a small two-tube Westinghouse model which required an aerial 30 feet high and about 50 feet long, 3 individual batteries for different functions in the circuit, and a couple of pairs of earphones. When the whole family listened or neighbors dropped in to listen each pair of phones could be separated and each of four listeners could use one phone pressed to an ear. Even so reception from Edmonton and Calgary was excellent and it was not uncommon to receive programs from such far away places as Denver, Oakland, Pittsburgh, Texas and even Mexico.

In the beginning Strome and area had no electricity. All lighting was by kerosene lamps and lanterns and gasoline-mantle lamps. Several years after the first war a small power plant was installed in Strome to provide electricity for local lighting. A few farmers purchased small Delco light plants which used 16 lead-acid cells charged by means of a gasoline engine-generator system. Electric power did not become available until 1929 when Calgary Power ran a high voltage line east of Wetaskiwin to Hardisty. Fortunately the line followed the main highway, but poles were installed just inside farmer's fields off the road allowance. This meant that Calgary Power had to obtain permission from farmers and pay for the use of their land. Joe made a deal with the Company; giving them the right-of-way along his mile-and-a-third of farm, providing they would connect him and Borgel to the line. It was not the policy of the Company to supply power to farmers at the time, but they agreed. A common 5-KVA transformer was installed between Borgel's and Robertson's and on January 1, 1930 power was turned on, introducing a new era in farming.

Electric lights not only replaced the kerosene and gasoline lamps but provided light in places which didn't have light before. There were electric lights in every room in the house, in the barn, in the workshop and on a pole to light the farmyard. Lights were even installed in the chicken house to make the hens work overtime and produce more eggs.

A portable quarter-horsepower electric motor was installed, which provided turning power for many machines on the farm. This was eventually fitted to run the water pump, the washing machine, the grain fanning mill, the cream separator, the butter churn, a grain elevator, an old car battery charger for charging batteries, and an emery wheel for grinding and sharpening many kinds of farm implements as well as skates. Thus, much of the drudgery of cranking and turning machines by hand was removed.

A five-horsepower electric motor was later purchased. This was made portable by mounting it on an old car chassis and was used to replace the tractor for grinding grain and sawing wood.

After Calgary Power arrived in the district, Joe brushed up on his former trade of Fairmont days. In his spare time he wired many of the houses and commercial buildings in Strome. He also occasionally helped Jeff Martin, the Calgary Power line-maintenance man, when there were line problems needing urgent attention.

Fuel for heating and cooking was a bit of a problem. There were always enough poplar trees, from land clearing, to supply wood for cooking and for heating in the spring and fall. Willow wood was also plentiful and was used for smoking and curing home butchered meat. For the long, cold winters, however, coal was necessary. This had to be hauled by wagon in late fall or by sleigh in early winter from Bish's, Westlow's or Simmons's mines along the Battle River south and west of Forestburg. This was a long trip for horses and usually took 2 or 3 days depending on the length of the queue at the mine. There were bunk houses at the mines where coal haulers could spend the night. After Joe bought the Fordson tractor he could haul two wagon loads, about 4 tons, per trip with it. The price of coal at that time was \$1.50 per ton. Hauling coal was an annual chore until 1931 when Alvin Gordon started his local trucking business.

Joe also undertook some extramural activities early in his farming career. In 1919 he ran for, and was elected to the council of Sterling Municipal District. There were 9 townships in the District and one councilor was elected from each one and a half townships. The councillors had to set the local tax rate and see that money was properly spent for road construction and maintenance. Roads were poor and zig-zagged around sloughs through the country.

Beth adjusted rapidly to farm life, thanks to her wonderful ability to cope with changes and her experience on farms while teaching school. Besides raising two sons and doing the household chores, she played a very important role in providing a varied and well supplied table. She always had a large garden and in the fall canned many fruits, local berries and home-grown vegetables. She also looked after the chickens and laying hens. During the rush of spring work and at harvest time she frequently milked the cows and fed the hogs. At harvest time there were always hired men to feed. At threshing time she would have to cook three meals a day and prepare mid-morning and mid-afternoon lunches for a crew of 15 to 20 hungry men. During the peak of the busy harvest season the neighbors' wives could always be counted on to lend each other a hand.

In spite of the many household and farm chores, Beth found time to take an active part in community life. She was an active member of the Ladies Aid of the United Church and also a member of the United Farm Women of Alberta (UFWA). In 1915 she went to Edmonton as a local delegate to attend the annual convention of UFWA at Government House.

Beth enjoyed young people and, after the boys reached their 'teens, she often had their friends in for Sunday dinner or for a Sunday afternoon lunch at which home-made ice cream was the special treat. Ice for this purpose was made during the previous winter and stored in a saw-dust lined pit on the north side of the chop house.

Christmas and New Year's were always times of memorable festivities spent with friends either at their homes or at the Robertson's. There were many happy occasions spent with the Jim Gordon family and with the Hugh Vagt family of Killam. On one occasion Beth and Joe bundled the boys up in robes and blankets, heated stones to keep them

warm and drove 13 miles to Killam with horses and sleigh through sub-zero temperatures to be with the Vagts for Christmas.

The educational joys and benefits of traveling were instilled in the boys starting early in their lives. During the summer it was common to take long Sunday trips, complete with picnic lunches, in the Model-T, to swim at Hardisty Lake, to fish at Dried Meat Lake, to see the wild animals at Buffalo Park south of Wainwright and to Ferry Point and other places along Battle River to pick berries and to meet friends. The Ganshirts and the Everetts, from Gadsby were some of their friends. Beth and Gussie Ganshirt were school chums back in Fairmont. Another exciting trip was to Edmonton to see the Ringling Brothers' Circus in 1922. One of the longer journeys was a camping trip to Musselshell in Montana to visit Beth's oldest sister. Ethel and family (Jensen) and her father who was staying at Ethel's at the time. Highways were still dirt and followed section lines. They were marked by means of colored bands painted on fence posts or telephone poles: the road to Wetaskiwin was marked by a green band on white, while the trail from Wetaskiwin to Calgary was red on white. Right and left turns were marked R or L in the appropriate colors for the highway one was following. On any trip more than a few miles from home it was customary to carry a tool kit and the necessary haywire, tire and tube patching material, a tire pump and a tow rope. In spite of many problems, the Model-T lived up to its reputation and always brought the family back home.



Joe & Beth's 50th wedding anniversary, 1961

After the Second World War, Joe and Beth took stock of their farming career. Their sons had been given a good education and were now embarked on their own careers. Neither was interested in the farm or farming as a career. As much as possible of their land had long since been cleared of bush and a maximum amount was under cultivation. Machinery was wearing out and needed replacing. New equipment was now expensive and would mean another large investment. They had survived the extremes of climatic variability from the very wet years when they started farming to the droughts and dust storms of the dirty Thirties, as well as many destructive hail-storms. They had recovered from the great depression of the late thirties and had witnessed the consequences of two world wars. Crops during the past several years had been good thanks to "adequate rain-fall. There was no point in continuing on the farm and risking crop failure. They decided to retire and in April, 1946 had a sale and sold out. The farm brought \$33.00 per acre.

They bought a house in Edmonton which was to be their home for the next 32 years. For the first time in their lives they now could enjoy the luxuries of central heating with gas, running water, and inside plumbing. Retirement was a new life for Beth and Joe. Now they could do the many things that they didn't have time for while tied down to the farm. Joe invested his money wisely and cautiously in the



Retirement Home of Joe & Beth Robertson, 1946-1978, at 11050-83rd Ave., Edmonton.

developing Alberta oil industry and in real estate. They travelled extensively, visiting every province in Canada, the Yukon and the N.W.T. as well as every State in the U.S.A. including Hawaii and Alaska. In 1970, they flew around the world, spending several weeks in Manila with son, George and his wife who were working in the Philippines at the time. On this trip they visited a dozen countries in Asia and Europe and realized a long desire to make a boat trip down the Rhine River through Germany and The Netherlands. They made several trips to Ottawa to visit their sons and grandchildren and later, their great-grandchildren.

In his spare time Joe did woodwork and in later years worked on the genealogy of the Robertson line. So far he has traced the line back from Iowa through Indiana and Kentucky to Virginia, covering six or seven generations to about 1650. Indications are that his Robertson line must have originated in England or Scotland before that date.

In spite of a busy retired life, Beth and Joe always found time to welcome and entertain visitors of which they had many. There were always meals and beds for many who came to visit them.

But humans are not immortal. Beth passed away suddenly on April 1, 1978 after a few days in coma following a massive stroke. She was interred in the family plot at the Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Edmonton with Father Frank officiating.

Joe's eyesight had been failing for several years and it was felt that he could not continue to live in his home alone. He sold the house and moved to Ottawa to be near his sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He lived in a comfortable home in Ottawa and enjoyed long walks when the weather was good and did a great deal of reading with his closed-circuit TV reading aid. He wrote and typed and continued to manage his investments and to conduct the slow research to locate ancestors prior to 1650.

Joe died July 26, 1980. He was taken by train to be laid to rest in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Edmonton with Beth his wife for 67 years.

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