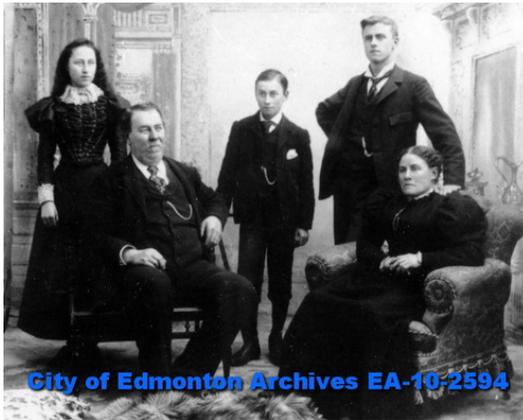
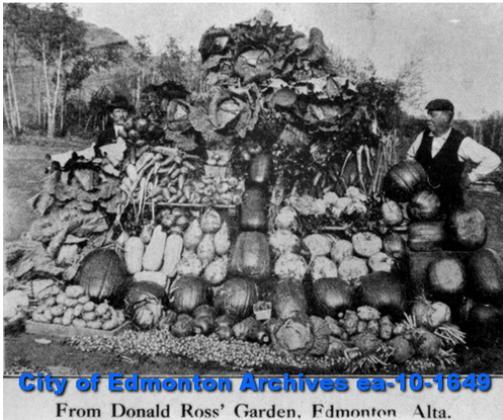


RIVER CROSSING STORIES

Donald Ross of Rossdale

As told by Kathryn Ivany, City Archivist



Edmonton has its share of characters, and many even have neighbourhoods named after them. The assumption might be that these historic figures were austere politicians or wealthy and powerful tycoons of industry. In the case of Donald Ross, that assumption would be false.

Donald was born in 1840 and his father was a gardener in Ross-shire in the Scottish Highlands of the north. After a short education he went to London and began his career in the hospitality industry moving from footman in a private house, to cabin boy on a trans-Atlantic steamship, to waiter in large hotels, like the Astor and the National in New York City and Washington, D.C. But Donald was obviously a man of adventure and soon he fell prey to the glimmer of gold shining in the west. He entered the gold fields in California and Nevada during the rush of 1860 and struggled for 9 years before heading to new territory in northern Canada. He settled briefly in Peace River in 1870 - before attempting his luck along the North Saskatchewan River in 1872.

You may not know that there was a significant number of gold panners in the Edmonton district in the 1870s. Charles Livingston, Charlie Stevenson, and Cornelius Gallagher among others tried their luck on the silt washed down from the Rocky Mountains, staying in this community even as others passed through on the way north to the fields in the Yukon and Alaska. Some panned in the streams coming down the ravines, others dredged the river itself using apparatuses known as “grizzlies” which resembled large rocking troughs on stilts, down which river water washed away the larger particles hopefully leaving behind gold dust. Between stretches on the river, Ross also turned his hand to gardening and agriculture on the old Hudson’s Bay Company farm on the north side of the river flats. He did fairly well in terms of barley and vegetable crops, but not in terms of enough money to pay off the lease he had on the land.

His next venture included opening the log house he had built himself near the base of the riverbank into a rooming house for those were coming into the area - either passing through or trying to join the growing settlement. In 1876 he expanded the service into a real hotel, the 1st hotel west of Portage la Prairie. Along the way he also started a coal mining business - burrowing into the riverbank behind his cabin - because the winters in the Edmonton district were long and cold. Because he had coal to sell, he also got into the shipping business, using scows to transport the coal up and down the river to customers as far away as the Fort Saskatchewan N.W.M.P. post. He continued to plant and grow vegetables and small plots of grains, both to feed his visitors at the hotel, and to sell to his neighbours in his general store. He also invested, where he could afford it, in others’ businesses like a brickyard, the boat builder and eventually, the Incline Railway which helped others transport their goods up to the top of the riverbank to the new settlement of Edmonton.

He was married in 1878 at the McDougall Mission to Olive Brewitt (1850-1932), an Englishwoman who came to Edmonton via Ontario. Her wedding ring was fashioned by the HBC blacksmith from gold dust from the North Saskatchewan. Olive assisted Donald to operate the hotel and also became an expert gardener. Together the Ross’ helped shape the community; she doing community welfare and church work, he serving on the Public School board, and the Exhibition Association as well as organizations

such as the Masons and the Old Timers Association. They had three children James, Donald and Olive. His standing in the community was such that he was requested to represent the community and drive the symbolic “last spike” on the railway line which joined the communities of Strathcona and Edmonton when the railway crossed the Low Level Bridge in 1902.

The Edmonton Hotel was a fine building built a little ways up the hill - high enough to avoid the flood waters of 1915. There were five private rooms, an ample dining room which served fine food, and, in time, three billiard tables. The tables were important for a couple of reasons. They provided the men of the new community a highly desirable communal activity which held drawn them into social interaction. Also, in a pinch, the tables could be converted into beds when the hotel’s bedrooms were full. A famous story of Donald Ross’ hospitality and business acumen is told about some notable visitors from the east who arrived after all the beds had been let for the night and were offered a billiard table instead. In the morning when presented the bill - fifty cents for the bed and fifty cents for the dinner and breakfast - the guests complained of the price of the inferior “bed-billiard table”. Ross’ reply was that if they were unhappy with the price of a bed for the night - they could pay instead the hourly cost of the billiard table - which was fifty cents an hour.

Ross was quite a salesman as well and a booster for the community. He often took photographs of his annual crop of vegetables and grains - often piled up as high as his head - and sent the image to newspapers in eastern Canada. He and his wife entered their produce and Mrs. Ross’ fancywork into the competitions at the Edmonton Exhibition and frequently won top prizes. When faced with the inability to apply for a liquor license for his hotel bar (the population of the community was too low to allow for more than three licenses in Edmonton and Strathcona) Ross turned this negative into a positive by advertising his establishment as “the only Temperance Hotel” in the district.

Although not a man of wealth or power, the recognition of the community came in the naming of his neighbourhood after Donald Ross. The love of his family and neighbours can be seen in his epitaph on the grave marker dated 1915 in the Edmonton Cemetery - “a very hospitable man”.