Amber Valley: A black enclave in northern Alberta, Canada

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AMBER VALLEY:
A BLACK ENCLAVE IN NORTHERN ALBERTA, CANADA

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by
Jimmy Robert Melton

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ABSTRACT

Over the years many African Americans left the United States after having been virtually hounded out of their own country. In 1910, a group of forty African American families joined in a wagon train to travel from Oklahoma to the northern regions of Alberta, Canada. The early part of this study examines (a) how the Indians fared in Northern Alberta before the African Americans arrived and (b) how the African Americans were maltreated in the United States, causing them to leave. The remainder of the study concerns how the African Americans survived in Canada. Personal interviews taken with some of the original Black settlers and their dependents are included in the research supporting this study. The importance of the family was found to be the driving factor in this story of survival in a physically harsh environment. Some of the group later returned to the United States but maintained relationships with their Canadian cousins. This history is not only a tale of a courageous group, it is also a family narrative of the author.
Dedication

To those women in my life that I will always remember for their kind hearts, who passed away during the assemblage of this writing, and who were always there to listen. First, my sister Patricia [nick name Tootsie, I gave her when she was eight or nine years old because of all the Tootsie Rolls she used to eat] Carolyn (Melton) Saunders, who died on May 17, 1993, at the early age of fifty-one. She helped in the initial planning of going to Canada, and made the indications of what and why it would be great to document our family's history. Second, my aunt Ula Melton who at the age of ninety passed away November 27, 1993, four months after our last meeting. Most of our time was spent sharing the little tidbits of family history that continue to tie us all together. In her last days she was gracious enough to allow a little time together even though she was in pain from a heart operation. Third, my special thanks go out to my mother Frances Mary Melton who even at the age of eighty, guided me from the outset on the information needed to get the travels of the forty families documented, read all the core material, and make corrections and comments for clarification. She passed away on a Monday morning during the 6.8 Northridge, California earthquake at 4:31 a.m., January 17, 1994. She is now with my father, and the love of her life, who passed away sixteen years before her.

Until we meet again.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Every family has a story of its own to tell no matter where they live or the
country they come from. At the beginning of the twentieth century my ancestors
concluded that, if they wanted a better life they would have to leave the United States
and live in Canada. The Melton family members believed this was the only way they
could be treated as human beings. When the Canadian frontier opened the invitation to
make the long journey from Oklahoma to Canada was irresistible. The better life began
when forty African American families decided to form a community, where former
slaves and their dependents could live free of racial discrimination, by joining together as
Canadian pioneers in the northern regions of Alberta.

Years before these Canadian pioneers began their journey, the land in the upper
regions of Canada belonged to the Indians of the Athabascian River tribes, and
unbeknownst to them they would lose control of their land to the Canadian Parliament by
the stroke of a pen. As the settlements pushed further west the Plains Indians were in the
way, and were induced and coerced into signing treaties to give up their land. The
Indians were the last big stumbling block in the way of the settlements; the factors
remaining were to get the land surveyed and attract settlers by getting notices out.

Flyers concerning the opening up of new territory in the upper regions of Canada
started circulating in the southern United States. When the flyers reached Oklahoma
they were not aimed at the African American community, yet they did not suggest that
the area was for whites only, and the low prices for land could not be refused by those
looking for a better future.
The decision to depart America was not a last minute decision, it was a discussion of last resort on the part of African Americans who loved the United States. Nonetheless, the pressures of hatred had become irresolvable. America was slowly allowing African Americans to revert back to objects of detestation, and the land they once loved was becoming a land of hatred. Throughout the years African Americans had passed down through their families the best way to handle hatred when it was exhibited. Most of these situations would be in the line of what to do to keep out of trouble, or what action is normally considered by white standards as appropriate or inappropriate behavior for African Americans. However, as time went on African Americans in the South found that they were quickly losing all means of correction to their political problems. The gains they had made in various political offices were slowly eroding, and they were losing control in regard to important negative political decisions.

One of the earliest political actions that had a strong effect upon the African American community was the martial law that was instituted in various parts of South Carolina by President Grant. He used the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 to bring in troops to suppress terrorist activities by local white groups, but in time the federal troops were condoning the terrorist activities taking place. As devastating as that was, it did not even compare to the action later taken by President Hayes. He sold out to southern whites, when they chose not to oppose his contested election, and in return white supremacy was restored to the South.

Finding some area in the United States where African Americans were welcomed, or even accepted as human beings, seemed difficult at best, and many African Americans traveled from location to location. Land and job opportunities were still available in Oklahoma even years after the land rush of 1889. The area was still gathering hordes of people including African Americans, the cost of land was very
reasonable, and Oklahoma was one of the last holdouts in the South for political freedoms. When Oklahoma was admitted into the Union in 1907, the influx of people into the region continued, and the central part of the state quickly became a distribution point for crops and cattle. The state's growth was stimulated even further as Oklahoma City started on its path to becoming its capitol in 1910. African Americans, although small in number infuriated the white population, because as they insisted upon equal treatment, whites resorted to extreme political steps or gross discrimination.

The citizens of Oklahoma brought their political power to bear upon the African American community, and established procedures to disfranchise permanently all illiterate African Americans. At the same time, procedures to allow illiterate whites to vote were enacted. The increased discrimination did not stop at the polls. The local Ku Klux Klan (KKK) increased its pressure to such a point that their night riders were the direct cause of forty African American families, and future Canadian pioneers to depart for Canada.

The 2,000 mile trip north would entail various hardships. Just the thought of travel to this foreign land split the Saunders family. The wife and the daughters stayed in Oklahoma, and the husband took the sons to Canada. Some community members who did not have a lot of furnishings and could afford it traveled by train. Those with large families, loads of furnishings, and livestock to worry about joined the forty family wagon train north.

When they reached the Canadian border, again they found trouble. The official belief was that African Americans were inferior and unassimilable. The orders-in-council banned their immigration, and they were informally denied initial entry into Canada. Nevertheless, they persisted and were ultimately admitted. Everyone crossing into Canada had to be healthy, and an additional charge of fifty dollars per person was
charged for the privilege to enter the country. The troubles traveling north brought out the best and the worst in the people. They discovered that they not only had to depend on each other; moreover they had to help each other.

Upon arriving into Athabasca they found it had recently changed from being a landing, and now was a town. For it was the starting point of those adventurers following the water route to the Yukon Gold Fields, and those seeking their fortunes in the Klondike Gold Rush. Yet, these settlers were mainly farmers in search of a home. The lands north of Athabasca were very different from lands these farmers had worked in the past, yet they were willing to do their best.

Clearing the land was top priority. It provided logs for building their cabins, wood for cooking and heating on the cool evenings, and of course was the first step in preparing the land for crops. Every member of each family helped in this endeavor. The men in the various families learned early in life that they had to help in all household duties. Life was physically hard. The stands of trees were so thick one could hardly walk through them. At different times throughout the year, rains made travel by horse, mule, or oxen almost impossible, because they would get bogged down in the muskeg, and the animals would have to be left behind.

As the community settled in the first year, a summer picnic was held celebrating their freedom. This was the beginning of the annual summer picnic held during the month of July. It was an event that everyone waited for throughout the year. Events like the annual picnic developed a closer relationship with community members. Participation in musical entertainment evolved into social clubs, and different sporting activities worked their way into a regional baseball dynasty. During the long winter months, sleigh races would take place to see whose horses were the fastest. Pulling contests were held all year long to see who had the strongest horse, and knowledge
debates about farming as well could be heard at any time.

Living in the far north was not all fun and games. At first, education was not considered that important. Older family members pushed knowledge through labor rather than academic education. It only took a short time for the community to realize that they had a problem. It was a time when thirteen year old children were considered old enough to work, but they realized that their third grade education would be insufficient for future generations. The community sought the government’s permission to create their own school district, their own school, and hire their own teachers for their children. This small community knew that they would have to support their own.

It was not long before various members of the community would look for work outside their community to help pay their bills. During the first three years after establishing the settlement, construction in Athabasca was overwhelming. The railroad continued to build towards Athabasca from the southeast, and finished the line into town in 1912. The following year heavy construction in the area required piping natural gas into the region for gas mains, for heating, and lighting street lamps. The push was on for all the modern conveniences to come into Athabasca. Fires developed because of all the construction, and heated discussions developed over the need for medical assistance.

The community originally looked for a place where they could build their self-esteem, and procreate. Yet health problems were not far behind, and medical assistance was a concern. Most family members had received some type of instructions from other family members for handling common medical problems. Some members of the community were knowledgeable in the use of herbs, and yet serious medical problems required professional help from miles away.

The birth of children in the area is a good example of the quality in medical assistance. Many times local midwives cared for the expectant mothers up until the time
for birth to start, and then doctors would take over if problems during the birthing process were anticipated. The birth of Romeo Edwards was the first African American baby born in Amber Valley without a medical problem.

Many members of the community found that they could not make a living on the farm, so most went to work for the railroad, and others traveled to far off places in search of employment. In some cases the help was needed to put food on the table, acquire heavy equipment, and especially when a spouse went off to war for a period of time.

When World War I began, African Americans from around the United States stood up to be counted. Their country refused to allow them to fight, and relocated them to work details. The reaction in Canada to African American participation was no different at first; it was only through persistence that things changed, and a separate African American corps was established. From the community of Pine Creek Richard and Robert Lipscombe were among those who joined to do their part for freedom.

The small community cherished freedom. Even though they lived so far to the north, they did not have to worry about the safety of their families. Despite the physical hardships, members of the community never ceased appreciating their freedom from white racism. They felt secure in a place that they did not have to guard incessantly against the marauding night riders of the Ku Klux Klan. These good feelings of security prompted the community to pull together in support of each other, and they went on to open a store, a church, and a post office. The facilities at first started out in someone’s home, and later designated buildings were constructed for their particular purpose.

For years, the school was the center of the community. It had served not only as a school, but also as the church, community center, meeting hall, and also functioned as the community’s main social gathering place. It was a sad day when the school closed, and the students were bused to their new location. However, the parents continued to
give their support to the school district by providing personal history lessons on the
African American pioneers that settled Amber Valley. It was a way of letting other
children in the district see that they also cared for their children as did their parents.

Seeing after the children’s needs was always a strength of the community. The
children’s welfare was always a high priority, and adoption was never out of the question
to assure a child a family. For children of dysfunctional families, where circumstances
left them without immediate family, relatives normally took custodial care of the
children. In certain circumstances where the number of children were too much for one
relative to handle, other relatives assisted in their care. In some cases when the children
became of age, finding employment meant they had to depart from the community.

My father, Jeff Melton, was the only one in our family to return to the United
States to search for a better life. His travels for employment took him to Minneapolis,
where he found other young men from his same community that had also traveled in
search of employment during World War I. Jeff held down various jobs. While he was
in search of himself, he met the love of his life, my mother Frances. They met the year
the stock market crashed, built their love during the Great Depression, and secured their
future together with hard work.

Just prior to World War II, my dad quit his job of seventeen years with Mung
Hings Chinese restaurant. His wages increased when he starting working for the New
Brighton ammunition assembly plant. In a few years he went to work for a new
company, that made controls for equipment named Honeywell. His wages were the best
yet, still he had a problem. In the same plant worked his brother-in-law, who vowed to
kill the African American man who defiled his family by marrying his sister. It was a
situation that my father did not like, yet there was not much he could do about it, because
now he had three children to care for; Jeff jr., Patricia Carolyn, and myself Jimmy
Robert. Five years would go by before my father was offered the opportunity to leave Honeywell.

A pleasant request from my Dad’s brother, Bob came along in 1948 for our family to move back to Canada from Minneapolis, and for Jeff to join him in ownership of the Chicken Inn restaurant in Calgary. The move was made, yet the agreement had changed, and my dad went to work for his brother Bob instead. The time in Canada was short, about a year and a half; however the broken promise would have shattering effects upon our family. The move back to Minneapolis found our family destitute, and for the first time we had to rely upon friends for food and shelter. My father returned to work for Honeywell, and my mother started working for the Radisson Hotel.

Our family was able to move into the first home we owned, which was our home for years to come. The death of my paternal grandmother, was the start of many trips back to Canada. The trip in 1960 was really shocking. Some of our relatives in Amber Valley had just recently moved out of their log cabins, and Athabasca was like stepping back in time. There were tie down rails for horses outside the saloon and the sidewalks were made of wood. The dirt streets were in fact mud, because of the rain that day. Everything was a perfect setting for a old western movie.

The land up north was great, yet Los Angeles became the city of choice when it came time to move. Jobs were harder to come by, and with all the civil rights marches during the middle 1960’s people seemed a little tense. The only jobs that seemed available to my brother and I at the time were janitorial jobs. In hopes of changing our employment eligibility my brother and I tested to enter Los Angeles City College, and when accepted we enrolled in classes. My employment picture changed, as that same month I received my official military greetings from the government.

It seems with the war in Vietnam they needed more men to support the effort.
They wanted me to report to the Army Induction Center, and that began my twenty three year Air Force career. My first assignment was with the SR71 (Top Secret) African American bird aircraft. My social life during my Air Force career included the fathering of a lovely child, a marriage of responsibility, that was wrong, and another marriage for life. The Air Force assignments kept me within the border of California when I was stateside, and traveling in the Pacific when overseas. My career finalized with assignment as a Base Explosive Safety instructor at George Air Force Base near Victorville, California.

As my Air Force career came to a close, I took advantage of the time I had accrued over the years to attend college, and started attending college at Victor Valley Community College. Once in college I knew that I could complete my Associate degree, and then it was just knowing that continuing my education was not out of the picture. My higher education was realized when I received my Bachelor of Arts in History from the California State University San Bernadino. The enthusiasm of my instructors let me know that with a little effort on my part, I could be able to even reach the unexpected goal of a Masters Degree, and with the completion of this written work that is accomplished.

The incentive for this work was the 83rd year gathering in 1993 of the Amber Valley community, to celebrate the grand opening of their newly built community cultural center. This new center replaced one that was old and crumbling away due to time. In the past, the center had acted as the gathering place for the entire community of African Americans, Indians, and Whites who could share their experiences of a farming community. For many of the attendees at the celebration it was a time for family reunions, and a time to renew relationships with old friends who had not been seen for at least twenty-five to thirty years. This gathering encouraged those present to reconsider
how the community came into being. What follows is a history of Amber Valley, and the
African Americans who started the community.
CHAPTER 2
THE EARLY YEARS

CANADA: 1629 - 1910

Early in Canada history African Americans first came through Quebec and Nova Scotia as freemen. Olivier Le Jeune is noted as being the first slave to arrive in 1629. At that time, all the lands and animals were part of the native Indian’s domain. The Athabascian River Valley tribes were the original settlers of the upper regions of Canada’s Western Plains, which was commonly referred to as the boreal forests and tundra of the Northwest. The two languages spoken primarily by the Indians were Algonquian, which was spoken by the Cree, and African Blackfoot, and Athapaskan which was spoken by bands of the Dene nation; the Chipewyan, Beaver, and Slave.

The Slave tribe were given their name by the Cree, who plundered and often enslaved many of this tribe, and when the English and the French used the name it became familiar. The Slave were known for being very timid and passive. They treated their women with respect and kindness, and the sick and the elderly were cared for and not abandoned as did the Chipewyan. Many languages used in the area gave rise to definitions of the region, such as: “God-forsaken” or “a chain of prairies like the meshes of a net” and “a low swampy piece of country with bare patches.”

A 1670 charter by King Charles II of England and Scotland granted a charter to a company whose name later was shortened to “Hudson’s Bay Company.” This group of English nobles, gentry, merchants and bankers were headed by the King’s cousin, Prince Rupert, and they were granted a monopoly of trade on the shores and tributaries of what became known as Hudson Bay. What the King used as his authority to dispossess
existing inhabitants was a 1608 ethnocentric judgement by the British courts (Calvin Case):

> If a Christian King should conquer a kingdom of an infidel, and bring them under his subjection, there *ipso facto* the laws of the infidels are abrogated, for that they be not only against Christianity, but against the law of God and of nature. (Athabasca Historical Society 1986, 3)

In 1763, Indians living from Quebec to east of Athabasca lost their aboriginal land rights at the stroke of the King's royal pen. A Royal Proclamation designated all British lands west of the Appalachians and south and west of Rupert’s land as “Indian Territory,” reserved for the exclusive use of the native peoples of the region. Rupert’s land stopped twenty five miles east of present-day Athabasca.

The earlier ancestors of the Athabascian river valley tribes were all nomads that crossed this region and used it as a meeting ground for the different native cultures, and as a buffer zone between the tribes for trading. Only occasionally did this region become the focus of hostility for control over the countryside and its animals. The trapping of fur bearing animals for meat and clothing was a general trading practice for trappers throughout the region. Furs from the Lake Athabasca area were plentiful, of exceptional quality, and the main attraction of white traders.

It was the trading by the Indians that provided a secure peace not only for the region, but as far away as Hudson Bay to the east, and this peace protected fur trading from hostile tribes from the south, such as the Sioux, the Snake, the Shoshones, and others. What broke up this peace was the New France fur traders (North West Company) who had linked fur trading posts from different points in the west back into Montreal. Faced with stiff competition, the Hudson Bay Company began to stretch further west with its trading posts. Struggles between the two companies caused problems within the local Indian communities during bargaining sessions, due to the amount of alcohol
provided by both companies.

When the Indians were losing their lands due to the expansion of the Hudson Bay Company, anti-slavery actions began throughout Canada. As in the southern United States, Upper Canada (English Canada - today’s Ontario) took much longer to release its slaves because the people in power were slave holders. There were some natural things that helped accelerate the destruction of slavery in Canada: protection of the courts deteriorated after a 1803 decision that slavery was inconsistent with British law; their short growing season was not conducive to high labor intensive crops such as tobacco or cotton, and the high cost of clothing and feeding slaves throughout the unproductive winter was not cost productive. On the eastern coast of Canada after the War of 1812, many more African Americans were finding freedom available to them. Some African Americans found it just as easy to simply move into the bush, and start building their homes, churches, and in time their schools.

Toronto has always been known for having many African American populated areas. Amherstburg was considered the center of African American Canadian population, and one small village outside Fort Erie called ‘Little Africa,’ was so well known that they attracted many more African Americans by its name. By the start of the nineteen century there were six areas where African Americans found it comfortable to live (along the Detroit frontier in Windsor, Sandwich, Amherstburg, Chatham, Dawn and Elgin settlements were all black).

Quebec and Nova Scotia are always spoken of as primary locations for African American settlement, and as the 1820 jumping off point for the resettlement of Sierra Leone, Africa. This location was compared many times to Sierra Leone’s southern neighbor, Liberia, that was resettled fifty eight years later by African Americans. Sometimes if individuals are knowledgeable about African Americans and Canada, they
will think about those African Americans that have lived on the west coast in British Columbia. But almost never will the conversation or literary material come forth to cover the African American pioneers that settled in Amber Valley, which is located in the northern Province of Alberta, Canada. Slavery would not abolished in Canada until the British Imperial Act of 1833 abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. In the meantime the big problem was the amount of alcohol that was getting to the tribes through the two fur trading companies.

In 1821, the overall peace throughout Canada regarding the two fur companies was restored when the two companies merged, retaining the Hudson Bay Company’s name. The merger led to fewer whites working in the fur trade, reduction of many duplicate trading posts, and less alcohol being made available for the local Indian community. However, the desire for alcohol was already in place, and many of the Indians clamored for its availability. The desire for alcohol generated its own business to such a point that it led to the creation of the famous Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

In 1869, a “Deed of Surrender” was signed by the Hudson Bay Company to the Canadian government for all lands it had acquired. The company received a cash settlement plus two land grants: 45,000 acres from around its 120 trading posts, and one twentieth (about seven million acres) of the fertile farmland set between the U. S. border and the Saskatchewan River. It took until July 15, 1870, for the North-West (territory) to become part of the Dominion of Canada. The British North American Act of 1871 provided for empowerment of the Canadian Parliament to legislate, and have direct power over any territory not a province. The North-West Territories was the only region to meet this requirement.

In 1871, the Canadian Government also started taking steps to induce the Plains Indians into signing treaties to give up their land by negotiation or coercion. Sometimes
the Indians gave up their aboriginal land rights in exchange for reservation lands, medical supplies, pensions and food. Most of these action were perpetuated by the disappearance of the buffalo herds, which were almost hunted into extinction by white hunters. Under the British North American Act of 1871, the government’s first act was the 1872 Dominions Lands Act. This act provided for free homesteading, with a three year residency requirement in the territories. The Mounted Police Force was established to enforce the laws within the territories.

By 1898 the government came to the conclusion that the native people and their aboriginal rights had to change, because they were getting in the way of settlements for the country’s farm land, and the building of railroads for the exploitation of mineral deposits in the north. The government appointed an Indian Treaty and Scrip Commission to start the process of eliminating the aboriginal rights for land titles. On June 1, 1899, the commission arrived in the Athabasca region, with the power to offer the Indians land or money scrip for their rights for the land. Certificates (scrip) were redeemable for cash ($160.00 or $240.00) or land (160 acres for adults, 240 acres for children). The face value of a quarter-section land grant was worth $160.00. The difficulties of homesteading requirements were set aside for Indians.

Within a few years the railroad line proved to be very important to blacks moving into this region. The railroad companies also advertised that if other jobs were not available, the railroad could use their services. This gave the impression to the people traveling to this area that no matter what, they could always get a job. The minister of the interior, Clifford Sifton, controlled both the immigration policy, and the land policy. Sifton’s advertising campaign, which coincided with hard times in the United States, sparked the interest of many African American families from the South. Between 1895 and 1906 the overall population of the territory went up from 30,000 to 185,000, and the majority (66%) of the newcomers were homesteaders. Once the legal obstructions were out of the way for expansion, governmental campaigns for settling the remaining farmland was started. Sifton simplified the homesteading regulations, relaxed immigration rules, and widely advertised the opportunity that a person could find in the Canadian western prairies. The settlers went where the railroads had traversed for ease of travel. He was also able to entice the railroads into building a very important line up from Winnipeg to Edmonton, in 1905. His vision for the region was to build a better future.

In 1906, Alberta became a province, and the majority of the southern and central part of the province filled up fast with settlers. No land could be settled until it was surveyed into quarter sections. Once the surveys were completed, the northern part of Alberta (ten miles past Athabasca) was unavailable for settlement until 1909.

Equity was coming into question concerning Indian land in Canada. The Athabascian River Tribes were not the only tribes that was losing their lands during this time. On June 18, 1910, the African Blackfeet surrendered 115,000 acres of reserves east of Calgary, in southern Alberta, at an average price of $14 per acre. The selling price at the time seemed fair to those inside and outside the tribe.
Early in American history, slaves were owned by whites and Indians. During the ante-bellum period Negro patrols (white patrols that kept the slaves under surveillance, especially at night) were very successful in keeping or returning slaves to their white masters. Forced migration, found numerous African American slaves accompanying their Indian masters into the territories from the East, by order of President Andrew Jackson.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the five Indian tribes of the region developed a different relationship with their former slaves. The Seminoles and the Creeks assimilated with slaves and intermarried; the Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Choctaws did not. The Creek Indian law even gave everyone royalty rights to whoever was born or had lived in their territory over a period of ten years. Later several African American leaders, including Edwin P. McCabe a Black Indian who served two terms in the state of Kansas as their auditor, hoped that an all-African American state could be created out of the Indian territory. All this changed when Oklahoma became a state, and African Americans faced segregation laws. Approximately one-third of the African Americans who were people of mixed ancestry of the Creek and Seminole tribes and educated in government operated Indian schools later relocated to Alberta.

Over the years many African Americans envisioned Canada as the nearest land to escape the yoke of slavery in the United States. As the first half of the nineteenth century came to a close, slaves in the Southern United States saw Canada as distant as the thought of freedom. Many African Americans would be able to reach Canada through the Underground Railroad. Resistance was met when the number of African Americans entering Canada exceeded expectations of Canadians. Runaway slaves were told to follow the North Star beyond the border of America to freedom.
After the Civil War, living in the southern part of America meant that African Americans had to contend with one of the most hateful groups in America, the Ku Klux Klan. In 1865, the Ku Klux Klan began its terrorist activities in Pulaski, Tennessee. This group was actually a secret revolutionary society out to destroy what they considered as radical political power, using intimidation and terrorism to accomplish their goal.

During its early years the Ku Klux Klan attained its height between 1868 and 1871. Ultimately, when Congress outlawed the Klan, the membership simply created new organizations and established vigilance committees, devoted to the same ends. More formal organizations were established, varying from Police bodies to large federations (united leagues) covering various sections of the South. Many of their names at the time were; “Constitutional Union Guards, the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, the order of the White Rose, and the Knights of the White Camelia.” (Simkins 1963, 287)

The Ku Klux Klan was headed by a “grand wizard” and ten “genii,” it was governed by such officials as grand dragons and hydras, titans, furies, and nighthawks. The master of local chapters, dens, or lodges were called Cyclops, and their members were called ghouls. The Klan’s used thefts and murder of African Americans as a means of expelling them from their areas. Failing to achieve general restoration of white supremacy, many prominent members of the white community resigned from the Klan in 1868. By 1869, southern Whites had to resort to political action to combat the ever increasing power of African Americans. The KKK grand wizard, General Nathan Bedford Forrest proclaimed the Klan’s formal disbandment.

Whites resorted to deception and trickery to counteract the strength of the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Amendments of the U. S. Constitution. The Fourteenth

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Amendment, dealt with the enumeration of certain post Civil War settlements, including forbidding states to abridge citizenship rights except by due process of law, apportioning representatives in Congress, disqualifying rebels for office, and validating rebel debts.

The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified March 30, 1870 dealt with universal male suffrage without regard to race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Whites preferred suppressing voting privileges; one, by changing registration requirements, two, by grandfathering eligibility requirements as a legal means to counteract the constitutional amendments. Whether legal or illegal, orderly or disorderly whites were firm in their belief to do whatever necessary to regain white supremacy.

By 1870, the Ku Klux Klan had aided greatly in the re-establishment of white supremacy in Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. The official Klan may have been pronounced disbanded but their activities continued. President Grant, acting under the Ku Klux Act of 1871, in October of that year declared nine countries in South Carolina in rebellion and placed them under martial law. After a while the white troops sent into suppress the terror activities of the local white groups, could be depended upon to show sympathy for the whites whenever interracial conflicts developed.

Pressure was continued by the government, but southern whites continued forming bands similar to the notorious KKK organizations. Their plans and campaigns were known as the Mississippi Plan, or the Straightout, or the Shotgun Policy. These plans were constructed in such a way as to persuade African American voters to either change their vote or not vote, and if this did not work then threats and violence were used. The Mississippi Plan in 1875 was headed by General James Z. George. This plan was based on the threat of its ability to use force if necessary to reestablish white supremacy. The new organization was known as the White League in Louisiana, the White Line in Mississippi, the White Man’s Party in Alabama, and the Rifle Clubs or
Red Shirts in South Carolina.

In the elections of 1876, three Southern states (South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana) remained under what was termed “radical control.” In that year’s disputed elections, two separate governments sprang up in each of these states, both claiming to be legitimate. In the ensuing governing crisis, President Hayes’ supporters gave assurances to influential Southerners that once Hayes took office federal troops would be withdrawn from their states. When Hayes took office he kept his promise in April of 1877 when federal troops were withdrawn. The removal of federal troops from the South assured white rule.

With the thought of white unity in mind, Southern whites were able to return to their former political positions, and African Americans and their supporters became targeted to be stripped of their power. One stumbling block was the war amendments to the federal Constitution. African Americans were still legally entitled to the privileges of voting and holding office, and were unwilling to give that up.

White supremacy in the South was the goal for the white Southerners. It signified the absolute elimination of African Americans being equal with the white man. The South demanded that all political privileges of African Americans be destroyed or circumvented. The elimination of African Americans was viewed by the majority of Southern whites as the only way to restore peace and comfort to the community. All public issues were subordinated to white supremacy. The view was there were only two kinds of people, “Democrats and Negroes.” Weakness and ineptitude of white candidates for political offices were overlooked in the interest of white unity. Threats of eviction or loss of employment for African Americans secured the political positions for whites. On election days, whites patrolled the roads to polling places in distinctive uniforms, and shot off their weapons if any African Americans were brave enough to approach the
As whites secured more political positions their fear of retaliation diminished. African Americans who were found discussing politics were warned to close their mouths, and if they persisted in discussing politics a fight ensued. African Americans continued to resist their lost political status, and in each year it cost them dearly in lost lives. In the Louisiana election of 1878 more than thirty African Americans were killed, and after the election of 1884 sixteen African Americans were found dead. The reassurance of the Federal Government that they would be there to secure the right to vote for African Americans never materialized. Various methods that looked legal were used to suppress the African American vote, and this was the time when gerrymandering became universal. The main object was to redistrict the States, so that for the next ten years no Republicans (meaning African Americans or their sympathizers) could win.

Election laws were changed to require the registration of voters months before the elections, and the voters also had to have in their possession at the time of voting, certificates verifying their eligibility. Bipartisan management of the election at the time was not required, so it left the system open for the possibility of tampering with the registration books, using false bottom boxes, and stuffing ballot boxes. The most interesting ploy was the use of “tissue ballots,” a lighter textured material dropped into the ballot box, possibly six at a time by one person. When the local commissioner was requested to extract surplus ballots before the count, blindfolded, he could tell by touch if he removed the right ballots made up for the Republican Party. The “tissue ballots” were just one example of the disadvantage African Americans faced.

The outcome to this practice of doing whatever it took to disenfranchise African American votes came with South Carolina’s Eight Box law, which required a separate box for each office. Many times illiterate African Americans had a friend arrange their
ballots in the sequence of the positions on the ballot, but the local whites noticed this and decided to make some changes. Thereafter the boxes were shifted during the day, and only those who could truly read were able to place the ballots into the right boxes. For those who could not read, they only had a one chance in eight to deposit the right ballot in the right box.

The election process generated gross indignation's when identification was required for African American voters when they came to vote. Whites who reached eighteen years of age could vote without showing any identification, but senior citizens of the African American community had to show proof of their age. In counties where whites were unable to win due to the overwhelming population of African Americans, local self government was relinquished. County officers were appointed by state authorities or indirectly by centrally designated electors. Of course, all appointed officials were white.

In 1890, some African Americans had considered the idea of a “separate state” as a means of escaping discrimination. The Texas Farmers' Colored Association chose the Oklahoma Territory. Two all African American towns were created to support their ideas, Langston and Boley, Oklahoma. Living in Oklahoma would become extremely difficult for African Americans with the large influx of whites during the last decade of the nineteenth century. African Americans throughout the United States were beginning to lose the political ground that they had achieved, finding it difficult to attain just a little bit of the good life that seemed to slip out of their grasp.

Mississippi led the way in a new state constitution that required long residency rules, and added a poll tax of two dollars eight months prior to the election. To add insult to financial injury, Mississippi added that the voter had to be able to read a section of the constitution upon demand (of course the demand went to all African Americans), or they
had to be able to understand the same when read to him, or give a reasonable interpretation. These vague areas left open the door for discrimination in the form of favoritism. Whites were asked extremely simple questions, while African Americans were asked impossible questions. By 1896 the Republican vote in Mississippi became negligible, and in 1898 the United States Supreme Court accepted as constitutional the suffrage portion of the Mississippi constitution.

Discrimination did not stop at the polls, and mixing of the races was viewed as desecration of the white race. Interracial mixing of the races was prohibited not only in schools, but also in jails or correctional facilities, factories, charitable institutions, restaurants, theaters, hotels, and public areas except streets and stores. In 1883 the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 as unconstitutional.

In 1887 the infamous Jim Crow laws that would spread to every Southern state had its beginnings in Florida. These laws would separated the two races on all manners of public transportation. With the many forms of discrimination being pressed upon African Americans, they found themselves moving from North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Texas and Louisiana into what was unofficially changing from Indian territory to the State of Oklahoma. In 1896 the Supreme Court enforced their decision concerning separation of the races by declaring constitutional “separate, but equal” public accommodations (Plessy v. Ferguson). The discriminatory legislation against the political and social rights of African Americans created a balance the South had long desired.

Many African Americans were effectively disfranchised by constitutional provisions that were in place, in such states as North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Oklahoma. The first step, bringing about disfranchisement by constitutional provisions started in 1896. There were 130,344 registered African Americans voters, constituting a
majority in twenty-six parishes. Within two years a new Louisiana Constitution would be passed and the total registered African American voters would drop to 5,320 making them a minority in every parish. The second step, would come about in 1900 when every state in the South enact laws providing for separate schools for African Americans and whites, while totally disregarding the principle of equity.

South Carolina in 1898 added a “understanding clause” to its residential and poll tax requirements they adopted from Mississippi.

After January 1, 1898, the prospective registrant was required to read and write any section of the Constitution, or show proof that he paid taxes on property worth $300. Moreover, South Carolina’s list of disqualifying crimes emphasized those of which Negroes were most commonly guilty. (Simkins 1963, 357)

In 1898, Louisiana added an “grandfather clause.” It was there to protect whites who were illiterate and lacked property as set forth in the plans established in Mississippi and South Carolina. The grandfather clause was waived for all those who voted in the state before 1867, or those who were descendants of those who did vote, and they also had to meet the residence and poll tax specifications as in Mississippi and South Carolina. Of course, African Americans were not allowed to vote prior to the Reconstruction Acts in 1867, so African Americans received no benefit from the “grandfather clause.”

Enforcing the need to maintain white supremacy was evident throughout the South, in light of incidents that took place in 1898 at Wilmington, North Carolina, and Phoenix, South Carolina. In both places white mobs imposed bloody vengeance on African Americans who took part in political activities. What was more defining in the effect of disfranchisement from politics, was that African Americans were not being invited or authorized to attend the Democratic primary, where political contests were settled and in which only white men were allowed. The exclusion of African Americans
was based on the fact that this was a private association, like a social club, which was not subject to constitutional concerns on membership. It was seventeen years after the settlement of Amber Valley before the all-white primary was considered unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court.

North Carolina was not as blatant as Mississippi or Louisiana. In 1900 it gave African Americans an eight year period of grace, by granting them permission to vote until December 1, 1908. Alabama combined the plans of South Carolina’s and Louisiana’s in 1901, into a permanent voting list of veterans of war. At the time, this list was made up of what was considered men of good character who understood the duties and obligations of citizenship under a republican form of government. This meant they only wanted whites who were for white unity. Some of the worse steps happened in Oklahoma, where whites attempted to disfranchise for all time those African Americans who could not read, while allowing illiterate whites to be able to vote forever, placing no time limit on registration for their “grandfather clause.”

During the first few years of freedom after the Civil War, both races were served at the same bars in saloons and at soda fountains in some locations; many eating establishments served both races in the same facilities but at separate tables; parks and public facilities often were interracial; and de jure segregation in churches and at public conveyances were not that strict. The law became strict when it pertained to interracial marriages or interracial schools. With the changes in law increasing the growth of power for whites, Jim Crow laws prohibited any contact between African Americans and whites that suggested both were equal. Given this increasingly restrictive environment, emigration to Canada appeared increasingly attractive.

The African American community in the United States was totally unaware that the homesteads they sought in Canada were lands that the Canadian Parliament had
actually coerced from the local Indians. The first significant exodus north occurred in 1903. *The Gazetteer and Guide* [(Buffalo, New York) dated March 26, 1903,] reported ninety families, approximately 500 people, were emigrating to Canada from Oklahoma. All of its members sold their property in Oklahoma with intentions of purchasing homestead quarter sections in Canada. The article also indicated that the treaty provisions of Canada would permit anyone who had five dollars in cash into Canada.

In another article dated April 25, 1903, *The Gazetteer and Guide* had an article that read:

> Living will be found to be much cheaper in Canada with the benefits of a fine healthy climate, magnificent scenery, abundant opportunities for investments and facilities for education and placing children in life not to be excelled anywhere; that is, those who have agriculture experience can succeed without doubt.

African Americans had moved to Oklahoma looking for a freedom they could not have in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Texas and Louisiana. Once in Oklahoma they continued to find the same white oppression that they hoped to escape. As in their states of origin, they found the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma. The Ku Klux Klan kept African Americans in such terror that within the house at night the parents or other adults who were on guard kept whistles at hand. The whistles were worn around their necks for fast alarm, in case of emergency. The whistles would also be used on a nightly basis for security, and were blown in a certain way to keep the outside guards alert and awake. The different ways they blew the whistles also let the guards know that everything was still fine on the inside of the house. Many of the homes that blacks lived in at the time were called shotgun houses by the occupants, because their three rooms were set up in a straight line; that way if the front door was opened and a shotgun fired, it would hit no walls possibly going straight through to the back door.

The families found themselves on a daily basis taking different steps to assure
that their life style could not be affected in any drastic measure by the Ku Klux Klan. They had to be sure that their food supply was safe, because that was the basis of life for the different families. Low growing vegetables like turnip and mustard greens were grown on the dirt roof, in sod that was normally used for roofing material, so at night the vegetables were indistinguishable from the roof. When harvested, items such as corn, wheat, or barley were sown into large sacks, and used in the bottom of beds to resemble the lower mattress’. The food supplies that were well hidden in the house were unnoticeable unless the night riders entered the homes, and cut open the sacks while they looked for any food stuffs kept by the African Americans.

There were many nights that the various African American families took turns standing watch for the community, ready to give a warning in case the KKK returned. One member in the group was a professional bare knuckled boxer, who one night when he was threatened by a white man struck back. The white man died because of a blow he had received by the fighter. When other whites in the community heard that a African American man had killed a white man, they became unruly and wanted blood.

When the night riders arrived into the small African American community late that night, they rousted everyone from their beds, and gathered them in the center of the village. The night riders could not find who they were looking for so they pulled a young African American female from the crowd who was expecting to give birth, and tied her to a telephone pole. Without hesitation her child was cut from her stomach and allowed to fall to the ground. Unfortunately, once the crowd was allowed to assist the young lady, both the mother and the child had died.

This one event was the catalyst in a series of terror events by night riders on this small African American community. In 1910, Oklahoma’s segregation laws came into effect and African Americans lost the right to vote. They did not lose the title to their
land, and the monies they could gain from the sale of their land could get them land in Canada. For some members of the community it was hard to conclude that the promise of rights in Oklahoma, was no more.

So because of all the terrorist acts, many African American’s stay in Oklahoma was short lived. Between 1900 and 1910, some eighty-one African Americans were being hung each year in the United States, the common comment of the time was “lynch one, speak to a thousand.” During these same years, race riots and strong protests from both races were taking place in different parts of the United States. Within Canada the controversy was heating up about the influx of hundreds of African Americans destined for the possible settlement of farming areas in and around Edmonton and Calgary between 1908 and 1909.

The question of African Americans immigrating to Alberta, however, only became a major provincial matter in 1910 and 1911 with the proposed immigration of a new group of Oklahoma African Americans and people of mixed African/American-Indian ancestry. The reaction in Canada to the mass movement of African Americans was not all that different from the reaction of whites in America. The April 12, 1910, meeting of the Edmonton Board of trade met to discuss the immigration of African Americans into their region. They unanimously passed a resolution calling for the Canadian federal government to stop a “most undesirable element” from entering the country. (Shepard 1985, 369)

It was during 1910 in Oklahoma that pamphlets were seen indicating that land was available near Athabasca, Alberta Canada. The pamphlets were not to be given to African Americans by instructions from Canada’s Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver. The Canadian government was faced with a dilemma, when African Americans started responding to the Canadian call for farmers. They did not want African Americans, and
yet they had to convince white American farmers that the Canadian climate was certainly not too cold to live in while simultaneously convincing African Americans that the Canadian climate was indeed totally unsuitable for them. The pamphlets advertised that an army of people were needed to settle the land, the biggest immigration of the nation was needed to settle the province. The land was advertised at 160 acres for $10. The welcome mat seemed to be out for those who wanted to be left alone. Disfranchisement of African Americans in the United States by constitutional provisions and numerous private acts of terrorism were forcing relocation.

The political climate in the United States had deteriorated to such a low point for African Americans, the trek north for social safety was a necessity. Nevertheless, the Canadian government had representatives in Oklahoma to halt the exodus of African Americans. They contacted the postmasters in each town and asked if the person requesting immigration information was either White or African American. If African American, the information packet would not be distributed. At the same time, the border points of Emerson, Manitoba, and Portal, Saskatchewan, were alerted, and the agents were told to carefully inspect African Americans. Canadian agents in the United States were no longer issuing settlers’ certificates to African Americans. Whether promise or propaganda, many African Americans at the time emigrated to Canada.

The group including my ancestors initiated their Canadian pioneering adventure in 1910. Forty African American families decided to form a community, where former slaves and their dependents could live free of racial discrimination, by joining together as Canadian pioneers in the northern regions of Alberta. One of the first steps that the community took as a precaution was to request that a scouting party make the trip to Canada, and return with results of visiting the area. Three members of the Murphy family were selected to travel north on horseback with a few families that could not wait
until the following year. The main reason for the members going was to check out the region for the rest of the community. Knowing the route of travel and the hazards involved were important to the entire community, care had to be taken for the various members of the community to arrive in Canada safely.

Canada did not set out to attract African American settlers, but the advertisements did not specify any particular nationality. The selected means of travel to reach Canada was mainly by wagon train, driven by oxen or mules. There were only a few members that had horses, so they were the ones that were selected by the community. The Murphys left in the early spring of 1910, arrived in the upper regions of Alberta during mid-summer. They traveled by rail most of the way with their horses loaded in the boxcars. They became friends with Mr. Jeff Edwards on the way, who was also going to the upper regions of Alberta, and would later become a very important part of the community.

When the Murphys reached Pine Creek they purchased three sections of land, one for each of the brothers and one for a son that traveled to Canada. They returned to Clearview, Oklahoma, in August 1910. They had a lot to say about the land; there was plenty of water, good black soil, trees to build their houses, game was plentiful, and “grass was belly high to a horse.” They believed their future to be bright in Canada.

The community realized with the opening of the upper Canadian region for settlements in the following year, they would have to waste no time in returning, and claiming the land. The main topic of conversation throughout the winter was Canada, and what things would be like in their new land of promise. Conversation covered everything from weather conditions to misinformation. Old myths about Canada had to be discussed, because they still lingered in people’s minds.

Many myths about Canada were started years before by Southern whites, when
African Americans were escaping slavery. The myths were statements made to frighten African Americans to keep them from traveling north. Some of the myths were: the Detroit River was 3,000 miles wide, so it was impossible to swim, and too far to paddle. Another myth was that the weather in Canada was so cold that your words would freeze and fall to the ground, so nobody could hear you speak. It was also believed that it was so cold that black-eyed peas were the only things that could grow.

The stories that the Murphys were telling were just the opposite: warm summers, lots of rain for the crops, and long daylight hours during the summer for farming. They would come to realize that it was such a different world that even the rivers flowed north instead of south. The lure to Canada was the fact that people who lived in this region were Indians and not whites.

Others heard that the border points in the central part of Canada were not letting African Americans enter. To circumvent the problem at the Emerson crossing, other groups decided to head towards the northwest, and enter Canada through Vancouver where the restrictions were lax; however, many thought it best to wait. There was no trouble attracting prospects for the trip. They all gathered in Weleetka, Oklahoma, and prepared for their journey. Forty families gathered consisting of approximately 194 men, women and children.

Trouble began before the community members left the State of Oklahoma. William Saunders traveled to Canada with half of his family. He traveled with four sons. His wife stayed in Oklahoma with their three daughters. Just as they were preparing to depart Oklahoma by train as a family, Mrs. Saunders refused to travel. She could not see traveling to such a far off place where African Americans had never been before. By 1911, the big rush of homesteaders were headed for the Athabasca area, the gateway to Pine Creek, and this would change Athabasca from a river landing to a town.
CHAPTER 3
THE TRIP NORTH

The decision to make the trip north was a difficult one, but it was a decision that many people in the African American community jumped at the chance to take, to get away from all the terror and injustice in the United States. The trip north would call for the community to pull together, and maintain the different things that had held the community together. One of the most important matters the community wanted to maintain, even on the trail, was its religious beliefs.

The community realized the need for religious services, and reading of the Bible was still a very important factor of their lifestyle that needed to be maintained even on the trail. Religion services was a personal need attended by the entire community. Even before leaving Oklahoma, the community had someone who had been called by the Lord to minister the word of God. During the trip north, members of the community sang songs to give encouragement to each other, and when a break was taken at the end of each day, prayer was given to thank the Lord for their safety during the day. The one day that the community spent a lot of time together in prayer was on Sundays, and it was also the day that as a community everyone would bring together their food stuffs to share.

Moving at this time in their lives was very difficult, especially for those who had to take their animals with them. The animals were needed when they reached their destination, but they were sure to be exhausted after the long trek northward, pulling the wagons loaded with all the pioneers’ belongings. Each type of animal taken on the trip required different types and quantities of feed. Mules and/or oxen were selected for
Figure 2. Map: North America, showing pioneers route of travel from Oklahoma to Alberta, Canada.
primary duty, because horses required a lot of grain for their feed.

Mules were faster than oxen and could eat the bark off trees such as cottonwoods, which meant reducing the load needed to feed them. But the mule was ornery and many times when pulling heavy loads would just stop, and no matter what you did, he would not move. The ox on the other hand pulled heavier loads, ate a lot of grass, which meant that they fed off the land and not out of the farmers pocket, costing less to maintain. So most of the farmers chose oxen for the trip to Canada. Even the time of departure was important because if they started too early, the grasses would not have had time to grow, and the oxen would not have enough to eat. If they started too late, they risked running into too much snow.

The wagons that were used varied in size and weight. Some were small, but many were heavier type freight wagons. The freight wagons had a bed about eight feet long and four feet wide; wooden wheels with the iron hoops; a canvas cover waterproofed with linseed oil and stretched over four or five hickory hoops. From the floor of the wagon to the underside of the canvas top was about five feet in height. The only people that normally rode in the wagons were young children, the elderly, and the sick or injured. The sides of the canvas top could be lifted for ventilation. Moisture would always get into the wagon area when it rained no matter how hard one tried, and having the means to keep the air flowing was good for keeping the goods dry. The wagons kept a pace of about twenty miles a day.

The wagon had to carry everything that was needed by the family, from food to tools, from clothing to spare parts in case the wagon broke down. The one thing that would always decrease and had to last as long as possible was the food. In preparation for the trip each family gathered as much food as it could carry, because it would be a long time before they would be self-sufficient. For food they depended on the nuts of
the forest, the fruits of the orchard, and the grains of the field. They also realized that buying fresh supplies while traveling would be very costly.

Many items were carried, such as fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetables that could be eaten in their natural state. Each wagon normally carried about 200 pounds of flour, half a bushel of dried beans and corn meal, 75 pounds of bacon, five pounds coffee, ten pounds of salt, and 25 pounds sugar. They started out with only a few prepared items; fish and meats were smoked or dried; cakes and breads were for early consumption. Most of the foodstuffs were prepared on the road as they traveled, and they relied on a diet that was about the same as at home. The major change was the way that food was prepared.

Cast iron cookware was preferred at the time. The cast iron Dutch ovens, kettles, and large pots were used just about at every meal. Cooking required some knowledge of the outdoors, in that the fires had to be set to burn whether it was raining or not. Most of the time the fires were set in such a fashion that they could be covered to protect them from the wind and the rain. Rocks surrounded the fire. Dirt was packed in between the cracks in the rocks to keep the wind from blowing the embers out of the fire and starting forest fires. Within the rocks, a small pit provided the depth for the fire that would be needed for extended cooking, with a small hole dug out at the front of the fire, so wood could be added. The meats for the main meal of the day were cooked on the open fire spit over the coals, grilled on a metal rack, or roasted on the open flame. It is said that normally within a hour and a half from starting the meal they could be sitting down to eat, no matter what was being fixed.

Preparing breakfast then was just a little different from today. Coffee pots often did not have a strainer, and the grounds were just added to the pot and boiled. The coffee pots were normally left on the fire and additional coffee grounds and water added as
needed. The biscuits or sometime hoecake were fixed with bacon bits to add more flavor to the meal. Having milk or eggs meant chores had to be accomplished before anyone ate. Eggs had to be gathered from the chickens, and the cows had to be milked. The leftover milk was put into pails that had lids, and hung on the back of the wagons. At the end of the day, the constant rocking motion of the wagon was great for churning the milk into butter, and making some great tasting buttermilk. Having bacon with the eggs required some preparation before hand, because removing a slab of bacon and cutting it took time.

Preparing pigs for many of the products at various meals took time. The skins had to be cooked down to make the fat that was used in many things, from meals to lubricants for the wagon wheels. The left over pig skins were used for snacks along the trail. Cleaning the cookware was not that difficult for the clean up crews. The cookware only had to be wiped out, and then stored due to the makeup of case iron.

The wagon train traveled straight north from Oklahoma to the northwest corner of Minnesota and in the process encountered some of the many lakes located in Minnesota. They crossed into Canada at Emerson, Manitoba and were delayed for a couple of weeks. It seems that a few new rules went into effect just before they arrived at the Canada. Border guards began asking additional questions, and if one could not answer the questions properly then entry into Canada was refused.

As it turned out the month the main party of African Americans departed for Canada the rules changed. Canada’s orders-in-council, banned the immigration of African Americans, because they were believed to be inferior and unassimilable. After 1910, African Americans were informally denied entry into Canada. Everyone crossing into Canada had to be healthy, and an additional charge of fifty dollars per person was charged for the privilege of entering the country. The outrageous additional charge was a
tactic to turn away African Americans wanting entry into Canada. The Canadian officials did not think anyone would be able to pay the high figure.

In late March 1911, members of the community arrived at Emerson, the border inspection point, and their numbers attracted a lot of attention and publicity. The publicity provoked some very deep negative feelings on the part of a number of Canadians. The local newspaper, Emerson Journal, reported their arrival as “men, women and pickaninnies,” and then further exacerbated the situation by stating that the town had been decorated with “coons” ever since their arrival. The paper acknowledged that it was probably too late to correct the problem. The immigrants had traveled far, yet they suggested that it would be better to stop the migration at its source. This is the action the Canadian government took. (Shepard 1985, 369)

The wagon train members were very angry with the new rules that were changed in the process, and the members had to fall back for lengthy discussions. The charges were a set back to the community, mainly because they had only anticipated a five dollar entry fee. When one considers the value of money at the time, they were asking ten dollars for 160 acres of land, so fifty dollars gets you 800 acres. It was a very high price that was levied to enter the border. The entire community gathered to discuss the additional charges. It was not long before tempers cooled, and everyone knew they would have to help those who did not have the extra money.

In anticipation of an attempt to keep African Americans out of the country, the healthiest members of the community were selected to go to the trek. They had no problem passing the required medical examination. The Canadian immigration authority believed they could stop the flood of immigrants through the use of medical examinations as a deterrent. Immigration authorities tried to bribe the medical authorities. The African American community leaders during the delays, were also
waiting for a reply from the United States Consul at Ottawa, in regards to an appeal they
made to Washington. The Consul was directed to make a determination whether African
Americans, as a class, could be excluded under Canadian law. No Canadian regulation
could be found specifically relating to African American immigration, so the group was
allowed to enter, and yet they were subject to the current high rates established for entry.

They had traveled so far and could not see anyone having to turn back, so the
monies had to be paid. The African Americans had fled racism in the United States, but
they encountered it again at the border. Time was important and lost, because of the
increased fees. The decision was made to travel to Winnipeg, load everything on the
railroad flatcars, and take the train from Winnipeg to Edmonton. On the day the party
arrived in Winnipeg, the local Manitoba Free Press had a reporter at the station, and
published a horrendous story about African Americans by a ex-Oklahoman. The story
ended with the women expressing hope that “Jack Frost will accomplish what the
authorities apparently cannot.” (Shepard 1985, 370)

When the group reached Edmonton, it was five in the morning, and the local
Edmonton Journal had a reporter there to meet them. Mr. R. Jennings, editor and
managing director of the Journal, noted that the African American immigrants “could
become useful if they followed Booker Washington’s idea of salvation through hard
work.” At the same time the Calgary Herald reported that Canada’s Minister of the
Interior, Frank Oliver, seemed as if he was allowing the colony to establish itself.
Answering ex-president Theodore Roosevelt’s question of what to do about the African
Americans, reciprocity was concluded by sending them to Alberta. J. H. Woods, editor
and managing director of the Herald ended the article by informing their public that the
immigration hall where the African Americans were located was full of “tumbling
pickaninnies.” (Shepard 1985, 371)
The uproar over African American immigration was building, Canada’s Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver received a seven page letter from F. T. Fisher of the Edmonton Board of Trade, and a sizable petition against African American immigration from a women’s patriotic group headed by Mrs. A. Knight, the Secretary of Edmonton’s Municipal Chapter of the Independent Order Daughters of the Empire. With the influx of African Americans into the area, emergency meetings were being held by various groups discussing the immigration problem. A. I. Sawley, Secretary of the Athabasca Landing Board of Trade, from the area were the African Americans were going to locate, wrote that many people threatened violence, and would meet the Blacks on the train tracks to drive them back. Sawley indicated the area had a few Blacks, increases might turn the area all Black, and he suggested sending them to a remote area. (Shepard IS’85, 372)

During the time, meetings and conversation were against the group. One of the preachers of the African American pioneers gathered approximately seven-five members into a separate room of the Edmonton immigration hall. They gave praise to God for bringing them to Canada, and told them it was up to them to make the best of it. Their satisfaction would be short-lived due to a home robbery in town, after six o’clock on 4 April, 1911, by a African American male. A fifteen year old White girl said she was knocked out with chloroform and then robbed. She was not harmed, yet the locals saw this as a prelude of things to come. The attacker was not part of the new arrivals. Just being African American reflected upon the pioneer community. (Shepard 1985, 372)

On 7 April, Mr. C. E. Simmonds of Leduc addressed a gathering in Edmonton, and said he did not want the province to be labeled “African American Alberta.” He reiterated that he did not want Alberta to be Black, or Black in spots, and he called for the overthrow of the Canadian government. Steps were taken to assure that no other
African Americans would be allowed into Alberta. They started a city wide petition. People were selected to canvas door to door, and their success rate was indicated as 95% of those contacted. A. I. Sawley wrote Frank Oliver stating, "Canada is the last country open to the White race. Are we going to preserve it for the White race, or are we going to permit the Blacks free use of large portions of it?" (Shepard 1985, 380)

On Saturday, 8 April, the Lethbridge Daily News published an editorial entitled "The African American Peril." It noted the attack on the fifteen year old girl, cautioned African Americans already in country to keep away from homesteaders, and indicated that "there was an ever present horror" because women were often left alone in isolated areas. The paper's stand was to "Keep the black demon out of Canada." The Saskatoon Daily Phoenix headline read: A Negro Atrocity - White Girl Flogged and assaulted by Late Arrivals at Edmonton." In one journalist's opinion, another incident would have the public at the lynching point. (Shepard 1985, 373)

By the 12th of April, the anger in the local White community had escalated to a point that opinion now included hostile comments. One comment was, "These Negroes have misused young girls and women and killed them." It was not until the 13th of April, that the young girl in question confessed to having fabricated the entire story. It turned out that the girl had lost her mother's ring, and feared punishment, so she concocted the tale. It was only when a man was charged with the crime that she stepped forward. Sadly, the Edmonton Chief of Police had known the truth for a number of days, and swore the family to secrecy.

Even though the girl confessed, the anger about African American immigration continued to build, while the African American pioneers went about conducting business at the Dominion Office. While there they learned most of the good land was taken in Pine Creek, and yet they were ready to make the best of the situation. Between 1909 and
1911 over one thousand African Americans traveled from Oklahoma to Alberta.
(Canadian Encyclopedia, 237)

It took a while for information concerning problems the group had at the border to reach the South. These delays caused those awaiting their moment to depart for freedom to rethink their movements. Within less than 30 days, May 1911, an African American woman and her son had been arrested on murder charges, were taken from their Oklahoma jail, and lynched off a railway bridge south of the town. African Americans were horrified by this occurrence, and it sparked some into leaving for Canada to pursue their land of promise.
CHAPTER 4
THE LAND OF PROMISE: 1910-1911

In 1910, a major construction boom began, in anticipation of all the people that were expected to arrive, and this helped create jobs for many of the African Americans that arrived for the next four years. Athabasca was the biggest town near Amber Valley. Located eighteen miles away, it sits on the south side of the Athabasca river. Before Athabasca became a town, it was a landing, yet not just a landing. It was the starting point for those adventurer’s following the water route to the Yukon Gold Fields, and those seeking their fortunes in the Klondike Gold Rush.

It was difficult traveling to Athabasca from Amber Valley, it was a two day trip if the roads were dry and a three to four day trip if the roads were wet, and many times the road conditions kept the women from leaving the settlement. Community togetherness

Figure 3. Homesteaders traveling the Athabasca Landing Trail, 1910. Glenbow Archives: Photograph Collection NA-2788-1. Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History, 75th Anniversary project by the Athabasca Historical Society, David Gregory and Athabasca University, 1986, 92.
Figure 4. Map: Alberta, Canada. Photo facsimile from The Window of Our Memories, Velma Carter and Wanda Leffler Akili, Society of Alberta Canada, 1981, 8. Publication provided by Betty Melton. Map indicates all areas were Blacks settled within Alberta.
was a way of life in Amber Valley almost from the beginning of the gathering of the community. Originally gathered as a Black community, with time, love, and friendship they began to make contact with others outside their community. Interracial marriages were very common with Blacks in this community of northern Canada. It did not seem to matter if someone was from another background. The local Indian tribes did not condemn their members when they married inside the Black community. As African Americans pioneered the area, when whites ultimately arrived, only those willing to accommodate themselves to this tolerant community stayed.

The Black community worked together helping each other put up their homes, loaning tools and equipment out to each other, and saving what precious time they had remaining before the arrival of winter. They kept track of each other and shared what foods were available with each other. Corn and other supplies were brought with each family as they traveled to Canada, and each family helped the others survive by sharing their crops when they became available. They all knew that they were in the same situation. If they did not help each other no one else would, and whenever the children of one family needed help, others were always there.

Many members of the African American community were surprised at the low quality of land when they arrived in Canada. The land in the Pine Creek region was different from any type of land that they had ever seen before. Overall, the land quality was below that which they had left behind in Oklahoma. The Dominion Land Survey ratings that were available helped the first arrivals select the better quality lands for grain farming, leaving the mediocre lands for the late arrivals. The lands in the region were rated as: excellent, one percent; good, fourteen percent; fair, forty percent; and poor, forty five percent. There were mainly four different types of vegetation cover in the region: scrub, brulè and windfall, woodland, and swamp. The vegetation was supported
by five different soils types; (black soils - chernozems), luvisols, brunisols, gleysols, and the organic soils to avoid (sedge and peat moss) which were associated with muskeg. The scrub land was first choice, then brulè and windfall areas. It was backbreaking work clearing woodland or swamp, because of the time and trouble involved in logging or draining.

The lands with peat moss had to be sectioned into quarter acre lots with a deep furrow cut around each quarter to allow the water to drain off the land. The owners of peat moss found they had to be very careful about burning any excess material on their land. Once the peat moss caught fire it would burn or smolder at a lower level for many years. Some lands had a depth of at least twenty feet of peat moss.

The quality of the soil was not as important as freedom to the African Americans moving into this region. Acquiring title to the land was as high a priority as freedom itself. Blacks also set a high priority on acquiring land that would be relatively easy to clear and have good access to existing roads to the railroad station. The rush of many Blacks to own land led them to purchase east of the forest district, primarily in a band of muskeg. It was one thing to file for a homestead and another to "prove up," or meet all the requirements to gain the title to the land. The homesteaders had to meet three requirements: first, they had to build a house that was worth three hundred dollars; second, they had to clear and cultivate thirty acres or more; third, they had to live on the homestead (or on a nearby relative's farm) for six months of each year of a three year overall commitment.

The homesteaders brought their families into the locations and many of them lived under canvas while preparations were under way. They cut the trees that built their houses. They cleared the bush to reduce the fire hazard, removed the tree stumps, and all this while raising families. They survived and endured. By the first spring most of the
settlers were ready to break the land walking behind their mules, to plant their first crops of oats, barley and potatoes.

The Blacks that came were poor, and some lacked horses and machinery, the basic implements needed to break the land and build their log houses or cabins. Many only had picks, shovels, forks, rakes, axes, saws, and hammers. “Proving up” (completing the requirements within the three year time frame from the filing date of their claim) was more difficult than first imagined. Those who ended up clearing scrub or those who drained muskeg found that four years were needed before they could feel comfortable about showing the government inspector the required thirty acres. For those who had woodland to clear it normally took six years, and the mixed terrain in Pine Creek normally took the average person five years because of the large areas of swampland, scrub and light forest cover.

The land in Pine Creek was not rich enough to support the continued growing of grain crops. Not far south of this region was the northern most point of what was known as Palliser’s Triangle, a “fertile belt” of land that stretched from Lake Winnipeg west to the mountains of British Columbia, and north near Edmonton. Palliser’s Triangle was named after Captain John Palliser of the British forces, who led an expedition in 1850 to determine the agricultural potential of the Canadian plains. Captain Palliser warned that farming would not be easy, and his warning caused the delay in settlements westward, and so his report delayed even further the settlements north of Edmonton into Pine Creek. Out of the Palliser’s Triangle came Canada’s Marquis wheat, a wheat variety while between 1890 - 1915 was America’s preferred bread wheat.

On farms that were lucky enough to have good land, their first crop from virgin

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1Marquis wheat was a fast maturing variety of wheat suited to the prairies developed by Charles Edwards Saunders 1867-1937. He was not related to the Saunders family who are part of the Black pioneers.
land was excellent. It turned out that their first year of planting had a hot dry summer, which was the optimal growing condition for cereal crops. The following years, they had to contend with late springs and early autumn frost that froze their crops. The winters were so cold that the trees actually split because the sap expanded and burst the tree. The spring storms were so violent and so strong that the crops were flattened by the winds, and if they survived the winds, the growing season was too short to support spring wheat.

Survival was difficult. Some of the settlers had to supplement their income by trapping and doing odd jobs until they were able to attain stock and enough feed for their animals. Within a few years, many of the farmers discovered that they had to go to mixed farming. They erected corrals, milk sheds, pig pens, and hen houses indicating that the raising of dairy cows, beef cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, and chickens would be a mainstay to the farming process, as was tilling the soil.

Despite the exhibitions of racism at the border, the Canadian government actually wanted them to survive. The rules changed four years after they moved into the region, whereby the regulations were eased to assist those who lacked finances. Additional support for employment came from employers in the area dealing with lumbering, mining, and freight hauling. The easing of restrictive regulations was first seen in the

![Horse caravan hauling freight.](image)

Figure 5. Horse caravan hauling freight.
requirements for housing construction; the house on the property no longer had to be worth three hundred dollars, it just had to be "habitable," and the eighteen months residency could be gained anytime during the three year time frame. The changes helped the poor because their three year time frame didn't start until the house was built, and they were ready to live on the land and were prepared to start cultivating land.

Lands that had not been subdivided by survey could not be settled, but one could go out and place the usual squatter's claim marker by using four small logs in a square as an indication for the start of a building. It was only when the land had been surveyed that the claim could be registered. This was normally done by writing down the number that was located on a peg placed there by the surveyors and taking that number to the land office and paying ten dollars. Only after 30 acres had been cleared in three years, did the government issue a patent (title) for the land.

Clearing the land was not easy. Most areas had to be cleared by hand, with the use of a grub-hoe. The grub-hoe is a short handled tool that looks something like a double headed ax, except that one head was turned sideways, and is used like a hoe. This tool was used to clear the land of tree stumps. By digging around their roots the stump could be rocked from side to side. Then the stump was ready to be pulled out of the ground. Once the trees were out of the way, the ax head was used to cut down heavy bush. When all the rocks and roots were removed by hand, a "walking plow" was used to break up the land. It was pulled by a horse and guided by a worker. The families worked hard for the land they acquired.

Originally, forty African American families came to Pine Creek. Eventually, it became the home for more than 160 African American families, who came from areas all over the southern United States. Here is a sampling: Earl Adverage, P. C. Allen, Columbus Bowen, Forest Bowen, Willis Bowen, Rod Brody, Clifford Brown, Felix
Brown, Essie Carothers, Hays Carothers, Redic Carothers, Faith Carothers, Oze Coleman, Joe Dunn, Jeff Edwards, Bob Hessler, Luther Hicks, Henry Homes, Jake Homes, Nathan King, Jaime Lipscombe, Tommy Lipscombe, Wyatt Lipscombe, Thomas Mapp, George Melton, William and Katy Melton, Robert Melton, Tom Mohead, Will Murphy, Jordan Murphy, Clay Murphy, Eddy Robinson, William Saunders, Ed Sneed, Parson Sneed, Walter Sneed, James Toles, Johnny Toles, Munday Toles, Nimrod Toles, William Lowe, and Joe Yarbough. Many of the families that started a new life in Canada had a number of children that they could rely upon for assistance.

When William Saunders remarried, his future would hold ten children, and from those ten children one child, David Leander Saunders, his seventh son, alone would have seventeen children. This one family alone affected just about every family in the valley.

Another family with a large number of children was the Melton family. It was George Melton who became one of the pioneers in the regions of northern Alberta. George Melton was born August 9, 1873, in Birmingham, Alabama. He was one of
many children born to Joe and Hanna Melton. His mother, Hanna and her sister Addie were hearty women, who even before the family left for Canada still worked the fields in their late 80's. George Melton moved into Dearborn (or d’arbom), Louisiana after 1874, where George Melton met and married Amanda (nick named Tanny) Howard (born May 1, 1877 in Dearborn or d’arbom, Louisiana). She was fourteen, and he was eighteen. Ten children were in their future before Amanda turned thirty five years old.

The first five of the ten children born to George and Amanda Melton were all boys, their first son born nine months after marriage: Robert - June 27, 1892 (Robert would join with Florence Carter who was born, and lived in Creek Nation Oklahoma), William - November 29, 1894, Wilbert Bradford- June 21, 1895, Peter - February 4, 1897, and their youngest son Jeff - November 29, 1898, who was born in Shreveport, Louisiana (the future father of this author). Unbeknownst to George
Figure 9. Back row: Jeff Melton, Peter Melton
Front row: Wilbert Melton, Robert Melton, William Melton

Figure 10. Left to right Olivia (Melton) Hicks, Georgia (Melton-Toles) Milam, Ula (Melton) Lipscombe, Beulah (Melton) Phipps
and Amanda, their first step heading north as a family was when they moved to Shreveport.

Not long after Jeff was born, the family moved to Texarkana, Texas where George and Amanda’s first girl was born: Beulah - August 10, 1902. Their next move took them into Oklahoma where their other four daughters would be born: Elenora (Ula) - February 15, 1903 (d. November 27, 1993), Adelean - May 1, 1905, Georgia - February 1, 1907, and their youngest daughter Olivia - April 21, 1909. It was right after the birth of George and Amanda’s last child that the KKK activities became unbearable and prompted the decision to make the big move to Canada along with the other families of the community.

Martha Edwards and her husband Jefferson, who married on their way to Canada, were the youngest of the pioneering families. They arrived in December of 1910, and they stayed with her father who lived outside Edmonton until the next spring. She had this to say about her father’s cabin;

When we got there, my dad had a poor house. You could throw a cat through the cracks. Jeff was always filling in the cracks of the house during the winter. Using the outhouse during the winter was almost out of the question, because of the large amount of snow and the cold winds. We stayed with him all winter. We had plenty of bedding and he kept plenty of fire, but, it was really cold. (Geisinger 1985, 22)

In the Pine Creek area Jordon Murphy and his two sons Henry Clay and Ernest, all now deceased, are credited with being the first African Americans to have their cabin up and ready to live in after they arrived in the summer of 1911. Katy (Williams) Melton remembered when she first arrived and was living at home with her family that her father, Mr. Williams, related how tired he was of having to leave an area because of some white men burning crosses. This was an indication to the African Americans that they had to leave or else. He even moved down to Mexico for a short while, in hopes of
getting away from all the hatred. In Canada, her family was able to lay down deep roots. Yet, sometimes adjusting to the new type of weather conditions were fatal, Katy remembered:

"My father was digging a well, caught a cold, couldn’t adjust to the climate, couldn’t shake the cold, and before we knew it he died. What kept the people going in this area was the survival techniques we had learned over the years. The women canned just about anything; fish, rabbits, berries, and vegetables. Each family raised their own garden, milled their own wheat, and made their own corn meal. All the pioneer women in the region would bake their own bread, and this tradition has been passed down to their daughters. Many times the local Indian tribe (Northern Cree) members would come down in the fall to barter their wild meats, such as bear, moose, and deer, as well as whitefish, for potatoes, carrots or other vegetables.

The log type cabins that were first built had cellars that were excellent for storing a lot of the fresh meat that was received from the Indians during the winter months. All they had to do was to hang the meat and it would stay frozen. Of course the inside of the cabin sometimes was like the cellars. If they were not well built, air passed through the structure, to the discomfort of its inhabitants. The cabins were constructed of logs that were planed and fitted together. Anything at hand (mud mixed with straw) was used to caulk any and all gaps between the flattened logs. They were normally constructed with a large chimney on one side of the structure, and one or two windows in the front facing wall.

Some cabins were constructed with a garret, a type of half loft in the upper portion of the cabin where the beds of younger children were located. Getting into the loft area, usually the warmest part of the house, required the use of a straight wooden ladder. It always seemed so hazardous as the children were entering and exiting the loft.

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The cabins started out very small normally, just large enough for a small family of four, and as the family grew the cabin had to expand. Some of these cabins were still being used on a daily basis some fifty years later.

The larger families built larger homes to begin with. They used the same building techniques that they had learned in the United States. So the larger homes were oblong shaped, kind of a modified shotgun house with the main door on the end of the structure, and the hall located directly in front at the end of the living room. Strangely, in some of these buildings, one side of the house was high and the other side was low. The low inside of the house was only about five feet tall. Normally this was the windward side of the house. On the inside, that portion of the house was the kitchen, and any bedrooms located on that side of the house were rooms for the younger children. Until electricity was installed their only means of illuminating the house was oil lamps, and they were normally located in the living room unless someone needed lighting to go somewhere during the night. Individual homes were the starting points of community actions.
Individual homes were used as prayer centers almost from day one, where bible classes were held, and the initial prayer services were held at Mr. Columbus Bowen’s house. Mr. Bowen was the Sunday school teacher, and Mr. Henry Sneed conducted the preaching service. When Sunday school card classes were formed, Obidiah Bowen was in that first class. He is now the only remaining member of that class, and a practicing minister. There were a few times when services were held outside during the warmer months when weather permitted. When the school house was built, it became the center for religious studies during the week, and the primary location for prayer on Sundays. It was only after the condition of the facility changed, that it became unsafe for the members, and their services to celebrate life and togetherness shifted back into individual homes.

When the first summer approached every member of the community wanted to celebrate their new life and freedom. In July 1911, the community as a whole celebrated with a picnic which became the first annual weekend for their new found freedom, a freedom from fear and terror that characterized their lives in the American South. It is possible their members from the state of Texas, or those who were in Texas for a few years remembered the “Juneteenth Day Celebrations” of old, and were an influence in the inception of the summer picnic. The summer picnic held in July

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Obidiah Bowen was the preacher for the community, and the brother to P. K. Bowen, who named e valley. Obidiah still lives on the property his father purchased when they first came to Canada in 1910.

Even though President Abraham Lincoln signed an Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Texas evaded this order until June 19, 1895. Major General Gordon Granger read the proclamation in Galveston, Texas and officially notified the state of Texas that their slaves were free. This great day had such a tremendous impact on the exslaves in Texas that they started Juneteenth Day Celebrations wherever they settled.
from then on was the event everyone waited for throughout the year.

The winters sometimes felt like they lasted forever, and the summers seemed so short that when the picnic came, the community wanted it to last forever. The events were planned from sun up to sun down, which meant eighteen hours of activities each day of the two day event. Some of the events were a little livelier due to the skill of making moonshine. The events were planned in such a way that participation was a community affair. They had events where the children played and the adults officiated. There were events for women, events for women and men, and events where any member of the community could participate.

Hattie Collins remembered one picnic not long after they arrived in Pine Creek:

When I was a child, one of the food stands at the picnic had a large stem of bananas, and because we had so many kids in our family I bought a banana for five cents and carried it around with me all day before eating it. By the time I sat down to eat it, it was just a little mushy. But because the only time we could buy a banana was when we went to Athabasca, I ate it anyway. That same picnic was the one where me and my sister went home in the afternoon to be sure and do our chores, and papa came home before we got a chance to leave. Papa told us it was too late to return to the events and we wanted to kill him, but papa was too strict to go against, and there was no talking back if you wanted to stay alive. (Geisinger 1985, 17)

As the community grew they formed social clubs, and the first club was named the “Good Community League.” It later became known as the “Pioneers Club,” and promoted group activities throughout the year. Yet, even before the social club formed, the community togetherness was so strong that it was nothing for two or three families to plan a surprise dinner for another family, and bring along a complete hot meal, biscuits and all. Lester Mapp said, “Can you imagine looking out your window, and seeing people arriving on horseback and in sleighs, coming to your house with warm food in the middle of winter.”

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5Interview of Lester Mapp, by Jimmy R. Melton, July 3, 1993, Amber Valley.
The social gatherings also included time for a little musical entertainment, everyone brought something to add to their time of enjoyment. Lester Mapp remembered his wife, Margaret (Saunders) before her death: “She had such a beautiful voice that she and other members of the family would join in lifting up their voices unto the Lord.” Sometimes sing-a-longs accompanied by musical spoons, a violin, guitar or just a upturned washtub, formed the basis for entertainment that evening.

When it came to adventure and excitement on the home front, the men could always be depended upon for entertainment. Many times the men had sleigh races during the winter months to see whose horses were the fastest. Pulling contests were held throughout the year to see who had the strongest horse, and knowledge debates about farming were heard anytime, day or night.

Living in the far north was not all fun and games. The community originally sought a place where they could be able to build their self-esteem, a place where they could rear families, and not have to worry about their family’s safety when they were away from home. It was a place that they would not have to guard incessantly against marauding night riders. But this new freedom also had its challenges. Martha Edwards was really concerned about childbirth when she became pregnant, for there was no doctor anywhere near. The people depended upon each other and upon simple means of treatment, for they had practical knowledge of birthing and other normal health challenges gained from experience.
Giving birth to the first black child in the region became the task of Martha and a local Indian woman, who would come by from time to time to see that everything was alright. Mrs. Robinson was sent for when Martha's time was near to have the baby. She was the local midwife, and later the midwife's duties were transferred to Mrs. Amy Brody. On September 14, 1911, Martha and Jeff Edwards gave birth to Romeo Edwards, the first African American baby born in Amber Valley.

Romeo Edwards found growing up in this free society was not completely free, because his parents' way of bringing up a youngster belonged to the old school of discipline. Romeo Edwards later remembered a time when he was about ten, when his mother asked him repeatedly to go bring in the cows before it got too late. By the time Romeo left to get the cows, it was almost dark, so by the time he had gathered up the cows and returned to the house it was very late. His father wore out his britches for not following his mother’s desires quickly enough. It only took that one time for him to realize the importance of following his parents', and teachers' words.

6The early pioneers followed the rules and guidelines established by their parents. When asked why some of the early pioneers decided to stop at this valley the replies varied. Some pioneers said “that this was the place where their oxen died, and the spot was as good as another.” But there was a lot of decision making that went into selecting Amber Valley as their final destination. The biggest factor that finalized the thinking for this region was the overall savings in homesteading the land, and being able

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6Videotaped conversation of Clinton Murphy by Jimmy R. Melton at the dedication ceremonies July 3, 1993 of the Amber Valley Community Cultural Center.
to own your own property there. The second reason was that it was so far away from whites that they would not have to worry about the Ku Klux Klan anymore.

Yet, they never ceased appreciating their freedom from white racism despite the physical hardships. Katy Melton remembered that when they first arrived the trees were so thick you could hardly walk through them. Life in those early years was physically hard. At different times throughout the year, rains made travel by horse, mule, or oxen almost impossible, because they would get bogged down in the muskeg, and the animals had to be left behind. At such times, the only means of getting around was by foot. When the rains really got the region soaked, sometimes it would call for the animals to be unhitched from the wagon and secured to a nearby tree. Human power had to be used to get the wagon unstuck.

The animals that the farmers had were important to the goals established to the owning of their property, as it was only with the use of animals that a farmer was able to clear the required 30 acres of land in three years. Before Jetteree Brown died she expressed her feelings about working the land: “It took a lot of work to produce a living from the land.” Selecting the proper location for a cabin was the first step to be considered. Clearing the land and yet leaving some trees to serve as a wind break took both effort and discernment. Some of the first trees were cut to build the house, and others were set aside for fire wood.

The forest areas were the most difficult. Clearing and burning the brush was easy, compared to clearing trees. Clearing an area of trees called for each tree to be cut down leaving approximately a three foot stump, and this stump then had to be rooted. This involved the use of a grub-hoe tool to dig around the roots and under the stump as much as possible. Then chains were looped around the stump, and between horses pulling and people cutting away at the root system, finally the rocking would place the
stump in such a position that it could be removed. Constructing their cabins took a lot of
trees, much of their time, and yet it was nothing compared to the amount of construction
that was going on in Athabasca.
CHAPTER 5
A NEW BEGINNING: 1912 - 1914

The construction going on in Athabasca at this time was tremendous, even though it is only eighteen miles from Amber Valley, a lot of planning had to go into making the trip to Athabasca. The distance was far enough that if you had planned to travel to Athabasca you normally planned to spend the night. The railroad continued to build towards Athabasca from the southeast, and finished the line into town on the 25th of May, 1912. In 1913, the year turned out to be one of gas and fire.

With the heavy construction in the area, piping natural gas into the region was the next step for lighting and heating. The gas mains and the street lamps suffered considerable installation delays. Once gas was found the well came in too strong. They were unable to cap the well, the street lamps had to be converted to gasoline fuel. The water mains were also in trouble because by the time winter arrived, the city officials discovered that they were not buried deep enough. The pipes suffered many breaks. All these financial expenses were costly for local business, and many of them started to fold, leaving the town in further distress.

It was a commonly held belief that the natural gas pipeline in the region was the cause of multiple fires that erupted over the next two years, and ended burning down half the town. As in most disasters there is always some good that develops. Thirty-two buildings burned in August 1913, calling for the town to rethink its style of construction. The town had to be rebuilt, so many of the African Americans were hired to help in the rebuilding process. Jeff Melton, my father, the youngest son of George Melton, started his working career on the construction of the Grand Union Hotel in Athabasca and
helped to rebuild the brick building during the winter of 1913-1914. By this time the town had sidewalks made of wood, gas mains, street lamps, and water mains.

Manual jobs could be found in the community, yet everyone realized that education was the way to the future for the children.

In the past, the children did not receive a good education because the older family members were brought up in a negative environment, and knowledge through labor was emphasized, not education. Children, who had completed approximately three grades in school, had been ready to further their education just as the community decided to relocate to Canada. After making the move to Canada, some of the children found that they had to cut their education short. They were always needed for something, and never had the time to return to school. Jeff Melton is a good example. His education stopped at the third grade, mainly because starting up a farm and a community at the same time called for the support of the entire family. The education that the children received allowed them to be mentally prepared for the world, yet not educationally prepared for advancement.

After the community settled in, they could see the children did not continue their education. What would happen if children did not elevate their education. They knew as parents they were responsible. The community as a whole considered education
important enough that they started up their own school board and school district in 1913. Nimrod Toles spearheaded the request for a school district, and Columbus Bowen and Sam Carothers assisted in establishing the school district. Their first school board meeting was held outside sitting on the grass. Members of the Toles family donated the land that would be used for African Americans in the area, and took the time to bring about an approved educational system for the children in the region. Because of the time and effort exhibited, the school district was named after the Toles family. At the time, financial responsibility for the operation of the school rested on the shoulders of the district’s taxpayers.

With the children’s education well taken care of, the adults had to worry about their own future, because the employment picture was changing. The gloomy employment picture for the adults started just as the winter of 1913 came to a close. The Canadian Northern Railway was in financial trouble, and it scuttled plans of extending the line north of the town of Athabasca. In March of 1914 the steamboat company that was starting to operate its fifth boat announced that because the railroad was not coming to the upper part of the region, they would have to relocate to pick up more business.

In 1914 a bright light for the community’s future was the opening of their school. It was the first official school for some of the children since the community left Oklahoma. Their first teacher was Mr. Stovall, who became ill in the middle of the term, and was replaced by Columbus Bowen’s daughter, Minnie. Some of the other pioneer teachers were Mr. McLeod, Mr. Virtis, Mr. Monroe, and Mr. and Mrs. Cromwell. With the different companies relocating out of the area, the teachers found it difficult keeping conversation from being a topic of the day in school. There was a lot of turmoil within the community at the time.

By the end of 1914 the Athabasca River travel route was abandoned, removing
Figure 16. The S.S. Athabasca River docked at Athabasca Landing. It was one of many steamboats to leave the landing, not to return, at the end of the 1914 freighting season. Glenbow Archives: Photograph Collection NA-3544-15. Athabasca Landing: An Illustrated History, 75th Anniversary project by the Athabasca Historical Society, David Gregory and Athabasca University, 1986, 148.

Another one third of the transportation system the town officials had envisioned for the region. Athabasca was transformed almost overnight from a transportation headquarters to a transportation backwater. The vision of becoming a junction point of a transcontinental line and a line opening up the Far North faded fast. From this point, Athabasca had to make it as a market town, sustained by the local farmers. Later, it became a governmental administrative center.

Finding work or getting supplies within the region was very difficult after the different freight companies shifted their business locations away from the Athabasca area. The only good jobs left were with the railroad, but job requirements called for workers to be away from their families for days. Many of the African American males from Amber Valley worked for the railroad, and when they saw each other they kept each other informed about what was had happened when they last left home. Most were porters on the railroad, such as, William and Wilbert Melton (my two uncles), Lester Mapp, and Clarence Coleman. Some started their job careers by working on the railroad,
and others found the job too demanding. The time away from their families was just not worth the income.

During 1914, Jeff Melton, a young fifteen year old, stayed in the area trying his hand at different jobs. However it was not long before he traveled south into Edmonton, where he worked for ten cents a hour laying steel track for a modern streetcar line. Given the relative primitive conditions that existed, all the rails had to be carried and fixed into place by hand. Jeff was alone in Edmonton. His mother, Amanda, soon found that to make ends meet she also had to work in Edmonton, washing and ironing clothes for the wealthy whites of the city. When work for Jeff dropped off during the winter season, he helped his mother on her job. The men in the Melton family learned early in life that they had to help in all household duties.

For a short while Jeff traveled to Ketchikan, Alaska in pursuit of higher wages, and returned before long. Cooking always seemed to be part of the way Jeff made his money. As a youngster, Jeff learned early how to properly dress wild game that had been killed in preparation for meals, and later he learned to prepare the meals themselves. It was not too surprising when Jeff and his older brother Wilbert hired on as cooks in Saskatchewan for the farmers and their crews. Jeff worked long hours each day, and served many meals for his dollar a day wage.

In 1915, major political actions were taking place in the United States. The United States Supreme Court (Guinn v. United States) declared it unconstitutional for a state to attempt to reestablish conditions prior to the Fifteenth Amendment. In the meantime disfranchisement by poll tax and other devices against African Americans were accomplished in Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, and Texas. Political battles were being lost all over the southern United States by African Americans, and the situation was no better in Alberta.
The problem of discrimination appeared again when World War I began. African Americans stood up to be counted, and their country refused to allow them to fight, and relocated them to work details. The reaction to African American participation was no different in Canada at first. It was only through persistence that things changed, and a separate African American corps was established. Richard and Robert Lipscombe were among those who joined to do their part.

As World War I came to a close different types of battles were going on in Amber Valley. In 1919, a world wide flu epidemic broke out, and the religious faithful of Amber Valley had the chance to practice their preaching. In many of the homes the flu put entire families in bed, and church members would go house to house seeing to their needs and giving prayer for their safe recovery. The fight for the children’s education also continued, as the community population growth continued through births.

Figure 17. Richard and Robert LipscombePhoto from The Athabasca Advocate, July 30, 1985, 16.
CHAPTER 6

CANADIAN LIFE: 1920’s - 1940’s

During the 1920’s, the school in Pine Creek was only open during the summer months. The children stayed away from school to help their parents by working in the fields. In the process, those same children lacked the education that those who stayed in school received. Many received a sixth grade education, and many students dropped out of school to work. Some children were taken out of school during the summer and sent by their parents to Edmonton to continue their education. In Edmonton, the Alex Taylor School was open because of its distance from Amber Valley. The children had to stay the winter, because the round trip by wagon to Edmonton took two weeks. The distances between homes was the incentive the community needed to support each other socially.

Not until 1920 did the community officially begin a social club. It was named ‘Good Community League.’ Later it was changed to ‘Pioneers Club.’ Through the club, the pioneers promoted various group activities throughout the year. Feasting and merriment seemed to be the order of the day, and the neighborliness built up from these different activities cemented many a relationship in the community. Bert Carothers once said, “You could go to a dance, get drunk, and dance all night long for twenty five cents.”

The one room school house was a excellent place for learning, yet it was also a place to bring people closer together. In 1920, a peak enrollment year, the school had 47 students. In that year, those children born in Canada came of age and combined on one end of the spectrum with the older children that were youngsters when the move was made to Canada.
Some of the students of the first class were: James Brown, J. T. Brown, Alfie Carothers, Malford Edwards, and of course Romeo Edwards, the first black born in the Valley. The first teacher at the school was Alice Cromwell, who served twenty years as the teacher for this small community. When the regular schoolhouse was built, it had to serve all nine grades in the one room. Not long after the schoolhouse opened they had a contest to rename the valley. Originally it was Donatville in Pine Creek area. P. K. Bowen was the winner who submitted the new name, Amber Valley. He had found the name in a poem, yet it would not be officially Amber Valley until 1932. The students enjoyed naming their own school.

The parents responsibility went beyond the norm. They were responsible for the children’s welfare while in the school. It was a responsibility they did not take lightly. The community had to be sure that each school had firewood for heat, fresh water for drinking, and a janitor to keep the facility clean. Most importantly they had to make sure that a tax base was devised to collect taxes, because the responsibility of the school belonged to the district people. For years the school maintained a population of between 35 and 47 students, grades one through eight, and all instructed by one teacher. Over the years, a variety of teachers filled this role.

As the African American pioneer’s dependents came of age they started leaving the Amber Valley community for the big cities of Alberta. In many of the cities they were met with resistance from the current residents. In Calgary formal discriminatory restrictions failed to pass through. There were 500 residents of Victoria Park that signed a petition seeking to prevent Blacks from residing in their district. The residents not only wanted to keep Blacks from coming into their district; they also wanted those Blacks already living in their district to be removed to other districts. Their city council contacted sixteen other cities across Canada, in an attempt to see how they handled the
problem before dropping the request.

During the late 1920's, a branch of the Ku Klux Klan started in Alberta. They recruited members from fifty towns throughout the province. The apprehensions of Blacks were heightened. Due to the small numbers of Blacks within the province, the concentration of the Klan was not on Blacks. The focus of the Klan was directed at the large Catholic community, the Catholic church, and the Catholic immigrants from central and eastern Europe. The Klan did not notice that Blacks were in the province, which was good for the Black communities.

During the 1920's, the population of the community started diminishing, due to the older boys leaving school and the community, to support their families. The mechanization of agricultural farm equipment led to the heavy migration of young people to the cities for better jobs. Better roads led to the possibility of school busing, and then came the inclusion of Toles school into the Athabasca school system, which was governed by an elected White school board. This change took the local people out of control over their children. From then on, there was no possibility of Black history being part of the curriculum, Amber Valley had a limited future because of its location.

In early 1930, a new school site was found, and the Canadian Government put forth a two hundred dollar grant to build the new school. The world was changing. The Alberta Ku Klux Klan numbers diminished, yet their ideas of prejudice and actions would be felt for years to come in hampering growth of the Black community. The settlement reached peak growth from its 1910 establishment during the 1930's. The community covered approximately fifteen miles east and west, and five miles north and south containing about 350 Black residents, which was 95% of the area’s population. This was when Amber Valley's Baseball team became known all over Canada.

The Amber Valley baseball team reached its peak during the 1930’s. From the
1920's to the 1940’s, Amber Valley had the best baseball team in the Northern Province of Alberta. Each year the team traveled to many places, and were guaranteed fifty dollars whether they won or lost. The Amber Valley baseball team was a Black powerhouse that was as well known as the Yankees in the Canadian league. Unlike in the United States where African American baseball teams had to play other African American baseball teams, this all African American baseball team had only all white teams to play. They played in such places as Lac la Biche (20 miles east of Amber Valley), where they went each year to play at the Lac la Biche’s picnic celebrating Canada Day on the 1st of July. Mr. Carothers remembered what he considered the best year of all the baseball seasons when the team traveled to Grande Prairie (a town located almost two hundred miles west of Amber Valley):

When we got to Smith, they didn’t have a bridge at the time, and we had to take the ferry to get across the river. The toll was five cents apiece after six-o-clock at the time, and we had to come up with something to keep from paying because we had no money. The truck driver had us to lay down under the straw he was carrying, and he told us to be very quiet until we arrived on the other side of the river. As the truck drove unto the ferry, I hoped the time would pass very quickly. Only the three people up front had to pay, and the rest of the team that was hiding was never discovered. We drove all night long and arrived at Grand Prairie the next afternoon. As soon as we arrived we got right out of the truck and started practicing ball, because we knew that we had to be ready the next day in the big game.

On this trip Mr. Carothers remembers who else was on the back of the truck with him: Mr. Jefferson D. Edwards, the manager; Kenny Edwards (J. D. Edwards’ son), their winning pitcher; Book; Alvin Brown; James Brown, their first baseman; Sydney Brown, Cliff, Evert, Horace Hinton, Kenneth, Lonzo, and Lester Mapp. The team was well known for the chatter they kept up during the ball game. They talked and shouted

encouragement throughout the entire game. The team was good at what they did. They loved having fun, enjoying themselves, and they kept fans on the front edge of their seats. The big prize money they won on the game was three hundred dollars, a lot of

Figure 18. Amber Valley Baseball team members: Kenny Edwards was the winning pitcher, James Brown was the original first baseman and Bert Carothers among others comprised the ball player. Photos from The Athabasca Advocate, July 30, 1985, 16.

money when you look at the wages during this period in that part of the world.

Mr. Carothers spoke about the amount of money he made at the time the team was active. In his regular job he made twelve dollars a month, working five day work weeks, twelve hour days, and had to work two Sundays a month. He thus worked 264 hours making less than five cents an hour. The team was paid $300 for playing this particular game which amounted to $9.09 an hour. Each team member earned the pay equivalent of 182 hours in just 3 hours.

When the Amber Valley Baseball team traveled to play another team, they would draw customers from all over the region. So the bottom line to Mr. Carothers joy, was they had earned a large sum of money for playing baseball. The money that the different
team members earned in baseball, became a deciding factor in whether they or others should participate in sports and businesses.

Felix and Jeteree (Murphy) Brown started one of the primary businesses in the area. Their construction business covered everything from new construction to remodeling. When their construction jobs decreased, Mrs. Brown helped her mother run the local store when it combined with the post office. Jeteree Brown liked farming, as did many of the original African American pioneers. Everyone braved their own hardships in this northern region of Alberta, Canada.

The winters could get so cold that they could become downright dangerous. For weeks on end the temperature could drop to 60-70 degrees below (Fahrenheit) and stay there. If you were going to be out and take the horses, you had to consider their health just as you would consider yours. Without proper care for your animals before, during, or after their use you could lose them. Many times the owners would care for the animals ahead of time by making sure the animals had breathing bags for their noses, chest blankets, and even then some animals were lost. It would take only once for the owner to forget to check the animals during the time they would be out, for their horse could fall over dead, because the horses breathing was blocked by the build up of icicles in the horses nostrils.

Caring for the animals was of primary importance because human life in this region depended on them. When any long trips were planned, human safety relied on healthy animals. Ula Melton, spoke of the early times when she and her family made preparations to go to town during the winter, and the weather was bad:

Unlike what you see today with fancy boots, back then you put on anything you had for your feet. Even then you would wrap them in ‘sackin’ (a cloth normally used from sacks of flour) and tie them up. Rocks would be on or in

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2 Interview of Linda (Smith) Phipps by Jimmy R. Melton, July 2, 1993, Amber Valley, in response to an article by Gail Davis and Glenda Williams, the “75th Anniversary,” The Athabasca Advocate, special pull-out section (July 30, 1985): 11-22.

the stove during the entire evening getting warm, so when you got ready to leave in the morning the rocks would be hot. The rocks would be wrapped and placed on the floor of the sleigh so you could put your feet on them during the trip and keep your feet warm.

When anyone traveled to Athabasca they had to stay overnight, but any extremely long trips, such as to Edmonton, took a lot of planning. Getting supplies during the first few years was very difficult, because farmers had to drive a team of horses to Edmonton, and that meant two weeks of travel. Romeo Edwards remembers when he and his dad, Jefferson Davis Edwards, traveled to Edmonton, and they stayed at Daniel’s Livery Barn. It was the normal thing to do. For the 75 cents charged for boarding a horse at night, a traveler could also sleep on the floor for nothing, if he had his own blanket. A big pot belly stove burned wood in the middle of the barn, and Romeo Edwards remembered “the stove could get so hot that it would have a white glow in the dark”.

Goods that were shipped into the region came by freight wagon, and during the winter season many times some of the freight companies would use dog sledges into the area. Amber Valley residents depended upon each other. Given their history, they were naturally distrustful of whites. Gradually, this distrust of others was overcome. Depending on freight companies required some trust. Few articles were readily available, and so the Black community had to rely on others for their supplies. Yeast was one such commodity. Many people held on to their sourdough starters as if they were among their most precious possessions.

Those who trapped furs for a living tucked their sourdough starter into a tin can, and a handle was fashioned to hang from their belt. Sometimes the dough was inherited, and occasionally it was purchased for cash, skins, or gold depending on one’s location.

4Jefferson Davis Edwards predicted as the 1930’s came to a close, that because of the distances to urban centers and the harsh weather conditions, “Amber Valley would be no more in twenty five years.” an article by Gail Davis and Glenda Williams, the “75th Anniversary,” The Athabasca Advocate, special pull-out section (July 30, 1985): 11-22.
Actually, "sour" is a misnomer, because the dough could be mixed into a chiffon-light pancake that rivaled any store bought mixes. Many times just a section the size of a silver dollar was maintained, and to make bread or biscuits a person just needed to pinch off a small piece to add to flour and warm water. Many members of the community were able to use their cooking talents in different ways in support of the community. Some went in search of employment, and others searched for business ventures.
Within Amber Valley a few important business ventures were started, each being a part of another business or operation to improve the community. The post office shared part of its structure with goods in the general store, while the schoolhouse became a community hall when the community wanted to gather. On Sundays it turned into their place of worship, acting as the community’s church. These structures served many purposes and were very important to the cohesiveness of the community.

Netty Gertrude Murphy started as Post Mistress for the Amber Valley Post Office in 1940, and many different events kept letters flowing into the small community. Letters from family members in Calgary started immediately. In April 1940, during a dance a white girlfriend of a white soldier paid too much attention to a Black musician. A fight ensued, and the soldier suffered an eye injury. The next night, a group of 300 white service members from the 49th Battalion wrecked the home of the Black band leader, and beat up his white brother-in-law who was a member of the military. When the police dispersed the crowd,
they turned and marched on the Black section of Calgary, and luckily they were stopped by the military police before reaching their destination.

The letters kept coming into the small community during the war years. The United States provided three all African American construction units to work on the Alaska Highway. They were in Calgary and Edmonton for a short time. It was long enough for the young ladies to make them the talk of the town in Amber Valley. The construction units had an affect on how the local Blacks were treated. They demanded and received equal treatment. In 1943, the letters continued to be filled with information concerning civil rights breakthroughs. One highlight occurred when Ruth Heslep, a Black Albertan, was able to acquire a provincial civil service job as a stenographer, breaching an invisible barrier for female employment.

The talk of the day concerned World War II. The war actually brought changes that permanently affected the attitudes of all Albertans. The atrocities by Hitler were racist acts. The press began publicizing local incidents throughout Canada of discrimination against Blacks in hotels, beer parlors, dance halls, and swimming pools. In 1947, city and labor officials joined together fighting racial discrimination. Blacks and whites joined together, organized the Alberta Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and worked toward outlawing discrimination in jobs and public accommodations. The association’s job became a little easier when African American professional football players from the states were hired to play football for Calgary and Edmonton. The attitude Whites had toward Blacks changed after the inclusion of African Americans on the football teams, and international events starting taking place in various cities.

The Black males who were porters were constantly keeping families at home informed about the changes taking place on the railroad. During the war, conditions for
porters improved after involvement of the American-based Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. By 1948 the union was recognized by the Canadian government. At the end of the war, porters wages had climbed to nearly $200 a month, plus tips. Their monthly work was reduced to sixteen days, giving the porters more time to spend with their families.

In the 1950’s, Mrs. Murphy opened a grocery store, combining the operation of the post office with the store. Her facility was located on Thomas Mapp’s property at first, and then relocated at a later date to Obidiah Bowen’s property. While the store operated she had established a 45 day open account with the Pioneer’s Store in Edmonton, allowing her customers to carry a 30 day open account. As many of the older buildings started to succumb to age, many of the facilities had to be relocated or started anew.

The Toles school survived for a little while. A new schoolhouse was built in 1950, which included students through grade eleven. Before long the area could no longer support its own school, and the final year for Toles school came in 1958. The children from Amber Valley for the next eight years were bused to Athabasca. The closing of the school finished the central and unifying force to the community at that time. The school for years had been the center of the community. It had served not only as a school, but also as the church, community center, meeting hall, and functioned as the main social gathering place.

Even though the old school was gone, education worked to keep the community together. Periodically other schools in the area, when studying the history of Canada, requested a personal oral history from the African American pioneers. Education was always a concern of the African American community, so it was never a problem to find a few speakers to cover the history of African Americans in Alberta, even for the teachers
in schools 278 miles away in Fort McMurray. Some of the personal historians that actively supported the program were Obidiah Bowen, Romeo Edwards and Lester Mapp. The support from the community worked wonders for holding things together and was a fact of inspiration for others.

The community support of their members gave them that extra push needed to go forward. Ron “Speedy” Mapp was good enough at playing basketball that he traveled to the United States, and joined the Ohio Colored Ghosts during the time of the Old Negro leagues. In the realm of boxing two Amber Valley Blacks stand out: Doug Harper once held the Canadian light-heavyweight title, and Clinton Murphy was the winner of the 1950 Golden Fighter Award.

The positive image of Blacks in the province was heightened during the 1950’s. Civic responsibilities were handled by Virnetta Anderson as soon as she arrived in Calgary in 1952 from Arkansas, to be with her husband “Sugarfoot” Anderson who played football for the Calgary Stampeders. They loved the community so much they made it their home. In 1954 Violet King, who grew up in Calgary became the first Black female admitted to the Alberta bar, and the first Black female to practice law in Canada. She was Calgary’s second female lawyer.

The changes within the communities were indicative of significant transformation in the public’s attitude, and helped the Alberta government in the passage of civil rights legislation. In 1955, Alberta became the third province to enact a Fair Employment Practices Act; in 1957 it was the sixth province to legislate an Equal Pay Act; in 1966 it was the fourth province to introduce a Human Rights Code. Overall, the new legislation lacked teeth, yet it undoubtedly helped to curb discrimination in the province and made it possible for Blacks to achieve a new stature. (Palmer, 390)

Baseball was the main sports entertainment in Alberta for years, and even into the
1960’s the Amber Valley baseball team was remembered. The manager of the Amber Valley baseball team, J. D. Edwards, went on to manage the Weilers and the William Colts of Edmonton. In 1964, the Edmonton Colts were selected to play in the Lacombe Lions Tournament, which was the top of the Western Canadian tournaments. During the tournament, the announcer mentioned numerous times that Mr. Edwards had been part of the “legendary Amber Valley African American powerhouse dynasty.”

The condition of buildings for which a community is responsible can be a good indication of the health of a community. The building of the first Amber Valley community center in the mid 1960’s was the first step in the rebirth of the community. The original community center had been decaying over the years. Floor boards lost their integrity, and eventually the structure substituted for a barn, after which it was just abandoned. Before long it was just a sterile gray structure that stood as a marker when giving directions in the area. Most of the damage seemed to come from the amount of water held in the peat moss under the structure.

One strange aspect of the area is the amount of peat moss on various farms. To this day, some farms the amount of crude oil has so saturated the peat moss that the fear of fire in the area is evident among farmers. Acres of land smoldering in the 1960’s were the results of fires that had burned during the 1920’s. In the 1970’s a farmer had been burning excess tree branches, caught his fence on fire, and in the process ignited his barn. The fire was noticed by his neighbors, and they all came to help save his house. They also came to put out the fire in the peat moss, because they knew, that if they failed the smoke would be in the air for years.

Some of the original settlers didn’t move into newer style homes until the 1960’s. Mrs. Edwards made mention of her early days living in a log cabin:
During the years we were growing up we used to joke about how some of the parents wished that they had skylights in roofs and sunken living rooms. The reply from the children would be that they already had all that, meaning that the cracks in the roof were large enough that you could see the sky, and the floors had fallen in over time. The living room was sunken down from the kitchen, and the dining room was sunken down from the living room. It was a way of keeping a smile on their faces. The kids always thought that they had invented the skylight, because when you looked unto the ceiling you could see the clear sky, and the stars all night long. Of course the breeze could always be felt.

Mrs. Edwards also joked about the stature of all the members in the Ralph and Etta Edwards family, “in how they lived off the land, and in how there couldn’t have been much available off the land, because the tallest family member is only four feet tall.” Her comment was exaggerated but the entire family does range between four feet eleven inches, and five feet five inches tall. The Brown family also was not too well endowed in the height department, since it is said that the mother determines the height of the children, Pink Henry Brown was six feet tall and his wife Viola was four feet eleven inches tall, and down through their lineage the tallest person was their grandson, Malford Brown, who is approximately five feet five inches tall.

One of the traditional rituals of the community was to support their own, and for years the store Mrs. Murphy started was the center of business for the community. It was a small store that carried only groceries, and no farm supplies. The store burned down in the 1960’s and was rebuilt. She had hoped to keep the store and the post office centrally located in the community, but time, health, and Mrs. Murphy’s retirement in 1969 at the age of seventy led to its closure. Mrs. Murphy was a good example of a strong African American woman, who experienced considerable independence due to the important role she played in the economics of the community.

The luxury of electricity did not arrive until 1963, when Lester Mapp paid the power company to run a power line, and set up a power pole near his house. To this day there is no running water. The farms rely on water trucked in, or they use the wells that were originally dug by the pioneers. At least now they can electrically pump their water, where before they had to do even that by hand. To this day some of the farms still have not hooked up with the power company. They found that it was cheaper for them to purchase a power generator, and run their power from the generator. The generator can be set in such a location that you don’t even know that it is the power for the house.

Sometimes, members of the community felt it was too difficult to achieve their goals at home, and left to pursue those goals. To some members of the community higher education was a stepping stone that would lead to independence. The Saunders family is a good example. The majority of their family members never went beyond high school, yet with the different levels of education they ended up living in areas from Alaska to Southern California. They came to be employed in a range of jobs from working in the oil fields of the Middle East, to cutting timber in British Columbia, and cooking meals in Alaska. In one case, higher education led to one member of the family owning his own business, and performing environmental clean-up work for the United States Navy.

Higher education was not even considered by most African American families in Canada. In Canada, a university education is provided by the government to a select few, and the African Americans in this story were not encouraged through their struggles toward that educational goal. For the longest time, completing high school was not a high priority for the David Leander Saunders family. Like many farmers of the time, David (the seventh son of William Saunders) and his wife were more concerned with the thought of daily living and the care of the family.
All the children with the exception of their son Martine had to work in the fields and take care of the farm. Martine was David’s favorite child, and his seventh son, making him the seventh son of a seventh son. Martine knew that education would be a great stepping stone, so throughout the years he continued his educational endeavors, and his parents stood behind him in his quest. Martine was able to attend a private boarding school in Athabasca in the 1960’s with the direct help of his mother. They could not afford to send Martine to a private school, but he could attend if his mother was employed at the school.

Martine’s mother got a job as cook and had to be at the school all through the week cooking. She could only travel home on the weekends. When studies permitted, Martine could also travel home on the weekends with his mother. This was really a sacrifice for the entire family, because the other members of the family had to do without their mother while she did her job so Martine could continue his education.

In the end, everything paid off. Martine was able to attend and graduate from the University of Southern California. His business skills enabled him to start his own business and reach his goal of earning a million dollars before he turned fifty. Even though the Saunders family was large, none of their family members ever carried any animosity towards Martine, because he was the only one ever to attain a higher education.

From Martine’s marriage to Patricia Carolyn Melton (this author’s sister), their daughter Deborah Jean Saunders was the first from the next generation to graduate from college, the University of California, Berkeley, in the summer of 1988. She also became the first female on either side of the Melton or Saunders families from this younger generation to own her own business. She was able to accomplish this before she turned twenty six years old in 1991. This is an example of how education affects future
generations within a family. An achiever of one generation becomes a role model for the next. When one member attains a certain level of education, the children see that level as their established goal.

Figure 20. Martine Saunders family, Patricia Carolyn (Melton) and Deborah Jean.
CHAPTER 8
SOCIAL TOGETHERNESS

At times, male members of the African American community have stepped away from the responsibility of family. When this has occurred, children have been left without family support, and through adoption others have had to step in to assure those children a future with a family. In Canada, bad roads and long distances kept communities from keeping in contact with each other. In the process they lost that togetherness of extended family many African Americans enjoyed. Nevertheless, limited efforts were made to keep in touch. Over the years, some forty Black families moved into the Breton area, which is about one hundred miles from Athabasca. Only a few are known by this author: Rose Collins and her son Kenny, and Miss Vicky who were like family because they worked for my uncle Bob Melton at the Chicken Inn in Calgary from the 1940’s to the 1960’s.

Except for the above mentioned individuals, African Americans from Amber Valley did not know anything about African Americans from Breton and vice versa, because they were isolated from each other. Travel between the two groups was unheard of due to distance. However, in Amber Valley almost from the beginning, reaching out to others in the community was second nature to many of the families, and particularly to Wilbert and Lucy Melton who through adoption shared their family life.

Figure 21. Florence Carter & Robert Melton.
Adoptions: The Wilbert Melton Family

Wilbert was either known as W. B. or the Chief to most of the people. He and Lucy (Williams) married, had two sons, named them Luther and Norman. They were a good loving family whose sons both suffered early deaths. Luther died when he was three years old, and Norman a budding trumpet player, died when he was eighteen. To enhance their ability to operate their farm in Amber Valley, both Wilbert and Lucy worked at Swift’s meat packing plant in Edmonton. After a while, Wilbert was able to get a job working as a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway, the hours were long, yet the pay was good. Most of the time he was gone sixty to eighty hours a trip, worked eighteen to twenty hours a day, and earned as much as $35 on each round trip when you include his tips. He continued working for the railroad for thirty-seven years. The monies made a tremendous difference in maintaining their farm.

The monies Wilbert received working on the railroad helped in the spring when he took thirty days leave to plant his crops, and thirty days in the fall to harvest the crops. Wilbert and Lucy both worked hard on the farm to assure that their family members would have a good life, and a future. Running the farm from a distance was quite a chore, and many times other relatives were hired to assist on the farm. Hiring relatives solved two problems; first it filled the requirement for farm workers, and second it added money into the pockets of those in the family who needed money. Lucy’s nephew Eddie
Williams worked on the farm for two years. Wilbert’s nephew (aunt Adeline’s son) Granville Walton worked on the farm for at least five years. A number of years after the death of their oldest son Norman, Wilbert and Lucy adopted Betty and Tommy.

Tommy’s birth name was Myron (Mayes). The Melton family adopted Tommy Melton, and that’s been the name he has been called by everyone. Tommy left home when he was a teenager and traveled to Calgary, where his talents of playing the guitar and singing blossomed. He met Tommy Chung (later of Cheech and Chung movie fame) who became his life long friend, and they started up a band called the Shades. The other two members of the group were Bernie Sneed who played the drums, and Wesley Henderson who played the guitar. The group was so successful. They played all over Calgary and Edmonton. Later they relocated to Vancouver, British Columbia, where some of Canada’s top recording studios are located. In time they had their own nightclub, and for a short time became RCA Victor recording artists.

Betty was adopted at age nine in 1946. While her birth name was Frances,

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1Granville married Helen (Ross), who was miss Vicki’s niece, a child of one of the original Black settlers of Breton, Alberta. Excerpts from a letter by Betty Melton, undated yet received by myself approximately March 1, 1994.
Wilbert and Lucy retained the Frances and added Betty Melton. From then on she was called Betty by the entire Melton family who accepted her with love as one of their own. Extended family members assisted in her upbringing. Uncle Peter taught her how to shoot a twenty-two rifle, and how to cook a rabbit as tasty as some of the best chicken. Aunt Ula, who was a great cook, had a lasting effect upon Betty’s personality by the good humor she exhibited. Wilbert was there to help Betty when she was in school at the age of fifteen. She needed to know the hottest dance of the day in Calgary, and he taught her the Charleston. Betty remembered that:

2Daddy was also able to hire a bulldozer to clear the land when it was required. I remember as a child picking rocks and roots after the bulldozer cleared the land. We as children would complain about being tired, daddy would simply, say “you’re too young to be tired”. That was because he wanted to get as much done while he was at home as possible. If we said the word, can’t, he would tell us that ‘can’t died and was buried way down south.’ He believed you could achieve anything you wanted to with effort and hard work. Before he retired from the Canadian Pacific Railway, I took him out for a pre-Fathers Day lunch at his favorite cafe, and gave him a gift of socks. Twelve years later he surprised me by showing me that he so cared about the gift that I gave him that he kept them even though he had to mend them.

Lucy and Wilbert continued on with the farm until 1970, when Lucy became ill and passed away. Within a year the farm had to be sold when Wilbert became ill. Wilbert described the sale of the farm as “a give away price”. His last days were lived out with his loving adopted daughter Betty, and her three sons. Before his death on February 26, 1980, Wilbert took the opportunity to take his grandchildren to their first wrestling match, and in retrospect Betty said “I am so thankful for not only my time with Wilbert and Lucy, moreover the entire Melton family”.

2Excerpts from a letter by Betty Melton, undated yet received by myself approximately March 1, 1994.
Custodianship: Peter Melton

Reaching out to others in the community was a common factor when help was needed, and custodianship of children within the extended family was a consideration. When Thedora Brown was diagnosed with cancer at the age of twenty three, her husband Noel Brown was nowhere to be found. The welfare of the children became of utmost importance. Granduncle Peter Melton volunteered to care for the youngest boy, Malford, who was one and a half years old at the time. Her three oldest children, Lewis, Odell and Alvina (the only girl) were all cared for by their aunt until the cancer took their mother’s life. After her death, the aunt realized she could not care for all three of the children for life. So Odell stayed with his maternal grandmother Elanora Ula (Melton) Lipscombe until he was fourteen. He was unhappy and ran away looking for his real father.

Through most of Malford's life he thought that he had always dreamt of holding his Grandmother Ula’s hand, and seeing his mother dressed in white like an angel. Malford kept this bit of information to himself, and it was not until some thirty years later and a length of time into his marriage that he revealed the angel story to his wife Myrna (Johnson). At a later date Myrna related this story to his grandmother Ula, and she let them know that it was no dream. This experience really happened. Upon the pending death of Malford’s mother, his mother requested that all her children be brought to the hospital one last time. When the children entered the room their mother was too ill to raise her
head, and the white sheet was pulled up to her chin.

After the death of Malford’s mother, uncle Peter (Pete) took control. Malford stayed for a while with Ula, and sometime with his granduncle Bob. Malford only remembered one time when Bob raised his hand and his voice to him, and that was the time Malford had the dog catcher at bay with a loaded rifle. The dog catcher was about to haul in Malford’s dog to the pound. One of the neighbors saw what was happening, and called Bob as he was in the process of installing a fan belt on his truck. Even though Bob was a big man, he ran down the street to rescue the dog catcher and wore out Malford’s britches with that belt.

Peter Melton was a single man, excellent hunter, tracker and fisherman, was very strict, enjoyed partying all his life, and yet also loved to crochet. Uncle Pete had his good and his bad side. Malford related one story that showed how people reacted to how irate uncle Pete could get:

3Once when I was in my teens and I had been out drinking and partying with my friends. They brought me home late one night, and I had too much to drink and they knew how irate Pete could get, so when we arrived at home they just opened the door and gave me a push. I attempted to walk but probably just fell on my face as they ran away.

When Pete was in his early sixties he challenged Malford to a foot race. Malford was fifteen at the time, played football, and was in good physical shape, but Pete won the race. That was really surprising, because Pete was a heavy drinker who smoked a lot, and up to the day he died he still rolled his own cigarettes. Pete was always seen with a cigarette hanging from the edge of his lip. The last time I saw him was in July of 1966 and he was sixty-nine years old. It was two in the morning, he was coming out of the Chicken Inn with two young girls, getting into a cab heading for a hotel. After Pete

moved into the seniors care center, he used to joke about how he was not ready to die just yet. Pete went down the hall in his wheel chair telling the different patients “to get their ass out of bed.” Once when Malford was visiting, one of Pete’s roommates asked if Malford wouldn’t mind helping him to the bathroom. Pete, who was 88 at the time, told Malford to sit down to go to the bathroom by himself. Pete explained that the old man just wanted some attention, and then he told the old man to get going to the bathroom.

Pete was really kind of typical of the older African American generation in Canada. Pete’s older friends always talked about Pete’s younger days at the yearly sporting events in Amber Valley. For their entertainment they would turn loose a jack rabbit, and watch Pete catch it by the ears. They always swore it was true, one had to wonder if they were pulling someone’s leg. Pete loved to party, Malford remembered:

4 Goose Brown, when he was eighty, came in from partying at four in the morning and was looking to continue partying. Alvin Carothers arrived at the house at five in the morning. He also was in his eighties at the time, all three Pete, Goose, and Alvin brought in the morning over a bottle.

Before uncle Pete moved into a seniors home, he lived in Dapp, Alberta, which is about thirty six miles from Amber Valley. Within Dapp he was considered the “mayor” mainly because he told everyone what to do. He lived behind the town hotel, and frequented their bar. He was so well liked by the owner of the hotel, that he and his sons would see that Pete was eating right and brought him hot food. They made sure that he was comfortable. Malford relayed a story the bar owner told him about Pete:

5 When Pete was still living behind the hotel, he always had this one bar stool that he sat at for years when he was in the bar, and it kind of became his stool by possession. One day, this twenty year old came in and sat down on Pete’s stool, and when Pete walked in the back door he was mad. He told the

young man if he didn’t get off that stool, he was going to kick his butt. Needless to say the boy moved.

After Pete passed away, Malford sent the hotel owner a thank you gift of a clock in memory of Pete for the loving care they provided. The owner placed the clock over Pete’s favorite spot, immortalizing Pete’s name.

Many times the things that are left behind can be of great remembrance to the living. Before the death of Malford’s paternal grandfather, Pink Henry Brown (1876-1967), (husband of Viola), he gave Malford some historical artifacts (Malford now wishes he would have learned about how his grandparents acquired the possessions).

The first items are a set of Mexican Federales (Mexican State Police) spurs with leather straps, large straight pointed spinners with eagles on the sides. The second item is a Colt 45 single action revolver with three notches carved into the handle. Malford contacted the Colt 45 company to give them the serial number stamped on the side of the weapon, but they told him that due to the fire in their facility in 1932 they are unable to provide him with any information.

Trying to verify information or tracing the history of an item can be very difficult. There is a good chance that the spurs and the Colt 45 Malford spoke of possibly came from one of three sources: first, they possibly came from the early nineteenth century Indian Wars that African Americans participated in; second, when African Americans participated in the Mexican War of 1846 - 1848. African American soldiers distinguished themselves; third, the spurs and the Colt 45 were possibly part of the 1890’s migration of African Americans to Mapimi, Mexico.

The migration to Mexico was planned by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Bishop Turner considered the

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treatment of African Americans as “ungrateful,” and did not think there was any “manhood future in the United States for the Negro.” Bishop Turner vigorously “encouraged Blacks to leave the United States and go to a foreign land and develop a nation of their own”. (Ebony, Pictorial History of African American America, Vol. 2. 1954, 60)

A number of African Americans traveled to Mapimi during the middle of a drought, that was followed by dust storms and a grasshopper plague. They returned to the United States highly disappointed within a few years after trying to settle into a harsh environment in Mexico.

In Canada when many of the elderly pass away on some of the out of the way farms, old relics often just lay there until someone finds them interesting and wonders about their history. More than once an old person has died and weeks later a friend or relative will stop by and find that they have passed away. Their old papers and pictures are blowing around the floor. The different members of the community try to keep in contact with each other, and many of the relatives try their best to be well aware of people and things in the lives of their loved ones.

Within the Melton family it has been joked how Ula Melton keeps her ex-husband’s picture on her bedroom wall. When a great-grandchild asked her, “Who was the man in the picture,” she let them know that it was their great-grandfather Bob Lipscombe. The child wanted to know why they never saw him, so she had to let them know that they were separated, and no longer living together. What makes this story so funny is that they separated from each other fifty years ago, and she still keeps his picture on her wall. Fifteen years ago, Ula went to a funeral in Edmonton of a friend, and all through the services she kept noticing this good looking man watching her from across the room. She felt that she knew him from somewhere but could not remember where. When she inquired of some of the other elderly ladies about this man, she was told that he was her husband Bob.
There is a certain type of truthfulness about the elderly that one normally does not get from other age groups. Ula lives at a seniors’ apartment complex. She cherishes her freedom and gets highly upset when it is suggested that she move to a senior care center. At the age of ninety, she refuses to go to a place where old people are located. The inside joke around the senior’s apartment complex is that when the coroner is notified that there has been a death in the complex, and arrives to remove the body, the tenants let him know they are not ready to go with him yet. They all seem to realize that after the apartment complex it’s either the senior care center or the morgue. Ula will not accept meals from the meals on wheels program. She hates the taste of the food, and says:

7I won’t eat that crap, if I fancy a potato at two or three in the morning, I can get up and fix it myself. The senior care center is like a zoo, they tell you when to get up, and when to go to bed. In my own apartment I can sit up and watch television to one or two in the morning if I wish.

Ula has a heart condition. She recently had a heart operation and had a pace maker implanted. In her apartment she has had to lower all of the items from the upper shelves, being unable to lift her arms very high. But she always is prepared for company. She always has a pot of soup or chicken wings cooking on the stove, and if anyone comes by she is able to offer them a little something before they go. The last time many of the relatives remember seeing Aunt Ula was at the August 3 - 4, 1985 festivities for the 75th Anniversary of Amber Valley, when relatives came from near and far. Even the local newspaper THE ATHABASCA ADVOCATE had a special pull out section that covered their history.

Myrna Brown received tableware passed down through the Brown and Melton families. A light pink colored glassware, and a flowered Dutch porcelain gravy pitcher that belonged to Ula (sometimes called Mama Midge) Lipscombe came into her

possession. A yellow and blue flowered plantation cream pitcher originally belonged to Malinda Howard. Malinda passed the pitcher to her daughter, Amanda, the wife of George Melton. At present the cream pitcher is in Myrna’s care. The cream pitcher was kind of a short pitcher with scalloped edging along the top.

When looking back into a person’s life, often looking at objects such as glassware or pitchers can bring about some unusual comments. Sometimes it will trigger a special thought that others may remember. Reality can be imagined in the partial reflections. Myrna let us into a little of her background when she remembered a few statements her uncle used to make when they had relatives visiting from out of town, and he said, “That’s about enough relating for a while.” His second comment was always “and its a relatively weekend we had, Evelyn.” Myrna described her uncle as “a big old rancher who was tough as nails.” It is unusual, coming from the city as I do, to discover a person with such an open heart as Myrna. Maybe that is why she is a nurse.

Malford and Myrna Brown live in the town of Sundre, Alberta, and she works at the hospital there. The hospital acts as a trauma center for the entire region; from the British Columbia mountains, where they receive climbers with injuries to motor vehicle mishaps in the prairies of Alberta, and everything in between. Her town is small and the number of medical personnel is limited. When emergencies arise the call for help goes out to everyone because you never know if those needing help may be one’s own family members or one’s neighbors. A few times Malford and Myrna have been called to the same location of a vehicle mishap. Once they had a three car pile up, and Malford responded since he was the captain on the volunteer fire department’s response team. When the jaws of life are requested, he is required to respond.

So it was good that no emergencies came up when this information was being gathered, and time could be spent just reminiscing and letting the thoughts flow. One bit
of surprising information that Myrna relayed was that in 1989, Ula had called. She told Myrna that she had just watched the news on television and the last slave ever released in the United States died. She went on to say that the African tribe that this man was from, was the same tribe to which her mother Amanda belonged. The disheartening reality is she can not remember the name that was spoken. It was the first indication that I ever heard, in our family, of anyone coming close to that all important link to Africa. It is painful that Myrna can not remember the name of the tribe. Hopefully, further study or remembrance may bring that crucial bit of information out, and make it available to others.
CHAPTER 9

Today's World

As the 1990's rolled around many of the younger African American descendants in Canada have started making a name for themselves. In 1991, after years of concentrating on the body and diet, Rawleigh Unger, won Southern Alberta's Journeyman Light Heavyweight Body Building Championship receiving one of Canada's highest awards in body building. Also his interest in automobiles led him to pursue training as a certified automobile mechanic specializing in Hondas. Yet, increasingly the ranks of the original African American pioneers' descendants are thinning due to emigration.

Today, the only vital structure in Amber Valley that is located on the lands originally settled by African Americans is the newly constructed Amber Valley Community Cultural Center. It officially opened on the third of July 1993. It had only taken the volunteers, Bert Carothers and others a little over a year and a half to acquire all the products needed to make the facility operational. Most of the construction material was donated or sold at reduced

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Rawleigh Unger is the grandson of Beulah (Melton) Phipps, and son of Creola (Phipps) Unger.
cost by local merchants. The labor was also donated by local residents, some of whom were professional.

The community center is located on twenty acres of land, just off the main road that traverses the valley. Portions of the land on both sides of the facility have been set aside for parking of visiting campers, with utility hookups for day and night camping. They have even constructed ball fields with hopes of a new local baseball team. Those who favor the outdoors are in the planning stage of installing nature trails, and cross country skiing trails. The structure itself is large enough in the main hall to accommodate more than three hundred people, with additional rooms around the sides of the building. It contains space for food vendors during special events and the start of their Pioneer Museum, which is strongly supported by their seniors. It is hoped that the new cultural center will serve as a magnet and bring back those who left the community plus attract new people to the region.

The cost to replace the community center was more than the community could afford until the government was approached for support. The hope is that this investment can reverse the gradual departure of African Canadians from Amber Valley. When young people have reached their maturity, they characteristically leave. Today, the area’s population is a combination of the very old and the very young, and those in-between are few in number.

Figure 27. Katie Melton age 93 in 1993, greets great-grandson Garth Wallin with his mom, Cheryl. Photo by Dave Smith The Edmonton Journal, Sunday, July 4, 1993, B12.
During the 1993 summer celebration, it was discussed that the burial plots for the original pioneers have been so poorly maintained that they are hard to locate today. In the past, family members have had to go out and clear the area of weeds, and do some of the minor maintenance. One of the last original settlers made himself a promise to place markers at each of the sites that he could remember, while someone could still point them out. It was too bad that he was unable to fulfill his wish before his death.

It was discussed that hopefully with the new cultural center bringing more visitors into the area, the cultural committee will view the burial site as another possible attraction, and take steps to upgrade the site or indicate it as a extension of their museum. Even governmental assistance to distinguish the site as a cultural location should be considered.

With the restoration project, the community as a whole has a renewed interest in Amber Valley’s history. Over the years, whites and Asians have moved into the area. The African Americans remaining are increasingly aware that they are no longer the only group defining the future of Amber Valley. Some of the Blacks that still retain their ancestral lands are experiencing something of an identity crisis. Many of the Canadian African Americans prefer to be called just Canadians without the hyphenation. Of course there are some that see this as turning their backs on their great African heritage.

The Immigration Act of the 1960’s has brought the issue of ancestry to a head. The changes resulting from this legislation decreased the bias against nonwhite immigrants and permitted large numbers of nonwhite immigrants to enter Canada. There have been approximately 100,000 Africans, and 250,000 West Indians, that have come into Canada. These numbers alone are pushing the original African American Canadian population to look at themselves, recognize who they are, and consider their customs.

There are some customs in Canada that normally would be considered unusual in
the United States depending on one's background. For example, anyone entering a home in Canada normally comes through the back door and when inside they remove their shoes in the foyer before stepping into the house. This custom is driven by the lengthy snow season, and a desire to keep the house clean by keeping the wet footwear off the floors or carpets.

Presently what is on the minds of many Black Canadians is how they are going to keep their lives intact financially. In today’s world, Canada is more of a socialist government than the United States, because the people contribute to the care of others. Many of those still on the farm have to determine how they are going to contribute by adding to the support of the people. Many of them have taken to leasing out their lands in hope of bringing in at least some return on their money, and possibly giving them funds to help in paying their bills. The largest growing cash crop in the region for this return is rape seed, which is used in the making of Canola oil. It is strange to pass a densely forested area in all its green splendor and then have a large field of bright yellow with the stocks standing about two feet high, stretched out as far as the eye can see. Even in this remote area the community worries about the influx of the Japanese.

In 1994, the Japanese opened a new pulp mill on the edge of the Athabasca River, within ten miles of the Amber Valley community. Lumber is hauled in from all parts of the upper regions of Canada, processed and shipped directly to Japan. The community is told that the mill operates at such high temperatures that unlike mills of the past, residue emissions are reduced to almost nothing. The Japanese insist that they only want to become part of the community, and will prove this by hiring from this peaceful community instead of bringing in its workers.

Amber Valley is not a perfect enclave of racial harmony, but African Americans, whites, Indians, and Asians have lived together in peace and harmony. One of the

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worries of the older Canadian Blacks is the problem they face if trying to return to the United States, and the difficulty in proving many of their parents were Americans. Dual citizenship for both Canada and the United States is possible, but the process for establishing U. S. residency claims is difficult and lengthy.

Recently, there has been a reduction in the outward flow of families from Amber Valley. Over the years, numerous families have departed the area leaving only the strong to survive. From that strength came the basis of the present day Amber Valley Association. A diverse membership seems to be headed in the right direction for the needs of the community through recreational enthusiasts. If they can get the remaining members of the community to pull together, they can achieve whatever projects are established for the community. Current plans call for using the community cultural center as the starting point for growth, and the area will financially blossom once the adjoining landowners think of the community as a whole. Having recreational enthusiasts to broaden their cash flow is exciting, and in the long run will improve the situation of the local families.
The Jeff Melton Family, 1914 - 1994

My father Jeff Melton, later to become Jeff Melton Sr., left Amber Valley in 1914 at the age of sixteen. As each of the Melton children attained the age where they could step out on their own. They traveled where the money could be found. Jeff and his brother Wilbert had traveled together to Saskatchewan, and worked as cooks on a large ranch. When their employment ended Wilbert returned to the farm in Amber Valley, working for the railroad as did his other brother William. Jeff, however, continued traveling east by riding the freight trains, following his family's original path that they took coming into Canada. He traveled to Winnipeg and exited the country approximately in 1918 through Emerson, Manitoba. He headed directly to Minneapolis, Minnesota, seeking employment.

The different manufacturing companies in Minneapolis at the time were gearing up for World War I. It was during these travels that Jeff learned many things about life and how to stay alive. He was traveling the rails, which was common at the time, and he lived in some of the camps near the tracks. One of the lessons he learned was that a newspaper could be used for insulation once you finished reading it. He demonstrated how to tuck the newspaper under one's shirt in the front and back. Once secure, it would keep a person warm. It seemed before he was able to purchase an automobile, there were many days and nights that he walked to and from work.

One of the first jobs that Jeff was able to acquire when he first moved to north
Figure 28. Jeff Melton approximate age 20, 1918.
Minneapolis was as a waiter at the White Bear Club in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, a suburb of north St. Paul. 1Jeff had no experience waiting on tables. This was his first time serving people who required the table to be properly set, and the other waiter told him “to watch and for him to place down what he did.” Within a few years Jeff would associate with four other young men; Roy Robinson, Ben Carothers, Phil Broden, and Sam Coleman, whom he had known in the Southern United States. They had also traveled together to Canada. They all were living within approximately three blocks from each other in Minneapolis at the beginning of the Great Depression.

Jeff’s girlfriend at the time, Carrie White, always left him watching her parrot “Jocko,” especially when she tried to rebuild her relationship with her husband who was a musician that lived in Chicago. Whenever she left Minneapolis for Chicago she knew her pet was in good hands. Their relationship did not last very long before the two of them ended up in court for some reason, and Jeff ended their relationship returning to the only other male friends he had in Minneapolis.

Four of the five young men that traveled from Canada married white women; Roy Robinson married Rachel Martin, Phil Broden married Mary Martin, Rachel’s twin sister, and they all lived in one big house on Highland Avenue where Mrs. Susie Martin lived (mother of the girls). Sam Coleman met and married Helen Tavis (nickname Tidy), and for years Sam worked shining shoes before learning to repair the shoes he had shined for years in Minneapolis. Sam and Tidy were married some forty years. She worked at the Minneapolis Star & Tribune for about thirty years, much of that time in management, without the company ever knowing her husband was African American. Had the company known she would have been fired.

1Telecon December 20, 1993, Frances M. Melton with Jimmy R. Melton. My mother had been reading a story about White Bear, Minnesota, and remembered that my father worked there before he worked at Mung Hing’s.
Figure 29. Frances Mary (Guier) Melton age 21, 1934
Two other mixed couples were friends with the Melton’s; Diane and David Turner, and Jack and Joyce Neal. Joyce later drove a city bus for almost twenty years from the early 1940’s to almost 1960. She maintained an accident free career and the company never knew she was married to an African American. Had her company known, she also would have been fired.

Jeff met his future wife and mother of his children, Frances Mary Gaier, at Mung Hings Chinese restaurant in Minneapolis in 1929. During the depression the pay was so low that Jeff worked three jobs to earn enough to maintain a reasonable living for the two. It was years before Jeff was able to get a car, and when he was able to afford one it was mainly needed to assure Frances transportation to the hospital when she was about to have their first child, Jeff, Jr.. Frances recalled:

2 I first met Roy Robinson and Ben Carothers in 1931, two years after having worked at Mung Hing’s Restaurant at 719 Hennepin Avenue; Roy worked at Snyder’s Drug Store on 8th and Hennepin Avenue. Sam worked at a shoe shop on 6th and Hennepin Avenue, and Jeff worked at the restaurant with me. Sam met Tidy when he would walk through the Federal Bakery, where she worked, to go see Jeff at the restaurant. They became very close friends, and when her abusive husband found out about their relationship he demanded a divorce. I worked as a bus girl starting in 1929 and later kept company with Jeff Sr. and married him. Our wedding bliss lasted 46 years, before he died in 1977.

Getting married for an interracial couple in the 1930’s was difficult. Many of the States made interracial marriages illegal. Many of these marriages were not recognized until the two parties had lived together for some time. If you were a good Catholic as Frances was, one would request to be married under the roof of God, and by a priest. Marrying an African American was looked down upon by the Gaier family, the state, and the church.

2 Excerpts of a letter dated November 14, 1993, from Frances M. Melton to Jimmy R. Melton in response to reading the original draft for this book.
The priest would not allow their marriage to be performed in the church, and would not give his permission for their marriage. Frances was given the option by the church of returning to a white life style or being excommunicated. For a person that had spent all of her life in the Catholic church who, at one point seriously considered being a nun, loving and marrying an African American was a major “crossroads” in her life.

As Jeff and Frances contemplated joining in matrimony, Mary Gaier, Frances’ mother, requested assistance from a Mr. Witek the local Polish interpreter to assist in legal action. Mary wanted to send Frances to a female reformatory, because she was seeing an African American. Frances received an official letter requiring her to be present at the county courthouse to see what action would be taken against Jeff. Frances was called to testify as to her age and her means of employment. Luckily, she was over eighteen years of age, because her mother would have prosecuted Jeff for statutory rape, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

When Frances entered the courtroom she remembered seeing a heavyset Jewish man setting behind a table with his feet propped up, and smoking a cigar. She was questioned as to the period of time she had been working, and she had been giving part of her money to her mother. She had been paying her mother two dollars a week. The man informed Frances that Jeff was considered an undesirable, because he was African American. Frances informed the gentleman that she was in love with Jeff, and the court action just made her realize that fact even more. The charges were dropped, Frances was
upset with her mother about being called into court. Accordingly, she refused to finish payment on a couch that she had given to her mother.

Frances’ mother, Mary, was originally from a little town near Warsaw, Poland. She had come to the United States in 1909, using her sister’s passport. She was too young to be traveling by herself. When she entered through Ellis Island the people had trouble spelling her last name, and Gujer was changed to Guier, and when Frances was born her last name would reflect the name change that took place in America. The problems in proper spelling continued when Frances spelled it as Gaier.

Frances was brought up in a very strict Catholic background, and attended Catholic schools until she was old enough to go to high school. She started working at the age of fourteen in commercial establishments to help pay her way in school. To acquire those jobs, a lady in the neighborhood who acted as an independent employment agency was paid for the jobs she acquired for the girls. Once the lady was paid, she would send the girls out to their new jobs, and when they were employed for a year they would have to pay the lady more money. After Frances graduated from Vocational High School, which at the time was an all girls school, she worked for the Zinsmaster Bread Company at the Matson Bakery. Here she frosted cakes and greased bread pans in preparation for baking. In later years, she worked as a maid at the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis. Mr. Zinsmaster would always stay on her ninth floor, because he liked her service.

Jobs during the late 1920’s were hard to acquire. For White women dating African Americans, being fired was always a possibility and fear of reprisals was a reality. Interracial marriages in the 1930’s were a little unusual, and six mixed couples associating was very rare. These couples stayed together, because they were in their own little world. They really had it hard, because African Americans did not want to rent to
them because the women were white, and the whites did not want them because the men were African American.

Frances related an incident that happened to them as a group when they all went out to see an African American Orchestra featuring performers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Daddy Hines, and Cab Calloway for a “Colored Musical Revue” at the Hennepin Orpheum Theater. The tickets were two dollars, and when the men and their ladies went in together they were told to continue into the section set aside for “Negroes”. Phil Broden and his wife were told to proceed to the white section, which always happened to Phil Broden, because his complexion was so fair that he was always mistaken for a white man. During World War II he was accepted into an all white military unit, without the Army realizing he was African American.

Often when the African American entertainers played in town they had to stay at the homes of African Americans in the area, because of the stiff segregation laws. When some of the poorer African American entertainers came to Minneapolis they stayed in a run down hotel near the Milwaukee Train Depot. Jeff associated with many of the musicians because he was a guitar player, one who could strum and pick at the same time. Being ambidextrous gave him the confidence to carry two pearl handle pistols during the 1920s and 1930s, in case he needed them for the type of lifestyle he had selected. Jeff used to enjoy partying all night long, and for years had a problem with heavy drinking. The problem with his drinking was that he enjoyed his liquor, and he drank mainly when he was with his friends. When Jeff married he set aside the weapons he carried, his guitar playing, and he curtailed his socializing.

Jeff worked at Mung Hing’s for about seventeen years before he decided to change jobs. He worked as a janitor in a bowling alley for a while, but the owners wanted everything polished to such a degree that he had to leave. After being a cook for
so many years, he decided on a career change when extremely high pay was offered for workers assembling ammunition at the New Brighton plant in St. Paul, Minnesota during World War II. On June 19, 1942, Susie Martin signed Jeff’s paperwork for him to be able to stay in the United States. Without her signing these documents, Jeff, would never have been able to get the government jobs at New Brighton or Honeywell as his family expanded.

Figure 31. Sam Coleman, Helen Tavis, Jeff Melton, and Frances Melton
Autobiography: Jimmy R. Melton

I was born June 25, 1943 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was a time when money
along with everything else was in short supply due to the war. I was the third and last
child born to Jeff and Frances Mary (Gaier) Melton, and everything was hand-me-downs
for years. My mother, as far as I can remember, worked during my younger years, and
normally day shift jobs. My father was always employed, normally working the swing
shift or the midnight shift, and usually sleeping during the day.

My father worked at the New Brighton plant until 1945, and then went to work
for Honeywell. After receiving the job at Honeywell, my dad discovered that his
brother-in-law Walter (nicknamed - Wiggs) Gaier, who wanted to kill my father for
marrying his sister, also worked at the facility. It was difficult working under those
circumstances. Wiggs was a machine operator, and my dad oiled those same machines.
My father always had to be aware of Wiggs’ location when he was working, always
looking over his back. Things changed in the spring of 1948 as my father received a
letter from his brother Robert (Bob) Melton.

The letter from Bob wanted my father to return north to Calgary where he and
Bob could join together in ownership of the Chicken Inn, a restaurant that served
Southern style U. S. foods. While awaiting for the right time to return to Canada, my
father allowed my oldest brother Jeff, Jr., who was twelve years old at the time, to travel
to Canada during the summer of 1948. Jeff Jr. lived and worked for uncle Bob while the
rest of our the family was preparing for the trip in the fall. The move back to Canada
required the sale of our furniture and household items.

The move turned out to be a major loss, because all the furniture was paid for and
we received almost nothing. My maternal grandmother, gave us $300 dollars for our
refrigerator. Her generosity at this point was surprising, since this was the same woman
who had disowned her own daughter when she first started dating a African American man seventeen years prior. She had agreed with her son, Wiggs, that Frances should be killed on sight. The monies helped a lot with the trip north.

We took the train north and entered Canada through the Emerson, Manitoba immigration entry point. Our family was held up at the border for a couple of weeks. We could neither travel into Canada nor return to Minneapolis. My dad had to check each morning on our status, to see if approval would be given either to enter the country or to return to Minneapolis. Each day was a burden, while the cost of food and lodging ate away at what little monies had been saved up. Our family had to stay in a hotel where people did not express any warmth towards a mixed family staying there. My dad was told by a white border guard, who knew his brothers from working on the railroad, he wouldn’t have had any trouble if his wife had been Black.

When approval was finally given, our family arrived in Calgary October, 1948. Once there my dad found that the situation about ownership had changed. Vicky Hicks (Florence’s lady friend who worked at the restaurant) and Florence (Bob’s common law wife) did not want my dad and Bob to join forces for some unknown reason. So dad went to work for Bob drawing a salary of forty cents a hour. ^My dad’s cooking ability was highly praised by the customers, many of whom played for the Calgary Stampeders Football team. This group included their African American player Woody Strode.

The year before we arrived the Calgary Stampeders won the Canadian championship against Ottawa. Woody Strode was the hero of the game. He recovered a

^Woody Strode was one of the first two Black players into the National Football League, and a member of the World Champion Los Angeles Rams in 1946. Movie credits included The Ten Commandments, Spartacus, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, How The West Was Won, The Professionals, and The Cotton Club, etc. Corresponding information taken from a personally signed copy, Woody Strode and Sam Young, Goal Dust; Woody Strode an autobiography (Maryland: Madison Books, 1990), 158-167. From the era of the “Gold Dust Twins” UCLA, 1937.
fumble, and ran for the winning touchdown. It was the first year that Calgary won the championship, and a crowd followed him whenever he came into the Chicken Inn. In 1949, Woody Strode returned numerous times to Calgary, and stopped by the restaurant to have dad fry him some chicken gizzards. It turned out to be the year Woody Strode received serious injuries during the Western Division championship game, which ended his football career. Later he went on to become one of Hollywood’s top African American actors.

By the time 1950 came around, dad no longer could afford to stay in Canada helping his brother and running his marriage into the ground. My mother wrote her sister Helen and before long there was a three hundred dollar loan available for the family’s return to the United States. All the family’s furnishings were packed up and sent by freight. Dad returned ahead of the family to secure a job again with Honeywell. He stayed with Mr. Beasley, a co-worker from Honeywell. However my mother and the rest of our family returned by train. I was only seven at the time, and my strongest memory of the return trip was our dog running after the train as we departed, as if in a scene from a Walt Disney movie. The only thing we had to eat along the trip was ham and cheese sandwiches, and when we finally arrived at the border, my brother Jeff, Jr., ordered a grilled ham and cheese sandwich! We were held up at the border again, not as long as in the past, and we were glad when we were released to continue on to Minneapolis.

The friendships that were cultivated years before we left for Canada came to be a Godsend. Our family had no place to stay, no money even if we had a place, and our furniture was in route to Minneapolis. Family friends Diane and David Turner offered their basement apartment for us until August 1950, to give us time to get on our feet. I did not understand much of what was going on, and my parents never liked to trouble the youngsters with problems in the household. It was only when my dad stopped to have a
drink before coming home that we kids would find out that we were short of money.

One evening when the family situation became unbearable, my mother took me by the hand, and we walked to the Church at the end of the block. There was a fenced in area where the statues were located, and my mother knelt down to pray. Because I would not be still she told me to walk around for a while. As I did, I felt that I had let her down, so I started saying the Lord’s prayer. While standing there, all of a sudden it was as if I was standing near clouds, and this female angel said to me “not to worry, everything would be alright”. Not long after that my father stopped drinking, the troubling situations within the family stopped, and overall our family lifestyle changed for the better.

My mother’s sister Helen came to our rescue again. She loaned our family one thousand dollars for the down payment on a home at 1211 Aldrich Avenue north in Minneapolis, the first home my parents owned. In August of 1950 our family was able to move into the home, where the weeds were taller than I was at the age of seven. That was my home over the next thirteen years. In the late 1950’s my paternal grandmother died. My father traveled back to Canada for her funeral, and it was the start of many trips back to Canada.

The majority of our return trips to Canada were partially financed by the pennies that were saved in between trips. There was a large cookie tin that my parents had in their room, where they deposited their pennies when they cleared their pockets or pocketbooks. It was the responsibility of the kids to wrap the coins for transport to the
This was a time when you could not bring loose money to the bank. All the coins had to be wrapped fifty coins to a wrapper. The savings were compromised when I had a strong urge one year for the taste of coconut cream pies. The good aspect of my actions was that it brought to light the need for an allowance.

When we went back in 1960, Calgary looked more like a city out of an old western movie, and it had not been long since some of our relatives in Amber Valley had moved out of their log cabins. When we went through Athabasca to go out to the farms, I could not believe the step back in time we made coming from Minneapolis. The sidewalks in Athabasca were made of wood. So were the tie down rails for horses outside the saloon. The streets were dirt, and in fact they were mud, because it had just rained. It was a perfect setting for an old western movie, and my aunt Beulah was like a medicine woman of old.

My aunt Beulah was our family’s contact when all other medical advise did not work. A good example of this relationship took place in the late 1950’s. My brother Jeff Melton Jr., was diagnosed with weeping eczema at the General Hospital in Minneapolis. They had so many specialists in to see him that it looked like a convention from the University of Minnesota Hospital. There he was hospitalized for almost a month because the doctors had no idea how to combat it. After Jeff Jr. was released from the hospital he was sent home with instructions; once each day to be covered in a body length heavy cheese cloth, while laying on a rubber bed covering. He was only allowed slits for his eyes, nose, and mouth. Once that was accomplished, a special solution had to be poured over his entire body, and he had to stay that way until the cloth dried.
After experiencing this procedure for weeks on end with no results, aunt Beulah was contacted for assistance. Within a short time a package arrived, when opened there was a glass jar filled with a black gooeysubstance with small bits of leaves. It smelled like unprocessed tar. It came with directions in how to apply, and no matter how bad it smelled, it was something that had to be tried. Within a few days a difference was seen on Jeff Jr’s skin, and it was not long before the treatment was stopped because he looked like a new person.

The knowledge of herbs and local cures in the Black community has almost disappeared. In years past this teaching was passed down through the family. The medical training depended upon a person’s willingness to acquire the knowledge from others. Within the Amber Valley community Beulah (Melton - George Melton’s oldest daughter) Phipps, was one of those who paid attention over the years. Her knowledge began when they lived in the southern United States. Later she was the one who picked up other cures from people in her travels, which included the Cree and Blackfoot Indians who lived in Amber Valley. Beulah Melton’s ability often was questioned even by her brothers and sisters. Nevertheless their feelings changed when she came up with a potion or a compound that solved the problem.

For medicine they used the herbs of the fields and gardens. Teas, especially sassafras tea, was outstanding. Medicines were made from the inside bark of certain trees and shrubs, and the health-giving, cooling juices of wild and cultivated berries that grew in abundance all around them. The herbs were gathered in the summertime and saved in case of sickness, for family or friends later on. Often the sick were helped backed to health with these herbs, fruit juices, and vegetable broths. Years later when Jeff Jr’s skin problems returned, Beulah had passed away, and the knowledge that she so carefully had acquired over the years had passed with her. After Beulah’s death, her
second son Milton (Buddy) Phipps, tried his best to remember even a little of what his mother tried to pass down to her children.

Buddy is now only able to remember just a few things dealing with cures, or the proper plant to use for the different healing processes. He regrets now not writing down the names of all the herbs and the roots his mother knew, and the diseases they cured. But Buddy’s lack of memory on medical matters was more than counterbalanced by the fact that he was available to save the property that originally belonged to George and Amanda Melton. When the government had threatened to seize it for back taxes, Buddy was contacted by the government, and the property was saved by a member of the family. We got along better with our relatives in far away Canada than we did with our mother’s relatives on the other side of town.

The family’s relationship with my maternal grandmother never changed over the years. Once or twice a year, she came to our house, and when we were allowed to come to her house it was only at night. Before we left for her house we always had to call first. Once we arrived at her house, we had to park in the alley down the block, and my mother would go in the house first to make sure no one else was there. If the way was clear we could enter through the back door, but if someone was there we had to return home. I do not remember what her house looked like. From 1950 to 1964 the year she died, I never set foot in her house. Yet I remember before she died, my dad was the only person that came to her aid to pay the bills when she was in the hospital.

My dad was a very understanding person, and never held a grudge. Luckily for me he would forgive and forget. Even though we never had much money, my dad never turned down any of my friends that stopped by for a visit without offering them something to eat. His form of correction, for us kids, was the look he gave us. I can

remember him striking me only once as a youngster when I was about nine or ten years old. It took place when he was on the telephone. My sister and I would not stop yelling, and were running in the house. He back handed me as I ran passed him with his right hand. Luckily for me his strength was in his left hand. I lost my vision for a short time, or it may have been fear keeping my eyes closed afraid to see if he was coming after me. I really had it coming.

Several other times, I deserved punishment. On some occasions I did not get caught. The first time happened when I was about fourteen years old, a friend of mind who was older than myself, had just received his drivers license. He was allowed to drive his fathers new Studebaker Golden Hawk. It was one of the last made, and was equipped with a supercharger. It was and still is the fastest car I have ever been in. It is said that a teenager fears nothing, I am here to tell you that this is not true. When my friend Roger McConnical drove me out to some deserted road and stepped on the accelerator, we reached a point where I could not see any distance between the trees as we past. I looked at the speedometer, saw that we were doing 135 miles a hour, and I wanted to beat him to death. I could not believe that someone would actually put my life in danger like that, and do it so quickly. The high speed that day exceeded my threshold of fear. Never again have I ever driven at such speeds.

For years the fastest car that I had available to drive was my dad's 1951 Packard, with a long eight cylinder engine. Even then I had the nerve to take it out to the race track, thinking my dad would never find out, because the track was so far out of town. Well, it turned out that a friend of my dad from work was there, and told my dad that he was surprised how fast his car would go. He must be very proud of his son coming in first place in that division. That action caused my driving privileges to be suspended for a short time I have never been able to do something wrong without getting caught.
There was an incident in 1960 when I was a junior in high school, that my father could or would have had the right to kill me. I had been out drinking with the fellows, insisting they drop me off at my high school, because I wanted to attend a school dance. When the alcohol kicked in I was kicked out of the dance. When the dance let out someone picked me up from the stairs where I was sitting and took me home. I hope I thanked them. I barely remember that taking place. My mother told me many times after that, that when I came home that evening, I threatened to fight my father. He totally rejected the thought, defusing the situation, and told her just to leave me alone to sleep it off. I do not remember the event to this day. It was something that the two of them could have invented, and yet I know better.

By the time I reached my senior year in high school, I thought I was the coolest thing in pants. Yet my means of transportation was either the bus or my ten speed bicycle. Oh, the trials and tribulations of youth. It was like my entire life was coming to its conclusion with school ending, and yet my life had no future. I had approached my parents about going on to college, and was told that because they were unable to send either my brother or my sister to college that they did not think it right for me to go.

After high school was over I went to work full time into the painting business my brother had started four years previously. During that four year period I always worked for him during summer and school breaks. In 1961, as the winter came upon us I discovered how seasonal painting could be in the dead of winter in Minnesota, when our jobs dropped to nothing. Since my brother and I were both looking for jobs, we let each other know if we heard of any openings. One day in the newspaper an advertisement for janitors appeared. It was the type of job I always told myself that I would never take.

With the opening of the new Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport, a new small company called Northwestern Maintenance Company won the bid, and needed
employees. When my brother and I called for information we were given a time to meet with our interviewer. When we went in for our interview, the interviewer turned out to be the company’s president, William Burwell.

He explained the reason he was doing the interviews was because he had not hired the additional staff yet. Directly after letting us know why he was giving us the interview, he preceded to tell us about his history. He told us how only a few years before he had moved from Minneapolis to the southern United States, and it was there that he started believing in the separation of the races. He assured us that he believed in good working relations, equal promotions for everyone who deserved it, and yet he did not believe in mixing of the races sexually. Since that was my very first job interview, I thought that it was a little strange. We both assured him that it was the money we wanted not sex.

The company started with seventy five people working as janitors at the airport. Everyone started at the same level. Four supervisory positions were needed to be filled; one superintendent, and three foreman positions. Within two weeks everyone was selected, one White person was selected to fill the superintendent position, and another White person filled the morning foreman slot. My brother filled the midnight foreman’s position. It was the shift that had forty people working to accomplish the majority of the work, and I was selected as the swing shift foreman.

After a few weeks work my brother made me aware that he had heard two of the white workers on my shift did not like working for someone who was only eighteen years old, and African American. Within the week I was called into the boss’s office. I was told that the White workers on my shift were complaining, and that they did not like working for a African American man. He explained to me that he was going to return me to a job as a worker for about two weeks, and he would bring in the superintendent to fill
my foreman’s position. He went on to tell me that at the end of two weeks I would be returned to the foreman’s position, and the White worker would no longer be working for the company. He was actually a man of his word. At the end of the two week period, the White workers were fired, and I was back in as foreman.

In retrospect I have to say that I would rather work for someone who is up front about their feelings than those who tell you they believe in everyone living together, and then behind your back they call you names or they laugh and tell others of their race that African Americans think they are equal. I remember many times my mother telling us about how the white workers acted at the hotel where she worked. The African American guest and staff members would be treated so nice to their faces, and as soon as they were out of hearing distance the Whites would talk about them like dogs. We were always warned about the racist thinking on both side of the color barrier. It was something that we had to be mindful of, and yet not worry about. Racism seemed to always be like a shadow no matter where we were. It determined the kind of jobs available, yet I was always eager to take the best job available.

Before turning twenty in 1963, major life changes seemed to be taking place. In January, I had picked up my very first brand new car; a 1963 Chevrolet Super Sport with a 327 cubic inch engine, a four speed transmission, and a positive traction rear end. I really wanted the Corvette, nevertheless Mr. Kieffer the owner of the dealership persuaded me that the Corvette’s upkeep would be too expensive, and I brought my dream car.

In June of 1963, my brother, sister, and a family friend Pauline Darrell, decided they had enough of the cold Minnesota weather, and they were headed for California by way of Calgary. During the trip into Canada my sister met her future husband, Martine Saunders. In the following month of July, my parents departed for their vacation to
Calgary for the Stampede, leaving me, their youngest son, alone to watch the house.

Unlike the Home Alone movies, I could not stand to be in the house by myself. Within a few days I packed my bags and headed for the Canadian border. I almost burned up the road getting to Calgary. My top speed for driving was 115 miles a hour, reached on the plains after departing Winnipeg during the summer of 1963, when I followed my family to Canada. My brother, sister and Pauline had been in Canada about a month, and they prepared to see my cousin Tommy Melton in Vancouver when I arrived. Before they left Calgary, they told me that they would only be a few days and probably would return. Things do not always turn out the way you think.

Within my first two days after arrival I mainly slept, due to the straight 24 hours of driving to Calgary. Not long after awaking from my long slumber, I received a call from my brother. He told me that after they arrived in Vancouver, they liked the city so much that they wanted to stay a while and get employment. He said that he traveled to the downtown area by hoping a freight train because our sister had taken the car to seek employment in another direction. He went to the longshoreman's hall for employment and was told that he had to go to the immigration office first for employment. At the immigration office he was told that he violated his visitors visa by applying for employment, and would have to leave the country by midnight that night.

During my two week stay in Calgary I drank twelve cases of beer, which entitled me to a free case of beer, as prescribed by law before I left the country. I had a lot of time on my hands because my car had to go into the shop for repairs. It needed to have the pistons rings and valves replaced. The dealer was one valve short of a full set, so my car sat in the shop for almost half the entire stay in Calgary. My parents stayed for another week then were on their way back home, and I stayed only a week longer then they. While there driving around a lot, of course the music was western, and not my
style. So I listened to the news a lot about the fighting in Cambodia. Of course my mind was set on all the partying I was doing, and the move to Los Angeles the next month.

Once I returned from Canada the next 30 days came around quick, just as my sister and brother had packed before me my things were packed, and I burned up the road leaving Minneapolis. After arriving in Los Angeles I contacted my sister right away, found where she was living, and contacted my brother. He was unemployed and his money was running a little short. So we all planned to move into together until we were able to get on our own feet. We rented a unfurnished three bedroom apartment with wall to wall carpeting. It did come with a refrigerator, and venetian blinds. My sister brought her mattress and clothes over, my brother brought his mattress and clothes over, and I brought my clothes over. The first thing we purchased for the apartment was a new Magnavox stereo combination center, and we put that in the living room with a small size bolder my brother picked up when they were coming down the west coast.

Luckily we moved in together, because jobs were harder to come by than what we imagined, and with all the civil rights marching going on in the South, people seemed a little tense. My sister worked at Lane Bryant in their accounting department. She worked for Lane Bryant in Minneapolis during a school work program, so it was not difficult for her to get a job. I applied for a job at the General Telephone Company, took the medical examination, and the doctor came out to tell me that they could not hire anyone who was borderline anemic. It was hard for me to understand the doctors reasoning. A job would solve our lack of food, and the nourishment problem.

Even when we did have food, we suffered from a lack of knowledge concerning how to prepare it. My sister's cooking skills were especially minimal. Once, she cooked up a pound bag of lima beans in a small pot of water. The water just barely covered the beans. Each time she came back into the kitchen to check the beans, she found that the
beans were swelling, and she had to keep changing to larger pots. By the time she
finished cooking the beans they were in a large turkey roasting pan, and we had enough
lima beans that we invited many people from the entire apartment complex to come and
share.

Living on our own was a time for lessons. I was twenty years old, and after
making good money in Minneapolis for some time, I just knew finding a job in Los
Angeles would be easy. We almost starved to death. I can laugh at it now. It was a
different story at the time. In my mind I had more than enough job experience: six
months as a foreman, six months as a superintendent, and six more months as a site
supervisor for janitorial companies. I could not get a job at that level with any janitorial
company. One of the first things that I heard was that I was too young for those
positions, even though I had held them for a reasonable amount of time, and it did not
seem to matter that it was with the same employers, showing progression in my job.

The only jobs that seemed available to my brother and I at the time were
janitorial jobs. I went to work for Lucky Stores for a short time, driving miles to West
Covina. Soon after I had to quit. I could not afford to continue driving without gas
money while waiting for my check to arrive. In the mean time, my sister’s accounting
background got her a job at Wheatherby Kaiser Shoe Company, and she was able to let
me know of an entry level position that was opened up as elevator operator. I did not
think there were any elevators left in the world that required operators, yet that job led to
an opening the company had for a salesmen. I did find work a little closer to our
apartment when I worked for a janitorial company at Columbia Broadcasting Station
(CBS) television City, and at KTTV channel 11.

In January 1965 in hopes of changing our employment eligibility, my brother and
I tested to enter Los Angeles City College. We were accepted and enrolled in classes.
My brother at this time was also working for various janitorial companies. His frustration with these companies led him to start his own company called Golden Bear Janitorial Company. My employment picture changed right away. I did not go to work for my brother. The same month I started college classes, I received my official greetings for induction into the military.

It seems with the war in Vietnam, they needed more men to support the effort, and they wanted me to report to the Army Induction Center in Minneapolis. When I contacted the Army’s local office, I was told just to report to their office, and they would handle everything. When I reported to the induction center, everyone was out eating lunch except for the Air Force Recruiter, and he said that if I did not have a preference he would take care of me. This started a twenty three year career in the United States Air Force.

My Air Force assignments kept me within the border of California when I was stateside, and in the Pacific when overseas. My oversea assignments started with Okinawa when it was under the control of the United States. My next overseas assignment was in Thailand, during the Vietnam War, later I was assigned to Korea, and then back to Okinawa, when it became part of Japan.

Overall I enjoyed my Air Force career, because from time to time some interesting things happened. My first assignment was with America’s first stealth aircraft, the high flying SR71 reconnaissance black bird aircraft, that could photograph an automobile’s license plate from over 15 miles altitude. It was the only aircraft that missiles could not reach, and could not catch because of its ability to reach quickly the highest of altitudes for an airplane.

Once on a temporary duty assignment (TDY) in 1968 to Okinawa, it was reported officially that we lost one of our SR-71 aircraft in the sea, and I wondered why...
the erroneous information was put out. As it turned out a YF-12, the civilian version of our same aircraft stationed on Okinawa at the same time, was lost, and I guess the government did not want the world to know that civilians were involved in the reconnaissance of Vietnam. My Air Force career was as diverse as my social life.

Not long after joining the Air Force, and traveling back and forth to Los Angeles to keep in touch with my relatives, I met Lonnie Saunders. She was the daughter of one of the original pioneers of Amber Valley, and my brother-in-law’s sister. The two of us over the years were aware of the other through family members, yet had never met. We hit it off right from the start.

There was no hesitation on my part when she said she was pregnant and I considered marriage. Yet, everything stopped when my ex-sister-in-law Deloris voiced her opposition.

Deloris, my brother’s first wife and Lonnie lived together at the time in Los Angeles, and were considered very good friends. The negative remarks from Deloris convinced me the child was not mine, and so I backed away from any thought of marriage or support. It was not long before Lonnie had to return to Canada, her visitor’s passport due to
expire. I followed within a few months on vacation, and before returning to the states I was given the honor to name the child, Tracy.

A new relationship started almost immediately after returning from Canada, I started living with Annie Margaret Woodson. She had two children from a previous marriage; Jason who just had his 5th birthday, and her daughter Danita who was 3 1/2 years old. My mother did not like me marrying Margaret. She believed the two children that Margaret had from her previous marriage was too much of a burden for me to handle, yet I was twenty-six and all she could do was advise.

Within two years, a similar pregnancy situation developed. Marriage was the responsible thing to do, and of course my upbringing made this a lifelong agreement. Because I believe strongly in continuing your ancestral connection, I did not adopt her two children, yet I did raise them as if they were my own. My new family responsibility made me aware that I needed to take steps to improve myself, and I went to the base education office to have my educational records checked. The young lady told me my educational test scores were so low, I was not smart enough to go to college. I did not find out until sometime later that the test score she looked at was the maximum score annotated for enlisted personnel, and unless you had a degree before entering the Air Force that was the score indicated. If you had lower scores you had to take further tests to raise your score to the ninth grade reading level. This all took place during a time when the base commander had a Confederate battle flag draped behind his desk, and

Figure 36. Annie Margaret (Hampton/Woodson) Melton and Jim Melton, June 1968.
African Americans were filling service positions such as cooks, supply people (my job), and any other job that was secondary.

The union of Margaret and myself brought Monica Rochelle Melton into the world on May 13, 1969, and her birth made me more aware of my failure to improve my employment marketability skills.

During the years Margaret and I were together many changes took place within my life. In 1971, I gave up smoking. It was a bad habit I picked up in the fifth grade, and it took me eighteen years to get rid of it. In 1972, the 15th of September, I gave up drinking, and turned my life over to Christ.

Giving up drinking was difficult because I looked at it as a form of release for pressures of the day. Everyone around me also perpetuated the problem, and the military pushed the booze. All the special parties and military formations were held either in base clubs or in aircraft hangers, and kegs of beer were provided free of charge. When I received orders sending me to Kwang-ju, Korea, in 1972, without my family, the anguish of drinking reappeared. Once in Korea, to get away from the desires of drinking, I went over to the Base Chapel, spoke with the Chaplain, and asked for assistance in learning about God. His reply was “that they did not do that kind of thing”. I was in total shock, because I figured who else would do it besides the chapel. He advised me that Leroy Richards, a young man on base who was
on leave at the time, was into a religious study program.

When Leroy returned from leave, I introduced myself, explained to him what I wanted to do, and that evening he started me into a study program. Gaining the knowledge about Jesus helped me on my path to a better life, and better yet it helped me to get through the long ordeal of a lonely Korean tour. Leroy introduced me to the missionaries working in town and that made a tremendous difference in my immediate environment. The missionaries Baptist Minister took me with him one Saturday when he was going out into the countryside to minister to the local churches, and he baptized me in the Yellow Sea off the southwest coast of Korea.

The pressures of the area cost one Catholic priest his job, because he officially complained about the drinking and chasing women by the other priest and the Base Commander. He complained to such a point that the base commander said he must be crazy, and they sent in a special aircraft to evacuate him out to be medically evaluated. It showed me that the government would go to no ends if you went against it. I was glad to leave there and get back to my family. But my marriage was in trouble, and my new assignment to Okinawa only delayed my divorce. After eleven years of marriage to Margaret, I realized that I needed an attorney.

Divorce proceedings began in 1980. When I prepared for my trip to the United States to see an attorney, I received a call from Lonnie. It had been sixteen years since I last heard from her, so I was very surprised at the call, especially since I was on Okinawa. Lonnie let me know that Tracy wanted to know her father, and during the conversation she related to me that my brother had given her my phone number. In contacting my brother, he told me that he had invited Tracy down to southern California, so he could see her for himself, and he was surprised to see that she not only looked like me, her mannerisms were like mine.
After my return to the United States to see my divorce attorney, I flew up to
Calgary to meet with Tracy. We had a long truthful conversation I explained to her
exactly what had taken place sixteen years before, and she was satisfied with my
explanation. One of her first comments was that she always wondered why her skin had
large pores. I had to confess, there was no getting around the large pores that could be
found in the Melton family. We got along very well, and I had the opportunity to teach
Tracy how to drive a car before returning to the States to catch my flight to Okinawa.
Once seeing Tracy I felt terrible that I had made such a error in Lonnie’s integrity.
Maybe one day I will find out why Deloris gave me such bad information. My apology
and sincere deepest regrets were extended to both Lonnie and Tracy.

A lot of action took place during the waiting period between filing for my
divorce and the actual divorce decree. I made sure all the old bills were paid, so nothing
could halt the proceedings, and I could start my new life without looking behind. My
twelve year marriage to Margaret ended in late 1981, and I returned to the United States
in May 1983. Margaret continued to live and work on the island of Okinawa. As of this
writing, she is still there. Monica is living on her own in Long Beach, California. She is
a junior at California State University, Long Beach, studying biology.

My next assignment was my last assignment, yet the beginning of a brand new
life, at George Air Force Base near Victorville, California. With all the old bills paid off
I saved up enough money in 1984 to acquire the down payment for a custom made home,
and the time to cultivate the love of a good woman, my wife Juanita. As my Air Force
career came to a close in 1988, I took advantage of the time I had accrued over the years
to attend college, and started going to the Victor Valley Community College.

Once in college, I knew that I could complete my Associate degree, and then it
was just knowing that continuing my education was not out of the picture. My higher
education would be realized in June, 1992, when I received my Bachelor of Arts in History from California State University, San Bernardino. The enthusiasm of my instructors let me know that with a little effort on my part, I could be able to even reach the unexpected goal of a Masters Degree.

In anticipation of doing a Master’s thesis on Amber Valley, I traveled there to collect as much information as possible in 1992. Within thirty day’s of returning from Canada, an opportunity presented itself to begin my own business. With my wife as my anchor, I jumped into the water of commerce, without customers, and became a incorporated wholesale cosmetic distributor with the name of Melton Distributing, Inc. With our primary product being Ebonè Cosmetics from Johnson Publishing, the manufacturers of Fashion Fair Cosmetics. Immediately, our territory was established as being all of southern Nevada, and all of southern California. Within the first year we had to expand that area to include northern Nevada. The business was important, yet not as important as gathering ancestral information.

In March 1993, we received a brochure showing there was going to be a 83rd year gathering in Amber Valley July 1993, to celebrate the grand opening of the newly built community cultural center. Upon arrival in Amber Valley we saw the new center,
that was replacing the old center that was crumbling away due to time. In the past, the center had acted as the gathering place for the entire community; African Americans, Indians, and Whites who shared their experiences of a farming community. For many of the attendees the celebration was a time for family reunions, and renewing of relationships with old friends who had not seen each other for possibly twenty-five to thirty-years.

There were those at the gathering whose view of the world was so negative that they entertained the idea of removing their children from city life and returning to Amber Valley for a wholesome environment. The types of crime problems in the big cities of Canada are equivalent to those in the United States, and the concern of Black on Black crime was also very visible. Many of the parents, especially those who were living in Vancouver, were so concerned that they thought it best to close down their businesses, and move back to the farm until the children were ready to live on their own. They preferred to give up the money and keep their children. In the city the children played cops and robbers, and on the farm they chase the animals or collect bugs. Being on the farm teaches you different aspects of life and your outlook of responsibility changes.

The gathering encouraged those of us present to reconsider how the community came into being, and for all of us to see how lives have been changed for the positive by those early pioneers. It also gave us a chance to see what an individual can do when joining forces with others of the community. This experience inspired me to become more community conscious where I live. In August 1993, I became a founding member of the Victor Valley African American Chamber of Commerce, was elected to the board of directors, and in May 1994 became vice president.

Finally, the only thing holding up the greater expansion of my business is the completion of this written work, and the awarding in December, 1994 of a Masters of
Arts in the Social Science program at California State University, San Bernardino. In thinking back, it is the people of Amber Valley that made a tremendous impact upon my life, and the decision to get involved in my community. Hopefully, others will take it upon themselves to look at their community, see just how it can be improved, and how they can make a difference.

Figure 39. Jim Melton CSUSB graduation, Master of Arts.
CONCLUSION

The story of African American involvement in the settlement of the northern regions of Alberta is not widely known. Within the realm of African American history, few if any books can be found that even mention that African Americans traveled to the northern region of Alberta, Canada. So it is refreshing to know that African Americans also settled the northern regions of Alberta. Discovering that African Americans were in Alberta when it changed from a territory to a Province is exciting, and it is truly amazing to find out that all this took place in the twentieth century. Normally most books that are historical in nature do not have the personal touch in relationships. Autobiographical books are just the opposite for they do not have the historical background, and people are left without a feeling for the problems of the day. It is best that family members know why a certain decision was made, and in this case their decision was to go into a part of Canada that just four years prior was Indian territory.

Knowing how the Indians came to be without a land to call their own, and why African Americans gave up what was considered their homeland helps in the overall understanding. Knowing what happened to the Indians who lived in the location before the African American settlement, gives us a better grasp of the feelings of the local Indians. Sharing information about an African American community movement, enlightens others to the fact that African Americans as a community worked together.

Indians in Canada as in the United States, were displaced by the stroke of a pen from those in England wanting their lands. Depending upon your view, the move to displace the Indians could be a horrific move on the government's part, or it could be the proper move to open the land up for settlement preparing for cultivation, and starting
those initial steps required at the beginning of what in this case, would be a province. These lands eventually would be the railroad corridor across Canada, and the main means of transportation of the new settlers.

Few historians would claim that African descendants have received their full due in Canadian historiography. In retrospect it is surprising since the movement of African Americans crossing borders of states and countries over the last hundred and fifty years has been dramatic and extremely large. On the personal level we see why various African Americans left different locations, how they traveled to their new locations, and how they developed as a family once they started going their own way.

In the past when the subject of African American settlers into Canada came about, the thought of African Americans in the eastern portion of Canada, Quebec and Nova Scotia was envisioned. It is well known that African Americans first came into Canada both as freemen and as slaves on the east coast, and in 1629 Olivier Le Jeune is noted as being the first slave to arrive. Quebec and Nova Scotia are always spoken of as primary locations where African Americans lived, and as the jumping off point for Canadian African Americans in the resettlement of Sierra Leone, Africa. Which many times is compared to Sierra Leone’s southern neighbor, Liberia, that was resettled by African Americans.

Sometimes if individuals are knowledgeable about African Americans and Canada, they will think about those African Americans that have lived on the west coast in British Columbia. Yet almost never will the conversation or literary material come forth to cover the African American pioneers that settled in Alberta, Canada, and certainly not those African Americans who settled in the northern Province of Alberta, in Amber Valley.

When historians speak about African Americans going to Canada it is usually
connected to the Underground Railroad, and the assisting of African Americans who wanted to escape the ever imprisoning system of slavery. It is also projected as individual slaves escaping north, however, almost never is it discussed or written that African Americans traveled together as a community, with destinations and common goals in mind. In the process of traveling they would learn to depend upon each other as if they were a family. Neither the trip to Alberta, Canada, nor the human relations there were a bed of roses, yet it was a learning process for everyone.

Many of the African Americans started to begin to trust someone again after years of terror by the Ku Klux Klan, and restrictive measures by governmental bodies that included State and Federal authorities. Up until this time many of the African Americans that traveled to Canada never allowed anyone to get to know them. Now with a complete feeling of freedom and community, they started to relax, and began even close ties with the land, and native Indians.

The Canadian pioneers found resistance to their desires, increased fees from the day they started coming into Canada, and yet from the negative would come a positive step bringing the community together. Starting in 1910, African Americans settled into the northern part of Alberta due to its land availability at cheap prices. Once they meet the established requirements, the land would be theirs. Of course, then they found that the weather did have a great affect upon their life style, and some of their members decided not to be so far from a populated area.

The community of Amber Valley came together almost immediately, they worked together putting up their homes, and other structures even though not everyone had all the proper tools. They learned to depend upon each other, and in the process they began to build close relations and a stronger community. Social clubs established in the community heightened the awareness of togetherness throughout the various families in
the community. As the relationships between the people came together, the hopes of a blossoming river transportation system failed, and the community knew that they would have to look within for strength.

To further strengthen their community they gained permission to have their own school district, and become their own school teachers. It would not take long before they had their own post office, grocery store, and later one of the best baseball teams in Canada. From this they built their own schoolhouse that served as a church, a community hall, and a social club.

Educationally the community started off as did their parents, where the majority of the children only had a third grade education. But the community joined together in support of all their children by becoming their educators, and establishing their own authorized school district. They were able to maintain this high level of educational endeavor as long as the student numbers were maintained, and like schools everywhere when the student numbers went below the minimum required, the school had to close. When the school moved out of the community they continued to give their support, by being living historians gladly willing to share the history of their community.

The strength of the community was such that their members did not hesitate when it came to caring for others when family members were ill or dying, and it was the same story regarding adoptions. When children were not wanted by one family, they would be taken in by other families. Like most farming communities, the medical services were lacking, and when the women were pregnant they had to depend upon those who were knowledgeable in the community. Lack of employment in the area for generations drove the young to travel great distances for a better life.

Jeff Melton was one of the first members of this small community to relocate back in the United States just before World War I to improve his means of support.
World War I employment opportunities in the United States attracted multitudes of African Americans from Canada. It was not until the 1920’s & 30’s that the employment picture changed in the United States. Depression settled upon both the U. S. and Canada. Canadian border restrictions during this time limited the migration of African Americans.

A number of the young men who returned to the United States from Amber Valley would face discrimination of a type of two edge sword, the one edge because they were African American, and the other edge because they were having interracial relationships that were looked down upon very harshly. My father, Jeff Melton would fall in love with a young lady (my mother, France Mary Guier) of Polish descent as the nineteen twenties came to a close, and their relationship continued to build even during the hard years of the depression. Many people during the depression did not have even one job. What jobs there were received low pay because of the number of unemployed, and my dad had to work three different jobs to make a living.

The offer to share in ownership of a Canadian business did not materialize for my father, and the broken promise would have shattering affects upon our family. The double relocation in such a short time was devastating, found our family destitute, and for the first time having to rely upon friends for food and shelter. My father was able to go back to work for Honeywell, and my mother went to work for the Radisson Hotel.

The 1960’s, found our extended family members in Canada completed moved out of their original log cabins. They attained some modern conveniences, and many were living in some of the primary cities of Canada. It was also a time that all the children of the Jeff Melton family were now old enough to move out on their own, and they relocated to the Los Angeles area. The opportunity for the young to advance during the 60’s was limited with the Vietnam War going on, and the draft was sucking in the young to support the war.
The young born during the 1960's would view the world totally differently by the 1980's and 1990's, when they were ready to move out away from their parents, and would think nothing about going on to college to get a degree that would help them start their working careers at high levels. Yet, there were those whose view of the world was so negative that they were willing to remove their children from any possible harm, and return them to Amber Valley to escape the hazards of city life. In the end, it is the people who make the difference in any community, and it is only when they desire to get involved that conditions will change for the better.
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APPENDIX A, PART 1, MAP: PROPERTY, AMBER VALLEY

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AMBER VALLEY HERITAGE PHOTO

Donated by
Lesster & Margaret Napp
and
Chadldah Bowen

APPENDIX A, PART 2, MAP: PROPERTY, AMBER VALLEY
APPENDIX B, MELTON FAMILY TREE.
Frances & Jeff Melton
Photo taken in Minneapolis beside our home
at 1211 Aldrich Ave North.

Helen Guier & Jeff Wheeler Melton Jr.,
1937.

Mary (Karasiewicz, Gajor) Spiczynski, Lynn
Melton, Jeff W. Melton Jr., Frances Melton,
and the baby is Lora Melton photo taken
1957.

John Spiczynski & Deloris (Fasion)
Melton
John was Frances (Gajor) Melton’s broth-
er, son of Mary (Karasiewicz, Gajor)
Spiczynski, & Grandson of Anastazyia
(Król, Gajor) Kulik. Excerpts of a note
dated January 28, 1989, From Frances
Melton to Jimmy R. Melton. Deloris was
Jeff W. Melton Jr.’s 1st wife.

APPENDIX C, PART 1, PHOTO COLLAGE, MELTON FAMILY

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APPENDIX C, PART 2, PHOTO COLLAGE, MELTON FAMILY.

Rushell, Rawleigh, and Creola (Phipps, Unger) Phipps.  Creola is the daughter of Beulah (Melton) Phipps and the mother of Rushell and Rawleigh.

APPENDIX C, PART 3, PHOTO COLLAGE, MELTON FAMILY.

Patricia C. (Melton), Deborah Jean, & Martine Saunders.

Jimmy R. Melton, Frances (Guier) Melton, Georgia (Melton) Toles, Mr. Toles, Jeff Melton Sr. Photo taken on the Toles farm in Amber Valley 1960.

Tracy Saunders

APPENDIX C, PART 4, PHOTO COLLAGE, MELTON FAMILY
Back Row: David Leander, Elvida (Sneed) Saunders. Front Row: Martine, Deborah Jean, Patricia (Melton) Saunders.

APPENDIX D, PART 1, PHOTO COLLAGE, SAUNDERS FAMILY.
Third row from the back second seat from left, Martine Saunders.

Left seat: Glen David Saunders

APPENDIX D, PART 2, PHOTO COLLAGE, SAUNDERS FAMILY.
Back Row: Margaret, Joyce Maxine, Thelma, Annette, Lonnie, Barbara.
Front Row: David Leander Jr., and their Mother Elvida, Norman (Pete) Wilford Saunders.

APPENDIX D, PART 3, PHOTO COLLAGE, SAUNDERS FAMILY.
Back Row: Martine, Milburn (Jack), Barbara, Joyce, Judy, Lonnie, David Leander Jr..
Middle Row: James (Chuck) Earl, Margaret, Stalla, Ernestine, Norman (Pet).
Front Row: Thelma, Jeanette Saunders.

APPENDIX D, PART 4, PHOTO COLLAGE, SAUNDERS FAMILY
Work Cited


Shepard, Bruce R. “Plain Racism: The Reaction Against Oklahoma African American Immigration to the Canadian Plains,” *Prairie Forum*, vol. 10, no.2 (Fall, 1985) 365-380.