

**“We are Family...”**<sup>1</sup>(Sister Sledge-1979)

## **Some FAMILY Names that Made History in Medicine Hat- Mitchell, Hargrave and Sissons and a Bear named “Nancy”.**

**By William J Anhorn K.C. ICD.D**

### **Preface:**

My mother was very proud of her Scottish heritage. My maternal grandparents were both born in Glasgow, Scotland and made Medicine Hat their home for a brief period of time....just long enough for my mother to meet my father!

Being a Medicine Hat writer, amateur genealogist and local historian, it is of some historical importance to identify and document the valuable contribution made by some of the immigrants from Scotland and England that made Medicine Hat their home before the turn of the 20th century.

In this regard, the names **Mitchell, Hargrave and Sissons** are surnames that are inextricably linked to the community and an examination of the contribution of these early pioneers is worthy of examination as part of our storied past. And embedded in this historical/genealogical vignette is a story about a bear named “Nancy”, which some readers may find of interest.

History is important!

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<sup>1</sup> "We Are Family" is a song recorded by American vocal group Sister Sledge. The song track was released in April 1979 as a single from the album of the same name and began to gain club and radio play, eventually becoming the group's signature song. "We Are Family" went gold, becoming the number one R&B and number two pop song on the American charts in 1979 and it became a popular theme song at many family gatherings and events.

## The Mitchell Ranching Clan of Medicine Hat

### James Mitchell Sr.(1805-1861)

James Mitchell (1805-1861), and Mary (née McEwen) (1807-1878), were born and raised in Scotland. They had seven children, four of whom emigrated to Canada.

In 1882, James (1835-1900), Robert (1841-1920), and sisters Margaret (1849-1941), and Janet (1851-1938), settled in Regina, NWT. James and Robert Mitchell began a livestock business and Margaret and Janet, opened a chinaware and stationery shop.

James married Isabella (née Bonella) and they had 11 children: James (died young), William, **James (Jr.)**, Robert, Isabella, Mary, Jessie, John, Bryce, Margaret, and Alexander.

Robert and his wife Elizabeth (nee McFarlane) had 7 children: Robert Jr., James, Elizabeth, Henry, Margaret, Mary and Janet.



James and Isabella Mitchell

It should not go unnoticed that the first names “James” and “Robert” were predominant first names given to the Mitchell clan, which made family gatherings interesting and which, from a genealogical perspective, made it very challenging at times!

In 1887, the two Mitchell brothers moved their livestock west from Regina to the area around Elkwater Lake.

James homesteaded at the site of the present day Elkwater Provincial Park townsite and Robert 3 miles further west at Fly Lake. They had their bull pasture on the "bench" to the south.

They would often herd their cattle into the area of the Medicine Lodge coulee in the area currently known as Eagle Butte because the snow was too deep at the ranch site near the lake.

James and Robert dissolved their partnership in 1892, and Robert moved first to Gros Ventre Creek, and later to a ranch north of Medicine Hat which became known as the Z-T Ranch. In the early 1890's, Robert opened a meat market and packing plant in Medicine Hat.

James Mitchell's had two sons, Robert and Alex, and both went to South America in 1897, to establish a livestock business and there they developed both a cattle and sheep ranch in Argentina.

James Mitchell Sr died suddenly while returning back home to his family in Medicine Hat. After accompanying a shipment of cattle to Scotland with his son Alex, James and his son, then travelled to Argentina to visit Robert.

## Medicine Hat News.

10. 50.

MEDICINE HAT, N.W.T., THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1900

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### DIED AT SEA.

Thursday evening last Mr. Robert Mitchell received a letter from a Mr. Ferguson, a cattle commission agent of Glasgow, Scotland, containing the sad and unexpected news of the death of Mr. James Mitchell, of the firm of J. & R. Mitchell, butchers and ranchers, Medicine Hat. The letter was sent from Liverpool, where Mr. Ferguson was transacting some business. Mr. Mitchell, together with his son Alex, left Medicine Hat about the first of September last with a shipment of cattle for the Old Country. After disposing of the cattle, they went to the Argentine Republic, where Mr. Mitchell's eldest son Robert, is engaged in sheep ranching. Alex. was left with the brother and the father sailed for home from Buenos Ayres on November 26th, on the steamer "Horace," going by way of Liverpool. On December 6th he died on board the ship, and the remains were buried at sea. From papers in his clothing, showing cattle dealings with Ferguson, the vessel owners notified that gentleman, and he in turn sent word to the family here, and also to a brother, William, in Glasgow. The news of the death, under these sad circumstances, was a shock to the family and also to the community, where the deceased had been for many years a respected citizen. He came here thirteen or fourteen years ago from Regina, having come, with other members of the family, to that place from Scotland in 1882. He was in his 66th year, and leaves a wife and eleven children to mourn the loss of husband and father. A brother and two sisters also reside here. Deceased was a life-long member of the Presbyterian church. On Sunday evening Rev. J. W. Morrow made mention of the sad occurrence at the evening service in St. John's church.

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On November 28th, 1900 he left Buenos Aires to return to Medicine Hat via Liverpool, England and while en route home, he died suddenly while aboard ship.

And as the custom of the time, he was “buried at sea”.

His sons, Robert and Alex remained in South America to carry on their ranch operations although Alex returned to Canada in 1937.

His daughters, Margaret and Janet had moved west to Medicine Hat when their brothers left Regina in 1882.

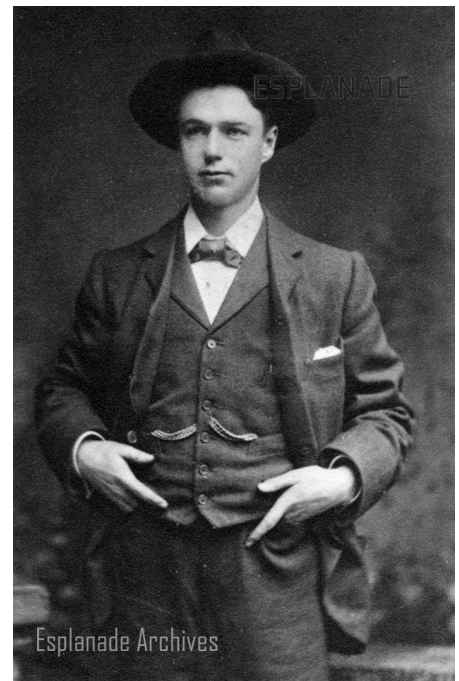
They had opened a stationery and fancy goods store on South Railway Street in the early 1890's.

They carried on business until 1908, when they sold out to Charles S. Pringle, a local druggist. Both ladies were active members of St. John's Presbyterian Church.

### **James Mitchell Jr. and the LA Ranch**

James' son, James Jr., founded the LA Ranch in 1897. It was located in the far southeastern corner of the province straddling a range of bald hills south of the Cypress Hills.

It was a 50,000 acre ranching empire that lasted for 70 years. James Jr. married Izzette (née Foster), an interior designer who was born in Medicine Hat and educated here and in New York.





James Mitchell Jr

They had 4 children: James Foster, Isabella Bonella<sup>2</sup>, Janet Margaret and Bryce Leslie.

James Jr. ran the LA Ranch until his death with the family living in the original log house which was added to over the years. When it was time for the children to attend school, Izzette and her children moved to Medicine Hat.

In addition to her duties on the ranch, she found time for many community activities.

She was a member of the International Business and Professional Women's Club, Past President of the Registered Interior Designers Institute of Alberta, Past Director of Beta Sigma Phi, Past President of the Toastmistress Club, Past Director of the Medicine Hat Y.M.C.A., member of the Medicine Hat Chamber of Commerce, the Western Stock Grower's Association, the Alberta Farm Women's Union, the Women's Literary Club, the Canadian Club and the Liberal Club. In 1990, she was presented with an Honorary Membership in the Chamber of Commerce.



Izzette Mitchell

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<sup>2</sup> Isabella Bonella “Bonnie” (1936-2023) was born in Medicine Hat and following the sudden passing of her father, enrolled in the University of Alberta and graduated and became a teacher in a small school; in Thelmas, AB where she taught 19 students from grade one to grade nine. Later she obtained a teaching job in the NWT where she met a young RCMP Constable, Bert Tricker. They were married in Medicine Hat in 1961 and spent their married life in various RCMP detachments throughout the NWT, Alberta and B.C. before he took a position in the RCMP in Ottawa, Ontario

Following the death of James Mitchell Jr. , the LA Ranch on the south slope of the Cypress Hills was acquired by the Ross family-George Jr. and Jack Ross, whose holdings at the time contained eleven and a half townships and they ran between five and six thousand head of cattle.

The cattle operation became known as the Lost River Ranch. George managed the Lost River and the James Mitchell place which became known as Flying R Ranches, until his untimely death January 5, 1971.<sup>3</sup>



LA Ranch (circa 1964) pictured are James Mitchell and Izzette Mitchell and Leo Hester. Hester was a Texan, who immigrated with his parents to Manyberries in 1903, and who became a police officer with the Alberta Provincial Police and later the RCMP, when the two amalgamated.

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<sup>3</sup> See my article, [Ross Creek and the Lost River Ranches and the Story of a Celebrated Pioneer Family from Southern Alberta](#)  
[-A Historical Vignette](#)

## **Robert Mitchell Sr. (1841-1920)**

Robert Mitchell (Sr.) bought the V Ranch north of Maple Creek in 1909. He married Ida (née Sykes), and they had 5 children: Robert, James "Jim", Phillip Benjamin "Ben", Harry and Francis. His son, Robert (Jr.), helped his father on the ranch. In 1939, the V Ranch was sold to the P.F.R.A. and Robert (Jr.) moved his family to Medicine Hat.

Robert Mitchell Jr entered other ranching ventures with his son Jim. Their company was called the Mitchell Ranching Co., and it operated from 1946 to 1967. Phillip "Ben" (1917-1984), married Eleanor (née Dixon) and they had 4 children: Phillip, Clifford, Mary and Susan.

He studied Aeronautical Engineering in Calgary and California and served in the Air Force during World War II. From 1945 until they retired to Maple Creek in 1967, they lived on the Battle Creek Ranch.



Robert and Ida Mitchell (circa 1916)

## The Hargrave and Sissons Families

The surnames Hargrave and Sissons are well-known family names in Medicine Hat, who also have a distinct Scottish connection, and it may come of on surprise that they have a special and unique familial relationship.



Front steps of James Hargrave residence on Riverside, Medicine Hat - Top to bottom: Carl Hargrave, Tom Hargrave, Alexandra Hargrave, James Hargrave, L-R: Molly (Mrs. Tom) holding Harry H, Hope Hargrave, Will (holding Duncan H.), Mary (Mrs. Jack) holding Margaret, Priscilla (Mrs. Will), Bottom L-R: Melrose Hargrave holding Hargrave Mitchell, James, Howard, in front of Queenie Mitchell (Mrs. James), Helen Mitchell in front of Jack holding Edith, Campbell in front of Heather holding Elaine, Lissa H.



James Hargrave (1846-1935), an eminent Medicine Hat early pioneer and founder of a prominent local ranching family, was born in Chateaugay, Quebec. His **grandparents**, Joseph Hargrave and Jane (née Melrose) Hargrave came from Kelso, Roxburghshire county, and Selkirkshire county respectively, in southern Scotland. They came to Canada in 1817, and settled on a farm in Beach Ridge, Ontario. The family included 7 children, including a son, **John Hargrave**.

His siblings included James, (1798-1865), Mary (1800-1859), Jane (1805-1893), Andrew (1809-1884) and William (unknown).

For our historical purposes and from a genealogical perspective, John Hargrave who was born in Chesters, Roxburghshire, Scotland in 1806 is the most relevant.

John Hargrave (1806-1874) married Jemima Moffat (1818-1869) and they had several children including **James Hargrave** (1846-1936). Jemima Moffat was also of Scottish descent, having come from Dumfriesshire.

James Hargrave married Alexandra Sissons (1853-1932) and it is here that the Hargrave and Sissons family became perpetually connected.

Alexandra (“Lexie”) Sissons was born 23 June 1853 in Kent county, Ontario, the daughter of Tom Sissons and Elizabeth MacKay and she was raised on the family farm. In 1871, Lexie, as a 18 year old young woman, traveled with her family west to Port-la-Prairie, Manitoba. They went by rail as far as St. Paul, Minnesota, and then by horse and wagon the rest of the way to Portage la Prairie, which at the time was on the edge of the Canadian western frontier with only fur trade posts and a few Metis settlements further west.

James Hargrave grew up in a small stone farmhouse at Beach Ridge, Quebec. With farming poor in the neighbourhood, James took advantage of his Uncle James' position with the Hudson's Bay Company to secure a position as an apprentice clerk and in 1867 travelled via St. Paul to the Red River and finally from Pembina by pony and cart in the care of a Cree. The Prairies were dangerous at that time, from both mosquitoes and the Sioux. Arriving in July at Fort Garry, he learned the ropes there before being sent to Norway House at the north end of Lake Winnipeg. Subsequent postings included Fort Churchill and Moose Factory where he was supervised from York Factory. He apprenticed there until 1872 when he spent a year in Saskatchewan. James arrived in Portage la Prairie in 1874<sup>4</sup> to take charge of the post of the Hudson's Bay Company.

It did not take long for him to meet Lexie since it was a small tight knit community and they soon became engaged.

As the wife of an HBC employee, over the next eight years, she travelled with a soon growing family to the remote fur trade posts of Fort Frances and Cumberland House, often by snowshoe or voyager canoe. On one memorable occasion, while returning to Red River from Fort Frances across Lake of the Woods, the canoe capsized, and she had to struggle ashore with two small children in tow.

Another time, in late 1878, she and her three small children had to travel 200 miles from Norway House to Cumberland House in winter weather. James had gone on ahead, so this trip was accomplished with a dog sled and Indian guides.

She often had the help of the Indian or Métis women around the posts and developed a great respect for Indian ways, ensuring that her children learned to speak Cree as she had.

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Unpublished Memoir of Malcolm Sissons referenced in a blog "Our Family Tree-This is an accounting of the Fouts, Hargrave, Cobbler, Wilcox Trattner, Snow Haugen and French Family History" at <https://tracingourfamilytree.blogspot.com/p/hargrave.html>

At Cumberland House, Lexie became known as the **Great White Queen** among the Indians, probably because of her physique and kindness to them.

She had blue-gray eyes, dark brown hair and wore ankle-length skirts all her life. Her first daughter, **Helenora Jemima**, (1880-1970) was known as the **Little Queen** at the post for her impetuosity.<sup>5</sup>

After 15 years of service at HBC, the couple and their young family settled in High Bluff near Portage, where James took up farming.

However, the building of the transcontinental railway soon attracted his attention and the prospect of abundant business opportunities further west, intrigued him. After farming for two years, he decided to go west. He took the train to the “end of rail” which by this time was at Medicine Hat and then carried on overland to Calgary. He found Medicine Hat to his liking and returned with the idea, based upon his HBC experience, to set up a “trading post” in partnership with his brother-in-law, Daniel Sissons. Medicine Hat was a border between Cree and Blackfoot territory. They set up a tent, later a wooden building, on South Railway Street (then called West Railroad Street), and operated a store “Hargrave and Sissons”,

A great deal of their early success can be attributed to their business of “bartering” with the natives, a talent he had developed while working with HBC. James became a great friend of Blackfoot and Cree tribes in the area and he could speak the Cree language fluently and encouraged his children to learn to speak it as well. He especially befriended a Cree by the name of “Little Corn”.

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<sup>5</sup> Cecil Sheppard Hargrave was the sixth oldest of the Hargrave children. He passed away in 1882 at the age of 2 year's 9 months and was the first internment at the Old Hillside Cemetery near Kin Coulee. See, Malcolm Sissons, “ Heritage in the Hat” Medicine Hat News June 8th, 2019. He reports that James Hargrave was instrumental in establishing the cemetery as a final resting place for his beloved deceased child.

According to a Hargrave family historical manuscript, they “*would outfit the Indians and Metis with wagons, harnesses, supplies and they would collect buffalo bones which were then shipped to Chicago. If they wished to go hunting, he would give them groceries, blanket and ammunition and I.O.U. with their X signed on it. Upon their return, the furs would be evaluated and the accounts settled. Every Christmas, he would send out to each teepee a pound of tea, ten pounds of flour, sugar and some candies for the children.*”

<sup>6</sup>

As the business grew, they began shipping trade goods by barge down the South Saskatchewan River as far as the Battlefords and Fort Carlton, taking cattle in trade which they trailed back to the Hat.

The Hargrave and Sissons store carried on business as general merchants and fur traders until 1896, when it was sold to J.K. Drinnan.



<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Sissons supra, note 4





The Hargrave Sissons Block on the corner of South Railway St and Second Street was built in 1901 on the original site of their store and continues to be a prominent Medicine Hat landmark. For a fascinating pictorial journey about the building go to the blog of Luke Fanfrich -Editing Luke  
<https://www.editingluke.com/2012/12/hargrave-sissons-block-merchants-bank.html>

In addition to starting his business, James also acquired 40 acres of land from the CPR on the north side of the South Saskatchewan River, a short distance to the west of the CPR bridge, in an area now known as Riverside. Here, he decided to establish a homestead. His wife and family<sup>7</sup> remained in High Bluff /Portage until a frame house could be built.

Once built, Lexie and her six children moved to Riverside where she established her new home with an expansive garden and where the children grew up.(1884)



James Hargrave and family circa 1887<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Campbell Sissons (Jack) Hargrave (1876-1942), Thomas Albert Hargrave (1877–1942), William Howard Oliver Ormstown Hargrave M.B.E.(1878–1965), Helenora Jemima “Queenie” Hargrave (1880–1970) Mary Lillian Melrose Hargrave, (1882-1972) Cecil E Sheppard Hargrave, (1884-1886) Lissa Bella Ruth Hargrave, (1886-1964) Willena Heather Izene Hargrave, (1888-1957) Andrew Ralph Carlton Hargrave (1891-1979)

<sup>8</sup> Note the bear on a leash in the background. He is being held by a member of the NWMP-Constable Drinkwater. The bear became a family pet named “Nancy”.

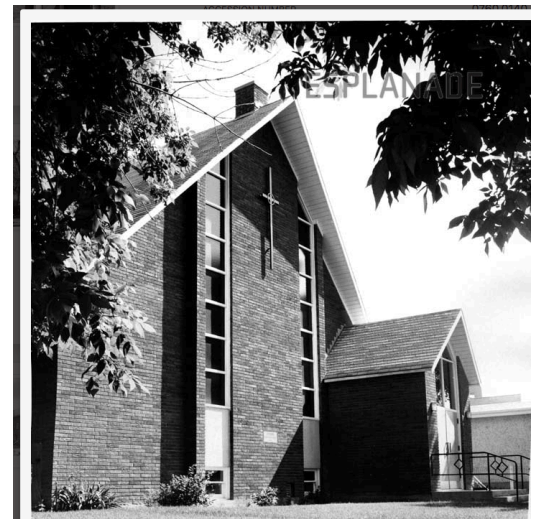
During the Riel Rebellion<sup>9</sup> the local authorities wanted them to move back across the river to Medicine Hat for greater safety. Lexie advised the local authorities that they were staying put and not moving, purportedly indicating that *“she had a small pistol and that she knew how to use it”*<sup>10</sup>.

Their good and kind relationship with their Cree and Blackfoot friends gave them comfort, being reassured that they would be advised well in advance of any trouble.

Little Corn helped out at the Riverside homestead in the early years, taking charge of the plowing, seeding and harvesting of the garden and crop and attending to a few head of cattle that they owned.

In 1907-07, the "Stone house" was built to replace the smaller wood frame house. It was a magnificent structure built of moulded concrete which simulated stone in appearance and it became a prominent local landmark in Medicine Hat for decades.

Later on, Hargrave subdivided the land into lots and called the subdivision Altawana. Included in the subdivision was a park called “Hargrave Park”, which continues to this day. Altawana Drive remains a major thoroughfare leading up to Crescent Heights. The Hargrave house remained the family home until 1949, when it was sold to the Presbyterian Church. Here the Riverside Presbyterian was built.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>9</sup> Few would be aware that Medicine Hat had a key role and was a important part of the history of the Riel Rebellion, See my article, [The Rocky Mountain Rangers, The Riel Rebellion and Their Distinct Connection to Medicine Hat](#)

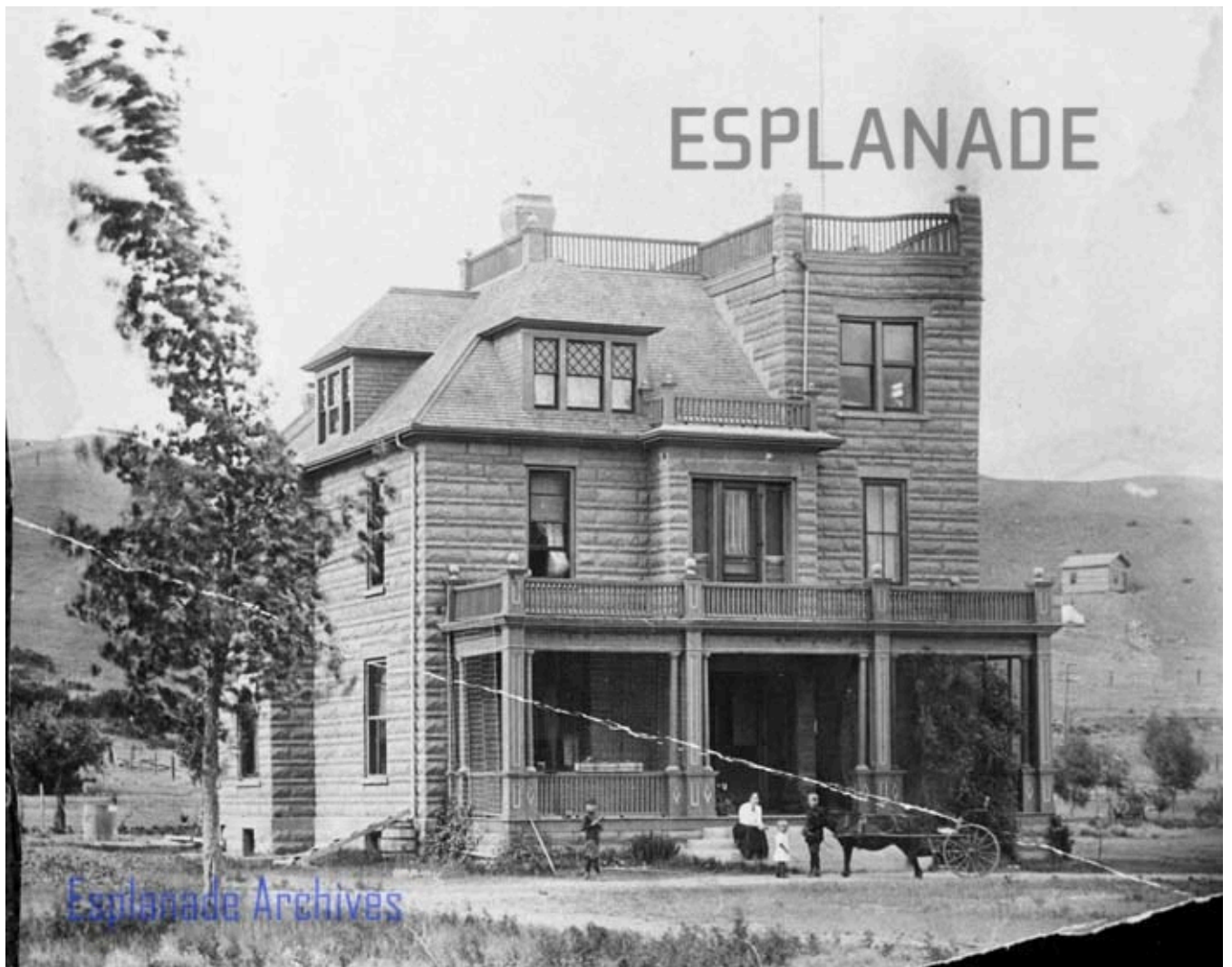
<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Sissons, supra note 4

<sup>11</sup> See my article, [“A Proud Riverside Rat”](#) for more history about Riverside. In my formative years, I spent many days playing at Hargrave Park and the swimming pool situated in the park which was one of the first in the City.



Exterior of the James Hargrave home (sandstone) at 114 3rd Street North, Riverside (ca. 1906-07).







Helenora "Queenie"  
Hargrave (1880-1970)  
outside of the Hargrave  
Family Home on  
Riverside. She later  
married James Mitchell  
(1875-1942), son of  
Robert Mitchell.

James drilled a gas well nearby to supply it with gas, one of the earliest in the area. The various children<sup>12</sup> gradually married and grandchildren appeared on the scene and the palatial home became the centerpiece of family activities and events.

A favorite memory of many of the grandchildren is of the Christmas dinners and activities including dances. Lexie died after suffering a heart attack while working in her beloved garden. She is buried in Hillside Cemetery in Medicine Hat.

### **“Nancy the Bear”-An Interesting Historical Sidebar**

Following the construction of the transcontinental railway and the establishment of a CPR station at Medicine Hat, travellers arriving from the east and west were greeted by an interesting sight, which attracted a great deal of attention. On the garden area near the station platform was a fenced enclosure which housed a “grizzly bear” held in captivity. According to reliable sources, “Nancy the Bear” had been a family ‘pet’ of the Hargrave family on Riverside.

Around 1885, a hunting party of Blackfoot Indians had arrived at the Hargrave home on Riverside and wrapped in a blanket was a Grizzly bear cub that the hunting party had rescued after apparently killing the mother bear.

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<sup>12</sup> John Campbell Sissons (1876-1941), James and Alexandra's first child, was born in Portage La Prairie and came to the Hat in 1884, with his mother. He attended McGill University and graduated with a D.V.S. in 1895. In 1900, he joined the Federal Government Animal Quarantine Inspection Service. He became the Chief Inspector of the Health and Animals Branch for Alberta, and remained in that position until he retired. Like his father before him, he was an active member of St. John's Church, serving as an elder and on the Board of Management. John married Mary Jane McKee Dundas Porter (1874-1962), who arrived in Medicine Hat from Ontario, at the age of 8, in 1883. Her father, Samuel Porter, was the first farmer in the area of the city now known as Porter's Hill. For more information on the Porter family and their special connection to Medicine Hat see my article, [Porter's Hill, Stoney Creek and the History of the Family of Medicine Hat](#)

It was the size of a small cocker spaniel and was offered to the family as either a gift or to be bartered or sold. Naturally, the children insisted that the cub be kept as a family “pet”. They called the bear, “Nancy”.

The family kept Nancy around the place on Riverside, often chained to a clothesline post and the children would often take it on hikes or down to the nearby river to swim. James Hargrave became concerned when the bear was about three years old, as it had grown to a formidable size.

At this time funds were being raised to help build a hospital in the community, and Nancy was given to the Hospital Board (1889) to be put on display at the railway station as a means of attracting donations and contributions to the hospital fund from the passengers during the many station stops. Nancy became a notable “tourist” attraction!<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> The Esplanade Archives



# ESPLANADE



No doubt animal activists today would be aghast at the sight.

Nancy passed away in 1895 after several years of faithful service and through her efforts and the efforts of others, sufficient funds were raised and a hospital was built-The Medicine Hat Hospital, which was the first hospital built west of Winnipeg.

It was built in 1889 and officially had its formal opening June 4, 1890. It was created to service Saskatchewan, Assiniboia, Alberta and Athabasca and was the first civilian hospital in Alberta.<sup>14</sup>



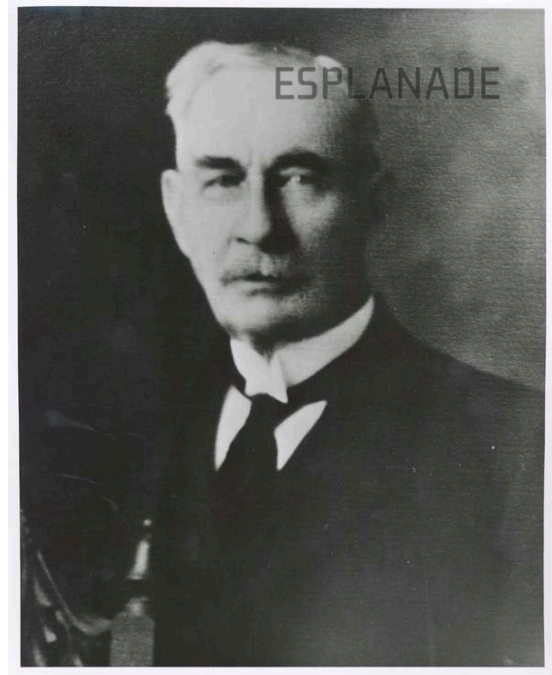
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<sup>14</sup> For a interesting story and more information regarding the establishment of the Medicine Hat Hospital, see my article entitled, ["Angels of Mercy-The Story of Nursing Sister Matilda Ethel Green"](#)

## The JH Ranch at Walsh

Besides his interest in the general store, James took up ranching. With partner and brother-in-law Dan Sissons, he brought his first cattle overland from Manitoba in 1884.

His first ranch, on Little Plume Creek, was destroyed by fire, so he relocated to the Walsh area to a site suggested by "Little Corn". The Cree considered it to be very suitable for ranching because the native buffalo herds wintered there on an abundance of blue joint grass. This area was called by them "Lake of Many Islands With Grass up to Horses Bellies". It came to be known as Many Islands Lake.



James Hargrave

A very successful ranch was established at this site, which was carried on by successive generations, which became known as the JH Ranch at Walsh.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Albert (1877-1954), second son of James and Alexandra, was born in Fort Francis, Ontario. He travelled west with his family arriving in Medicine Hat as a boy of 7. The family resided on Riverside and Tom and his sisters walked to Toronto Street school across the train bridge. He completed high school in Toronto and attended the University of Toronto majoring in Political Economy. On leaving university, he took over management of the Hargrave ranch. He was a fine horseman and under his management, the family ranch produced large numbers of well-bred cattle and work horses. He was an active community leader serving on the Cypress School Board and was involved with St. John's Church. He also took an active interest in history and was instrumental in the establishment of the city's first museum in Riverside Park. For a more complete family history go to the following link from the [Esplanade Archives](#);

James Hargrave was a member of the first Board of School Trustees and acted as Secretary for some time. He was interested in the industrial development of the west and at the time of his death was President of the Redcliff Pressed Brick Co. and Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Company.<sup>16</sup>

Here again, history repeated itself as the **Mitchell, Hargrave and Sissons families** became entwined both through marriage and through mutual business interests and industrial development in both Medicine Hat and Redcliff.

## **The Brickyard**

The original parent company, The Redcliff Pressed Brick Company Limited, was established in 1912 by **James Hargrave, James Mitchell and Herbert Sissons** (a businessman from Montreal), as well as a number of other interested family members.

By 1912, Redcliff had become a “hub” for brick manufacturing in Western Canada with several plants having been constructed and operating at full capacity.

The first, Redcliff Brick Co. (later known as Redcliff Brick and Coal), was located at the south end of Main Street and established in 1907 by Mssrs Stoner, Lockwood and Wheeler. The first bricks were produced in 1908. A fire struck the plant later that year.

Mr. Arthur Woodcock, an experienced brick maker from Minnesota, came out to repair and operate the plant. He was soon joined by Ernest Sellhorn, another brick maker from Minnesota.

In 1910, the Redcliff Clay Products on Broadway was established by Mssrs Lussier, Farmer and Bryant. Arthur Woodcock's son Fremont soon joined the operation but he enlisted in WWI and was killed at the Battle of

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<sup>16</sup> Source: The Esplanade Archives

Passchendaele. The old brick house at the corner of Mitchell and Broadway was the Manager's Residence and plant office.

As noted, in 1912, the Redcliff Pressed Brick Company was established by a group of shareholders that included **James Hargrave, James Mitchell, Herb Sissons** and families. Arthur Woodcock also became a shareholder, built the plant and became the first Superintendent.

In full operation by 1913, the first big project was St. Theresa's Academy and bricks were dragged across the prairie by horse and sled. In 1916, Herb Sissons married James Hargrave's daughter Lissa and in 1917, Woodcock's daughter Aimee married Hargrave's son, Carl.

After the war, Carl came back and worked as press operator for the Pressed Brick before moving over to manage Redcliff Premier Brick, as the Broadway plant was now called.

The First World War years saw all the plants closed by decree. They bounced back and had reasonable sales during the 1920s. But the Great Depression started in 1930 and sales dropped.

The Premier Brick was effectively closed in 1941 and Carl Hargrave went to work at Domglass. In 1944, Pressed bought Premier for its gas well but market demand caused the plant to start up again. Post-war demand for building materials kept all three plants busy.

In 1965, a major modernization took place at the Pressed Brick with the installation of the tunnel kiln. The additional capacity meant the Premier Brick was no longer required and it closed in 1967 and was demolished in 1976. Meanwhile, Perry Brick and Tile closed in about 1972. I-XL added a second tunnel kiln to the Pressed Brick in 1980 but the brick market declined after that and I-XL consolidated its manufacturing operations at Medicine Hat. The last Redcliff Brick plant closed in 2004, ending almost a century of brick making in Redcliff.

## **Herbert Joseph Sissons (1881-1949)**

Herbert Joseph Sissons was born in Montreal in 1881. His father came from Horncastle in Northern England, and his mother was born in Hamilton, Ontario. Herbert Sissons spent some of his boyhood years in Winnipeg, but went back to Montreal about 1900. He was employed in the hardware business until he came west in 1912. Along with James Hargrave, James Mitchell and A.W. Woodcock, he started the Redcliff Pressed Brick Company. In 1929, they bought out the Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Company and later the Premier Brick Company and carried on business under the name Medicine Hat Brick and Tile until 1971, when the business was re-branded as I-XL Industries Ltd.

H.J. Sissons married Lissa R. Hargrave of Medicine Hat in 1916 and they had five sons. Twins born in 1917 who died in infancy, Gordon Hargrave was born in 1920, Thomas Alexander born 1923, and William John "Jack" born in 1923. The family lived in Redcliff until 1930 when they moved to Medicine Hat. Herbert J. Sissons died July 23, 1949. Malcom Sissons<sup>17</sup> is the son of Jack and Nancy-Ruth Sissons, and was heavily involved as a Senior Executive for I-XL Industries Ltd.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Sissons is an accomplished writer and local historian in his own right and is most known for his newspaper column, "Heritage in the Hat" published in the Medicine Hat News. He is currently the Vice-President of the Medicine Hat and District Historical Society, and formerly a member of the Heritage Resources Committee of the City of Medicine Hat

<sup>18</sup> For more about the history of the brickmaking industry in Medicine Hat and Redcliff see Malcolm Sissons "Heritage in the Hat" The Unamphibious Frog-Medicine hat News April 6 th, 2019  
<https://newspaperarchive.com/medicine-hat-news-apr-06-2019-p-15/>





“Jack”, Gordon and Tom Sissons-IXL Industries (circa 1970)

### **We Are Family and.... Finding Your Own “Roots”**

“Roots” was an American television miniseries based on Alex Haley's 1976 novel, “Roots: The Saga of an American Family”. The series first aired on American network TV in January 1977. It received critical acclaim and was nominated and received several prestigious awards including 9 Emmy awards, a Golden Globe award and a Peabody award. It also received an unprecedented Nielsen rating for the final episode, which was watched by millions of TV viewers.

But more importantly, the premise of the book and the television series which followed was the unwavering necessity and persistent need for the main characters to discover their “roots”.

The overwhelming success of the TV drama created an unprecedented desire on the part of many, to seek out their own origins or “roots”, and it gave rise to a dramatic increase in the popularity of genealogy as a legitimate pastime.

But this preoccupation with family history was not something that was new. Genealogy has been a perpetual activity and it is not isolated to any one culture or ethnicity. It bridges across all cultures and all eras. Genealogy, at its core, satisfies the basic human curiosity about our own “roots”.

## **Climbing the Family Tree**

For centuries, people have found history and in particular, their own family history to be very important. Many took great effort to document their family tree or pedigree in painstaking detail, scouring Church and Government birth and marriage records, for original source material to verify and document their family ancestry. Some travelled back to the family’s country of origin to search for details, which were not otherwise available from traditional sources.

Information, often in the form of “yellowed” pages, or newspaper clippings, hand written notes or pencilled pedigrees were passed down from generation to generation and kept for some eventual purpose, which was not always necessarily clear.

Some were fortunate to have some dedicated patriarch or family member, who tried to actually document the family history in an organized manner in the form of a scrapbook or written summary or hand drawn or typed family pedigree.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> William Paul Anhorn, my Dad’s brother developed an early interest in genealogy, by researching and documenting the Anhorn Family history, in his own self-published book, “A Family History Review and Short Stories of My Life and Times”. I credit my Uncle Bill for creating my own interest in genealogy and history and inspiring me to pursue writing. My very first article was entitled, [“The Anhorn Family History-From My Perspective”](#).

With the invention of the camera, the photography of individual family members, staged family portraits and wedding photographs became commonplace as a means of preserving important life events and created its own version or form of documenting important family history.

With the advent of the Internet and the establishment of various search engines and dedicated genealogical websites, interest in this aspect of history has grown exponentially. More recently with the development of DNA testing and the ease of capturing this type of information, the interest in one's past has become a "new" phenomenon or has developed a renewed sense of importance.



With the prevalence of this type of inquiry, the question from the unsophisticated and untrained observer is, "what is the use or relevance of studying this form of history? Why is genealogy important? Why is family history important?"

William Paul Anhorn (1930-2020)

Does it really matter what happened long ago?

My simple response is that, "History and in particular, family history matters and genealogy should matter to us all".

## **Family History Matters**

The longer answer to this question is that history and in particular, family history has been and remains an inescapable part of our existence. From the earliest of times, it has been a time-honoured tradition to capture and document in some manner important life events, whether it be a birth, a marriage or a death. Far from being a meaningless subject, family history connects things through time and encourages others to take a closer view of their own connections to the past.

Someone more eloquent than I will ever be, summed up the answer to this penultimate question, in this way,

*“Few persons are so insensible to the ties of kindred as not to feel a legitimate curiosity in the history and connections of the individuals of their own family, a feeling which remoteness of time cannot impair and which proximity of relationships only serve to strengthen. If the greatest nations have been ambitious in deducing their history of the earliest times, surely individuals may be pardoned who seek to trace their origins in the earliest recorded annals of their country.*

*Without attaching undue value to the advantage of birth, the love of our race is laid so deep in the foundation of human nature that such adventitious circumstances will always influence our social position. It should teach us humility when we reflect how small a space we ourselves occupy in the eye of posterity and it may inspire us with the spirit of emulation to maintain the good name we have inherited from those who have gone before us.”<sup>20</sup>*

## **An Important Connection to the Past**

This form of history is important because it connects us to specific times, places and events that were significant milestones in our collective past. The ability to revisit these preserved elements from time to time provides us with a sense of place, and maintains continuity between our past and our present by preserving a trail of how we arrived at where, and who we are today. It helps in establishing our own cultural identity by tracing our common descent, language, culture and ideology. It assists in preserving the culture and time honoured traditions of our ancestors for future generations to discover. In some rare cases, it provides vital hereditary information, which could be life saving.

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<sup>20</sup> Botfield, Beriah, *Stemmata Botevilliana* 1858, Chapter I

The pursuit of family history and origins tends to be shaped by several motives, including the desire to carve out a place in one's family in the larger historical picture and to create a sense of belonging to a greater order of things.

It often evokes a passion for discovery as one searches with the hope of finding some famous or celebrated ancestors. It creates great excitement when one finds a relationship that we never knew existed or on discovering a fascinating family ritual, tradition or belief which helps define our own existence.

### **An Opportunity for Self-Discovery**

Here are some more reasons why family history and in particular, genealogy is important and why we should encourage this form of enquiry.

Firstly, it provides a sense of identity. It ascertains who we are and where we came from and places our current station in life in a generational context. As a people, we have always felt compelled to recognize our origins in order to be "grounded" and to provide us with a sense of commonality and purpose. Identifying our family history puts our presence in historical context but at the same time helps us establish our own uniqueness, individuality and self-worth. It offers an opportunity for self-discovery.

Secondly, far from being simply an interesting pastime, genealogy helps us understand our current society and this societal connection to the past, helps us understand who we are by identifying the events and people who helped shape who we are today. It is essential in order for us to have the ability to appreciate and understand the human soul and perhaps, more importantly, ourselves.



Thirdly, the study of family history documents the forces of change and helps us understand how life events or political or economic circumstances resulted in change and how this change has impacted our current circumstances. As a society, we can learn and benefit from both our past triumphs and our past failures.

Fourthly, genealogy creates a forum to help document important stories from the past, which can provide us with a source for inspiration. Knowing how our ancestors came to this country and what motivated them to find a better life may act as some motivation for us to do the same. Pride in our family accomplishments provides an opportunity for celebration and may inspire us to carry on a tradition of resourcefulness and perseverance. It can be a powerful motivator.

Finally, by understanding the suffering, joy and chaos that preceded us and allowed our current family situation to evolve, we may have a better understanding of ourselves and this may help in making us a better person. To put it another way and in more simplistic terms, understanding the linkages between past and present is absolutely basic for a good understanding of the condition in which we find ourselves as human beings and may help us develop and maintain some humility as we recognize that our existence is a mere “dot” in the overarching history of mankind.

In this latter context, I am reminded of a thought-provoking poem by an unknown author, which was referenced in my Uncle Bill’s self published book on our own Anhorn/Weiss family history.

It is recited as follows:

If you could see your ancestors standing in a row,  
Would you be proud of them, or don't you really know?  
Some strange discoveries are made in climbing the family tree;  
And some of them, you well know,  
Do not particularly please.  
If you could see your ancestors standing in a row,  
There might be some that you wouldn't care to know.  
But there is another question, which may require a different view,  
If you could meet your ancestors,  
Would they be proud of you?<sup>21</sup>

William J Anhorn K.C. ICD.D

### **The Mad Hatter Historian**

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<sup>21</sup> Anhorn, William Paul, "The Family History Review" p1 author unknown.

**The Mad Hatter:** "Have I gone mad?"

**Alice:** "I'm afraid so. You are totally bonkers. But I will let you in on a little secret. All the best people are."

From Lewis Carroll ...."Alice In Wonderland"



### **About the Author:**

*William J. Anhorn was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Political Science) from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta. He returned to his hometown of Medicine Hat in 1976 and practiced law for over 35 years retiring in 2012 as a senior partner with the law firm of Pritchard and Company. He and his wife Joan Elaine Anhorn (Medlicott), a retired teacher, continue to reside in Medicine Hat.*

*Before his retirement, he was recognized for his valuable contribution to the legal profession, his community and his country by being appointed and receiving the designation of Queen's Counsel by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (now K.C.) He is also a graduate of the University of Toronto Rotman School of Business and holds an Institute of Corporate Directors designation.*

*Always having had a keen interest in history and more recently genealogy, he has researched and written a series of articles on his own family and his extended family (Medlicott/Mclvor) and their history.*

*He has also written numerous other articles on other topics of interest. His passion for history (including the history of Medicine Hat) has resulted in several articles in relation to local history.*

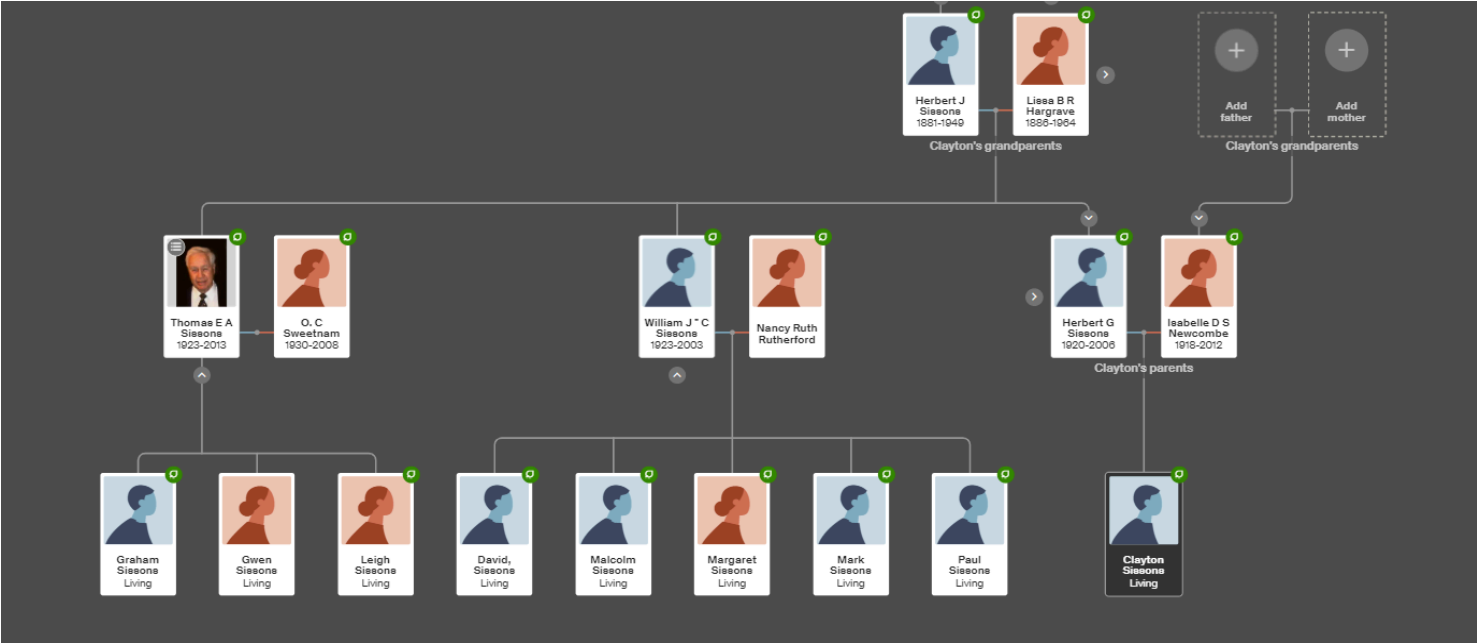
*He currently is a member of the Medicine Hat and District Genealogical Society (MH&DGS) and the Medicine Hat and District Historical Society. He is former Chairman of the Historical and Heritage Resource Management Committee of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company. He also served as Board Chairman of Servus Credit Union and was a Board member of the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission. Being community minded, he served 9 years as a member of the Medicine Hat Police Commission including 3 years as Chairman.*

*He is a frequent contributor to the Alberta Genealogical Society newsletter 'Relatively Speaking'.*

*Most of his articles and stories can be found on his blog at <http://wjanhorn.ca> or simply 'google' The Mad Hatter Historian*

## The Herbert Sissons Family Tree





The Hargrave Family Tree

