Ross Creek and the Lost River Ranches and the Story of a Celebrated Pioneer Family from Southern Alberta
-A Historical Vignette

by William J Anhorn K.C. ICD.D

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 as a senior partner with the Law firm of Pritchard and Company. He retired in 2012 and he and his wife Joan Elaine Anhorn (Medlicott), a retired teacher, continue to reside there.



Always having had a keen interest in writing and more recently genealogy, he has researched and written a series of articles on his own family and his extended family (Medlicott/McIvor) and their history. He has also written numerous articles on other topics of interest to him.

He has also a passionate interest in history including the history of Medicine Hat and has researched and written several articles in relation to local history. He currently is a member of the Medicine Hat Genealogical Society and Chairman of the Historical and Heritage Resource Management Committee of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company.

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

In a recent article entitled ***"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor": The Life and Times of A Famous Medicine Hat Remittance Man-Horatio Hamilton Ross,*** I detailed the life of an illustrious character whose exploits around the turn of the century created a special and unique chapter in the history of Medicine Hat. Interestingly, there is a pioneer family from Southern Alberta, that shares the same surname as Horatio (but who are unrelated) who may have an even "closer" connection to Medicine Hat.

Those who currently live in Medicine Hat or who grew up there in the 60's, 70's and 80's are well familiar with a small watercourse or stream which originates in the Cypress Hills[1] and which meanders its way north to Irvine and west parallel to the Tran-Canada Highway, then north of Dunmore and into the valley north/east of the Ross Glen Subdivision in Medicine Hat. It gradually ambles its way through Strathcona Park and becomes a tributary to the South Saskatchewan River opposite Police Point Park. It is known as **Ross Creek** and along with Seven Persons Creek, the two join together and empty into the South Saskatchewan River.

The convergence of the two "creeks" into the South Saskatchewan River became a popular fishing spot and recreational area before the development of Strathcona Park.

Moreso, from a historical perspective, this location on the South Saskatchewan River is believed by many to be very near the location of an infamous battle between two Indian tribes, the Blackfoot and the Cree.

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[1] The headwaters of Ross Creek are located in the Cypress Hills, and the basin includes the Gros Ventre Creek tributary watershed. Flows in the basin have a long history of local regulation, including diversion into Cavan Lake for irrigation use as well as considerable on-farm storage. See, Irvine-Ross Creek – Flood Hazard Study – Summary- Government of Alberta (2016)

Indeed, the "generally accepted theory"[2] as to how Medicine Hat got its unique name was as a result of a battle between the two these "warring" factions. It was said that during the course of the battle on the north and south sides of the South Saskatchewan River at or near what is now known as Police Point Park-the "shaman" or "Medicine Man" of the Cree, while on horseback in the middle of the river, was struck by an arrow and purportedly, fell into the water. His Eagle feathered war bonnet or headdress ("saamis") was then observed "floating" down the river, which was viewed by the remaining Cree warriors as an ominous sign. The "battle" was quickly over and the Blackfoot tribe defeated the Cree and their success was "wildly" celebrated.

Naturally, the skirmish became the subject matter of tribal "folklore" which was passed down through successive generations. The place where the battle took place was thereafter referred to in the Blackfoot language as "*the place where the 'medicine man' lost his hat*". With the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the construction of a railway bridge across the river, a short distance from the site of the battle, it did not take long for the bustling construction site and railway station to be named, "Medicine Hat". And the rest as they say is "history"!

The place where the two streams or creeks merge and flow into the South Saskatchewan River became quite infamous for another reason.

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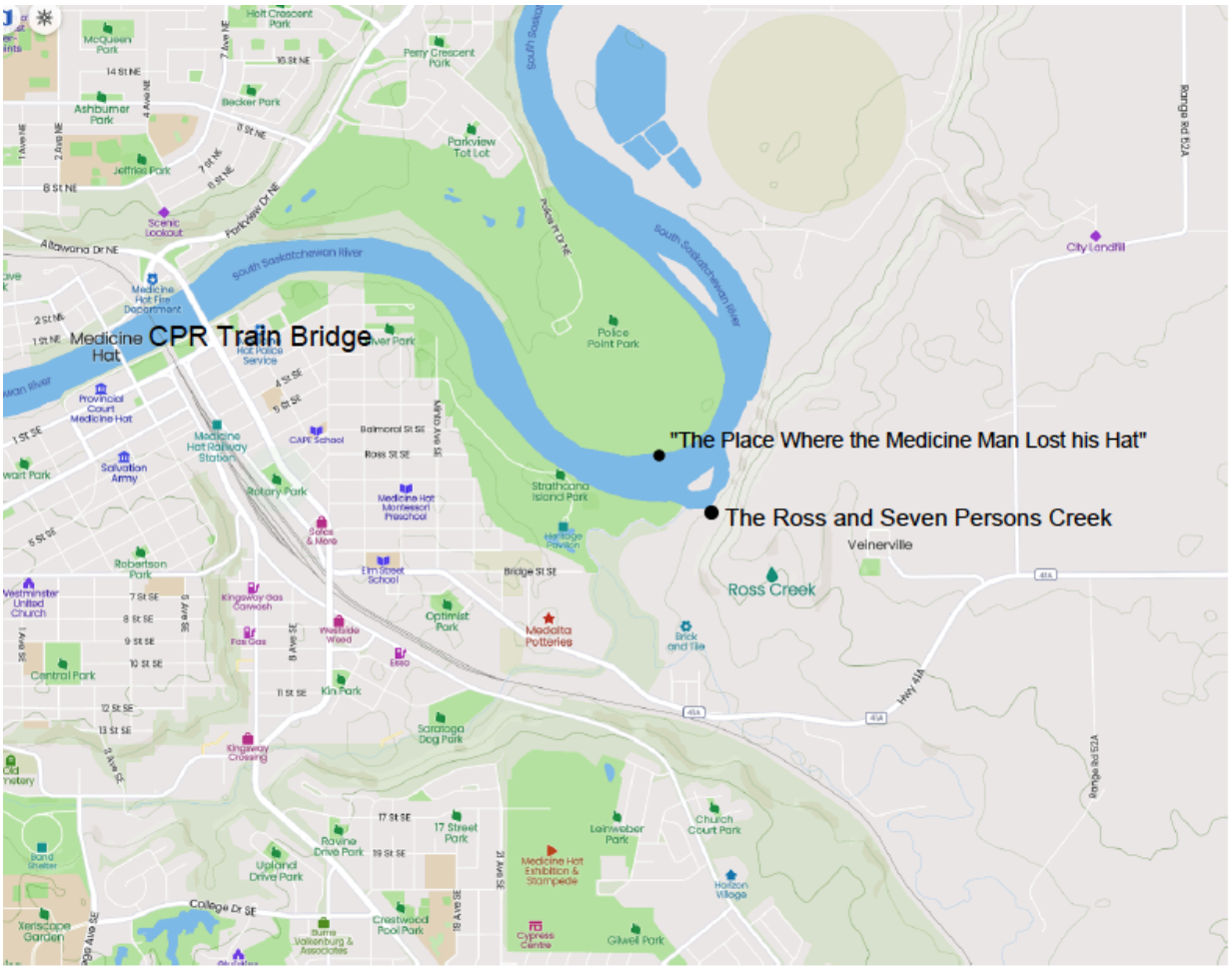
[2] There are several stories about how Medicine Hat got its unique name. Based upon my own research, this account appears to be the most plausible explanation, which has been recognized by several noted historians including the writings of John "Kootenai" Brown, Earl Joseph Gillett and Reverend James William Morrow. Although each writer offers slight variations, the storyline involving the loss of the Medicine Man's headdress at or near Police Point on the South Saskatchewan River near present day Medicine Hat is a constant and consistent theme.

In 2013, during the “Great Flood at Medicine Hat”, the South Saskatchewan River reached its “100 year flood” stage[3] and both creeks overflowed their banks and contributed to a devastating flood.[4] The impact of the flooding has resulted in extensive flood mitigation strategies being developed with massive berms and floodgates constructed on both the north and south sides of the river as it flows through the City, in order to prevent future devastation.



[3] The term "100-year flood" is used to describe the recurrence interval of floods. The 100-year recurrence interval means that a flood of that magnitude has a one percent chance of occurring in any given year. For river systems, the 100-year flood is generally expressed as a flow rate.

[4] This was not the first time that the Ross Creek caused massive flooding. Earlier reports indicate that serious flooding took place at Medicine Hat in 1903 and 1947.

Ross Creek is named after a well-known pioneer family whose patriarch was Walter Inkerman Ross, who established a huge ranch south of the Cypress Hills and west towards Lethbridge which in time, through three generations of ranchers, developed a rather unusual name given its location. It was called the “Lost River Ranches” and its story and the story of the Ross family and their unique connection to Medicine Hat is a story worth telling.

Let’s start at the beginning.

Walter Inkerman Ross (1855-1935) –“The Pioneer”[5]

Walter Inkerman Ross was born in 1855 at St. Jean Chrysostome, Quebec. His father, Alexander Ross (1824-1913) was a Presbyterian minister.



[5] The photo depicts cowboys on the General Round-Up in Southern Alberta June 8th, 1901 with Walter Ross seated on the ground.

At an early age, he went to Texas where he was engaged in the construction of the railroad being built into San Antonio. On his return to Canada, he continued the work of railroad construction with the Canadian Pacific Railway, which at the time was slowly constructing the transcontinental railway along the north shore of Lake Superior. He made his home at Rat Portage which is now known as Kenora, Ontario.


Major Jack Ross.

Here he married Grace Graham (1866-1895) and they had two sons:

- George Graham Ross (1891-1956)
- John Alexander ("Jack") Ross (1893-1916)[6]

They also had two daughters both of whom died in infancy (Eileen 1889 and Grace 1890).

In 1885, Walter Ross and some railway construction co-workers formed the Brown Ranching Company Ltd. They purchased four hundred head of Shorthorn heifers and shipped them by boat to Fort William, Ontario, then by rail on the Canadian Pacific Railway to Medicine Hat.

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[6]John Alexander Ross enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Val Cartier, Quebec in 1914 at the outbreak of WWI and was assigned to the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles). Having attended the Royal Military College in Kingston Ontario, he was immediately given a commission as a Lieutenant but was quickly promoted to Captain. Prior to the Victoria Rifles heading overseas in May 1915, he was promoted to Major and at age 21, he was in charge of a full company of 200 men. While in France he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, the British Empire's second highest award for gallantry, second only to the Victoria Cross. He was killed in action on September 17th, 1916 during the battle of the Somme and is buried at Courcelette, Somme, Picardie, France.

They were then trailed to the ranch headquarters eight miles down the St. Mary's River from what is now Cardston, Alberta. The cattle were branded BR on the right ribs and Ox Yoke Bar on the right hip and rib.

Sometime in the 1890's, the Brown Ranching Company obtained twenty-four sections of Government lease on Milk River Ridge, which even by today's standard was a huge tract of land.[7]

In 1900, Walter Ross moved his family including his wife and two sons out west from Rat Portage and established a home on the Milk River ranch.



In 1901,The Brown Ranching Company partnership of Tom Moffat and Walter Ross split up with Moffat taking the home place near Cardston and Walter Ross taking over the Milk River Ranch.

In 1905-1906, Walter Ross joined Ted Kenney and Doc Sheets in moving three thousand head of cattle from the Milk River Ridge to north of Gleichen, Alberta. In 1908, Walter Ross sold out to Ted Kenney, and in 1909 formed a partnership with Jim H. Wallace, thus creating the Ross-Wallace Ranch, using the 'hat' brand on the left thigh and the 7Ubar.

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[7] The picture depicts the Ross Ranch roundup- circa 1901 with Walter Ross (sixth from the left) among the several cowboys resting around the chuckwagon.

They ran their cattle on leased CPR lands east of Lethbridge.[8]

The winter of 1905-06 was extremely harsh on the ranchers in Southern Alberta with hundreds of cattle perishing in the heavy snow and winter blizzard conditions. Those cattle that survived wandered off in the vast open range.

In 1907, a large cattle round-up took place between the Red Deer River and the Bow River and from Calgary south and as far east as Brooks to round-up the open range cattle lost or dispersed in the year earlier winter.[9]

It is reported that over 12,000 cattle were “corralled”, with brands of every description in the mix.[10]

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[8] “Ross Ranches:” The Forgotten Corner History Book (Consul Saskatchewan Museum)

[9] The photo source: “Walt Watt, Captain of the Round-Up” by Terri Mason and Pat Melvin-The Canadian Cowboy Country Magazine

[10] “Pioneer Outfit in Canada’s Range Livestock Industry” by Guy Weadick, February 1950 edition of the Canadian Cattlemen Magazine.



In 1912, the Ross-Wallace partnership obtained seven townships in the southwest corner of Saskatchewan and moved their headquarters into the Province. The Ross family still owned the Brown Ranch on the Milk River Ridge and half interest in the Wallace and Ross Ranch.

Every fall Wallace and Ross would ship between two thousand and twenty-five hundred big steers to the Chicago market by rail from the CPR siding at Medicine Hat or Maple Creek.[11]

[11] The picture depicts the cowboys getting for roundup at the Ross-Wallace Ranch circa 1925



During the years 1914-1918, the Wallace and Ross partnership bought the Cross Z from Add Day, the “Q” Ranch from J.J. Bowlen, who had previously bought the outfit from Tony Day, and the Spencer Ranch from Billy Taylor.

When Cliff Wallace and George Ross Senior, sons of the two owners, began to participate in the cattle operation, they had a cattle range that was between 12 and 14 miles wide (north/south) and which along the border between Canada and the United States, stretched 12 miles into Saskatchewan and 42 miles into Alberta, all of it fenced and cross-fenced.[12]

[12] See, footnote 10

George Graham Ross Senior (1891-1956) –"The Flying Cowboy"[13]



Before the start of WWI, Walter's son, George Graham Ross had developed a keen interest in "flying" and recognizing this would be a valuable asset given the vast open prairies, he decided on his own account to travel to the United States (Curtis Flying School in Virginia) to obtain pilot training.

On June 7th, 1916, he was one of the first in North America to receive a pilots' license (#50).

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[13] The picture shows George Ross Senior at the Ross-Wallace Ranch Circa 1925

Not unlike his brother, he volunteered for military service and went overseas as a member of the Royal Flying Corps where he served with honour.

While overseas he met and married Rodney W. Ogg (1890-1967) from Scotland and following his military service, he and his new bride returned to Canada and settled back into ranch life on the ranch near Milk River.

They had four children:

- Grace W (1921-1929),
- George Graham Junior (1922-1971)
- John C. (“Jack”) (1925-2008)
- Walter R.S. (“Stubb”) (1931-1987)[14]

Following the end of the war, he returned to civilian life but in keeping with his passion for flying, he became one of the first civilians in Western Canada to have a pilots’ license and acquire an airplane to be used in the conduct of his vast ranching operation.[15]

In 1919, he continued in his pre-war effort to acquire more land to conduct his ever-expanding cattle operation. In 1920, he bought the Milk River Ranch just west of the Wallace/Ross ranch property, which had originally been owned by A.E. Phillip and Sir Clifford Sifton. Later, he acquired the Deer Creek Cattle Company, west of the Milk River Ranch. In 1926, with the ever-increasing debt load and high interest rates at the bank, George decided to consolidate his cattle operations by selling the “Q”, Blacktail, Cross Z and the Upper Spencer Ranch to the Gilchrist brothers, and the Upper Spencer Ranch to Mack Higdon.

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[14]From a Medicine Hat historical perspective, those having lived in Medicine Hat during the 1970’s and 1980’s will remember Time Air as being the first to provide regular commercial passenger service out of the Hat. Walter R.S. (“Stubb”) Ross was the founder of the airline, which later became part of Canadian Airlines and is now Westjet.

[15] See footnote 10

In an earlier article entitled **“Memories Are Forever”- The Life and Times of “Mack” Higdon and his daughter, Ethel**, I chronicled the life story of the well-known Medicine Hat rancher and resident Mack Higdon.

In 1949 George Sr. and his sons joined with oilmen Neil McQueen and Art Mewburn to purchase 160,000 acres and set up the **Lost River Ranches Limited,** with his son, George Ross Jr. as the president of the company and John (“Jack”) Ross as secretary, headquartered at Manyberries, Alberta.

The “Flying Cowboy”, George Ross Sr., passed away at the Lost River Ranches at branding time, June 1956.

George Ross Jr. (1922-1971)- “ The Ranchers’ Advocate”



As noted, George Ross Sr. and his sons George Jr. and Jack, together with Neil McQueen and Art Mewburn purchased a “total of one hundred sixty-seven thousand acres consisting of seven townships of the Gilchrist Ranch, which includes the Cross Z, the Lower Spencer and the old Stark place, which is about thirty thousand acres that the Gilchrest’s got from Higdon, also the Whitney place. This new conglomerate became known as the Lost River Ranches Limited, using the hat brand on the left thigh”. [16]

[16] See, footnote 3

The name Lost River Ranches was a by-product of the unique landscape of the ranch property, which can only be fully appreciated by an aerial view, a view that details long deep crevices and ravines that are the remnants of large rivers that flowed from the melting glaciers and that cut deeply into the terrain over 12,000 years ago.

These glacial rivers gradually disappeared leaving vast dry riverbeds many miles wide from which the term “lost river” originated. One of these wide prehistoric riverbeds meandered down the heart of the Ross ranch property south of the Cypress Hills and the cattle operation was aptly named the “Lost River Ranches”.

James Osborne, an accomplished author/novelist in a blog[17] on his website gives the interesting account of his visit to the Lost River Ranches in 1963.

Here is an excerpt:

George Ross banked the small plane and pointed it west across Lost River Ranches. His home was near the eastern border of the vast spread. His brother John, also a pilot, lived at the western end of the beef cattle operation they owned together. Their homes were 90 miles apart.

George was showing me why two aircraft and a dozen riders were needed to patrol the massive ranch, founded in the late 1880s by his grandfather. He’d explained before take-off that Lost River Ranches covered a staggering 273,000 acres. It spanned a huge swath of land on the prairies of southern Alberta. Ranchers call it short grass country – where annual rainfall is so limited it’s borderline desert.

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[17] **“Lost River Ranches – A Vignette”-from the blog ‘James Osborne Novels’ Posted October 30th, 2015 by James Osborne**

Most years, 100 acres of prairie grass are needed to support just one head of cattle.

It was early afternoon and visibility was good from 1,000 feet. Below, numerous ravines interrupted the undulating prairie looking much like long-legged centipedes wiggling their way down to dry creek beds. Water's found in those ravines only after infrequent rains, and in the spring given enough winter snow. For now, the bottoms of the ravines were covered with a mixture of brown and green grass, and scrub bush. Occasional groves of trees acted like magnets attracting cattle to their shade.

"Are those your cattle?" I asked, pointing down to a small herd grazing in a deep ravine. George Ross responded,"yup".

Some years later, the Ross family acquired the old James Mitchell Ranch on the south slope of the Cypress Hills. At this time they operated on eleven and a half townships and ran between five and six thousand head of cattle. In about 1954, the Ross brothers later bought out oilmen Neil McQueen and Arthur Mewburn. George Jr. continued to operate the Lost River Ranches Ltd as President and Jack Ross, his brother as Secretary.

George Ross Jr. married Eileen M. Barton and together they had a son and a daughter:

- Mary Jane (1947-2013)
- George Graham III (1955-).

As the oldest son, George Graham Ross Jr was destined to follow in his father's footsteps as both a rancher and pilot. He studied agriculture at the Olds Agricultural College and at Port Hope, Ontario and like all the Ross "boys", he became a pilot. He joined the RCAF during WWII but due to a medical condition (spinal meningitis) he was grounded and was prevented from going overseas. While stationed in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, he met his future wife, Eileen M. Barton. George's charm and his stories of the adventurous West proved irresistible. They married and moved to the Lost River Ranches and despite the isolation and harsh climate, Eileen adapted and became an integral part of ranch life raising their two children.

In 1959 the government took back thirty-four thousand one hundred and sixty acres of lease land to the north of ranch headquarters and formed the Nemiscam Community Pasture. George managed the Lost River Ranches and the James Mitchell place (now known as the Flying R Ranches), until his untimely death January 5, 1971. He was forty-eight years of age at the time of his passing.

In addition to his passion for flying and ranch life, George became an accomplished writer contributing numerous articles in various publications including a regular column in the “Winnipeg Free Press” from 1967 to 1970 and he became a well-known industry spokesman.

Some called him the “Will Rogers of Canada" [18]for his down-to-earth perspective, humorous stories and no-nonsense views on ranch life, politics and the cattle industry. His colourful descriptions of the realities of life on the wide-open plains, and the characters that he rubbed shoulders with, captured the imaginations of readers across the country.

Like his father before him, he served as President of the Western Stock Grower’s Association and was a founding member of the Canadian Cattlemen’s Association, serving as its first manager. George Ross Jr. became active in speaking up for ranchers’ rights and became a strong farm and ranch advocate through both organizations.

His charm and wit made him a popular guest speaker at various events and he became a well-known personality in Western Canada.

He was a member of the Senate of the University of Lethbridge, and chaired a federal advisory committee on animal research. With scientists at both the Lethbridge and Manyberries Research stations, he worked on developing a new crossbred type of cattle that could

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[18] George Ross” by Diane Finstad, December 2011/January 2012 Canadian Cowboy Country Magazine

excel in the rugged range conditions, the kind of range conditions that were found at the Lost River Ranches.

He was in high demand on the speaking circuit and made friends and undoubtedly “ruffled”some feathers, as he talked about cattle and politics at livestock events across Canada. He spoke with authority as his Lost River Ranches included some 6,000 head of cattle on more than 273,000 acres, which by most accounts at the time was the largest ranch in Alberta.

After the death of Eileen Ross in 1975, the ranch was split again. This time the government took some of the lease land to form the Sage Creek Grazing Reserve.

The Lost River Ranches was sold in 1978 to their daughter Mary Jane and her husband Leonard Piotrowski (1945-2018), who had been managing the ranch since George’s death in 1971.

Leonard and Mary Jane have two children, Timothy and Susan Marie. The whole family is interested in ranching and rodeo.[19]They carry on a cow-calf operation and also lease some rodeo stock. The Flying R Ranch was sold to George Graham Ross III and his wife Marilyn in November 1978.

Leonard Piotrowski passed away on April 28th, 2018 and he left to cherish his memory his two children Tim (Tannis) of Manyberries and Sue (Gord) Wudrich of Bow Island.

Leonard Piatrowski left his own kind of legacy by not only owning and operating but “preserving” the unique Lost River Ranches, which continues today to be operated and managed by his son, Tim and daughter-in-law Tannis. And not to be outdone, their son, Barrett, although only 11 years old, has already expressed the desire to one day follow in his great great grandfather’s footsteps and carry on the

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[19] Leonard Piotroski was a past director of the Chinook Rodeo Association and was an Honorary Director of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company.

Ross family heritage as a next generation “rancher” on the Lost River Ranches.

Ross Creek and the Lost River Ranches and the Ross family have a special place in the history of Medicine Hat and of Southern Alberta and the story of the early beginnings of this celebrated pioneer family and their unique connection to the “Hat” is a story worth sharing.

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William J. Anhorn QC-A Medicine Hat Prolific Writer, Amateur Genealogist and Local Historian

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