

## **“The Mad Hatter by Finn Bridge” -A Medicine Hat Historical Vignette**

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

In one of my most recent articles, I made reference to the fact that one of the many pitfalls that the amateur genealogist or historian encounters as they pursue their craft or hobby, is going down the proverbial “rabbit hole”. In that article, I made specific reference to one of Lewis Carroll’s earliest works and it may not come as a complete surprise, that the term “**going or falling down a rabbit hole**” was introduced in the 1865 popular novel, “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*”.<sup>1</sup> In that story, Alice literally falls down the hole of the White Rabbit, taking her to Wonderland, which was a bizarre and absurd universe, with a multitude of strange and unusual characters.

When collaborating or commiserating with fellow historians and genealogists, this is found to be a common malady or disorder.

But what does the phrase “going down a rabbit hole” actually mean?

Although the phrase may have been used from time to time in common parlance over the next 100 years or so, it did not rise in popularity until the advent of the Internet. As pointed out by several authors and columnists<sup>2</sup>, it took the Internet to develop the “phrase” as an online metaphor, which means being caught in a virtual time warp, where one of two things invariably happen.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that any reference to “**Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland**” and “**Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There**,” by Lewis Carroll are in the **public domain**. The works were published before January 1, 1923, and are in the **public domain** worldwide because Carroll died in 1898, more than 100 years ago.

<sup>2</sup> See, Kathryn Schultz, “The Rabbit Hole –Rabbit Hole” The New Yorker Magazine June 2015

First, we become interested in a particular topic and a quick 'Google' search leads us to one article on the subject, which leads to another link, which leads to another article and before we know it, we have spent hours reading all we can about the subject, all the while wondering when we look up, where the time went.

Alternatively, we will look up a certain fact or subject and in doing so, become distracted by another completely unrelated topic which piques our interest and as Alice in Wonderland would say, we become "curiouser and curiouser" to borrow a phrase from the book and down another "rabbit hole" we go.<sup>3</sup>

For the historian, a vague reference to an event in history will often trigger an investigation as our "curiosity" gets the better of us and we search to find out more and then we become eager to share our learning experience with others.


For the amateur genealogist, a casual comment about someone's family history or some recently "found" family heirloom or a mysterious circumstance in the family history or an interesting character from the past will evoke a legitimate investigation and an ancestry.ca search will be undertaken to find out more about this antecedent or solve the family mystery. Sometimes a "simple" photograph or an oblique reference to some other fact, will "trigger" this kind of inquiry and down another "rabbit hole" we go.

While researching another unrelated topic, I had occasion to visit newspapers.com for which I have an annual subscription. It is one valuable resource which I use quite regularly. The following newspaper column attracted my attention and for many, like myself, who grew up in Medicine Hat, it brought back some pleasant memories.

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<sup>3</sup> See, Elaine Zelby, History of the Idiom "Down the Rabbit Hole" Medium.com January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019

And I got "curiouser and curiouser" about the origins of this historical bit of newspaper memorabilia.....



*The* **MAD**  
**HATTER**

By **FINN BRIDGE**

**WHAT'S ALL THE MYSTERY?:** I have never fancied myself as a particularly mysterious individual. But judging from the following letter, received Saturday morning I guess I am . . . in some circles anyway:

"Dear **Finn**:

Everybody in town is wondering who **Finn Bridge** is! You are the most talked about man in town . . . really popular. On buses, over coffee cups, at corn roasts, at work . . . everywhere you go, people are asking the question, 'Who is **Finn Bridge**'.

Nearly everybody reads your column and those who haven't, have started to. In fact one person has read all the old editions, he enjoyed it so much. I wish Mrs. Ballyk would hurry and meet you. Then we'll all know who it is that's writing that wonderful column.

She will be leaving our city in the near future so hope she gets down to The NEWS soon. Anyway, keep writing your articles. We enjoy them very much. I'm sure glad Mrs. Ballyk called in to see you last week . . . it created a great deal of interest in the city. Yours truly . . . A Reader."

Well reader, you're more than kind with your praise. And just to put your mind at rest, I have now met Mrs. Ballyk . . . and enjoyed it very much. She dropped in Friday and for a change I was here. We had a delightful visit and I hope we have a chance for many more. And as for Mrs. Ballyk telling you "who **Finn Bridge** is", I'm a little stumped . . . who else could she say I am but **Finn Bridge**? The only thing that disturbs me slightly about your letter, is your passing reference to the fact that Mrs. Ballyk will be leaving our city.

What's all this about, Mrs. Ballyk? We can't afford to lose you.

This was a column that was featured in the Medicine Hat News for many years and which had a strong and faithful readership. More than just a “gossip column” it was a unique form of reporting as “Finn Bridge” talked about various and sundry topics and about “things” that were happening in and around the Hat and which appeared to him to be of interest to the readers of the News. Although never disclosing the source of his information, (often being letters from the public) Finn Bridge referenced enough facts and referenced a few names “in confidence” to give the “tidbits” of information a real sense of credibility.

Even if at times it was simply based upon rumor and innuendo, it was highly regarded as fact by readers, perhaps simply because it was in bold print.

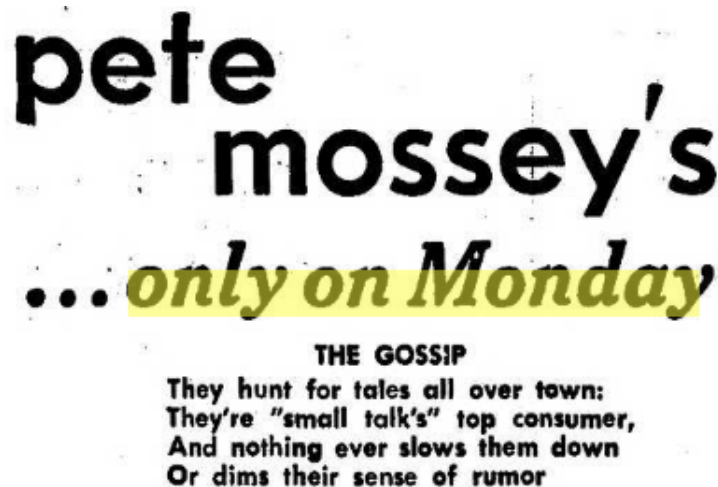
### **But who was Finn Bridge?**

Clearly, Finn Bridge was a pseudonym for a clever newspaper columnist who had his “ear to the ground” and who was not shy about reporting the “happenings” around town. It should not go unnoticed that the Medicine Hat News in the 50’s and 60’s was located in a building on the south side of the river whose main entrance was on the avenue immediately adjacent to Findlay Bridge.

One can easily speculate that the enterprising reporter, searching for a proper pen name for his or her new column, happened to glance out of his or her window in the direction of this historical structure and came up with this “catchy” nom de plume.



The earliest date that the Mad Hatter Column appeared by my research was September 1958 and continued until approximately 1964, when it was replaced with Pete Mossey's column "Only on Monday". This was another classic newspaper column which forms a unique part of the history of Medicine Hat. Mr. Mossey in a more dramatic fashion took his "gossip" column to a new level, where local lawyers and politicians and anyone else for that matter, were not immune from his ire, if he felt it was deserving.<sup>4</sup>



## What is a Mad Hatter?

Many attribute the Mad Hatter to purportedly a character in one of Lewis Carol's books entitled "Alice Adventures In Wonderland ". The character, if you have read the book or seen any of the movie adaptations, is an eccentric who presides over a rollicking tea party that Alice attends. The character is referenced subsequently as the "Mad Hatter" although a careful examination of the work reveals that the author, Lewis Carol, never actually used that phrase. The actual reference was to the fact that the character was "as mad as a hatter" in the sense that he was "mad" or "crazy".

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<sup>4</sup> Recently, former editor of the Medicine Hat News Bruce Penton carrying on this tradition began a similar style of column called "Noteworthy". Hats off to Bruce.....



Alice takes tea with the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Mad Hatter in this classic illustration from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." [JOHN TENNIEL/BRITISH LIBRARY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#)

Carroll's book was published in 1865, but the Oxford English Dictionary puts the earliest known use of the phrase "mad as a hatter" in 1829. That's three and a half decades before any March hares or dormice sipped tea, or the Cheshire cat made his famous claim of general madness in the book. The actual origin of the phrase is unknown, but it's believed to be connected to mercury poisoning in hatmakers.

**"Mad as a hatter"** is a colloquial English phrase used in conversation to suggest (lightheartedly) that a person is suffering from insanity. The etymology of the phrase is uncertain, with explanations both connected and unconnected to the trade of hat-making.

Mercury was used predominantly in the manufacturing of felt hats during the 19th century, causing a high rate of mercury poisoning among those working in the hat industry. Those working in the industry were known as "Hatters".

Mercury poisoning causes neurological damage, including slurred speech, memory loss, and tremors, which led to the phrase "mad as a hatter". Several years after the Alice first appeared, (1883) the phrase "hatter's shakes" was used to describe the condition caused by mercury poisoning. The symptoms included muscle tremors, plus mental and behavioral changes. In the Victorian age, many workers in the textile industry, including hatters, sometimes developed illnesses affecting the nervous system, such as the central nervous system and became insane. Many were sent to asylums as there was no known cure for the associated mania. Hence the phrase "mad as a hatter".

Making hats during that era involved part of a process called "carroting." In order to make felt, which is what many hats are made of, you had to get the fur of a beaver or rabbit to stick together in a mat of thick, stiff fabric. To get the fur off the skin cleanly, mercuric nitrate was used. It came to be known as carroting because the solution would turn the edges of the pelts orange as it dried.

Modern haberdashers or hat makers use hydrogen peroxide to remove the fur from the skin, which is a slower but much safer process.

Today, mercury poisoning is known to the medical and scientific communities as erethism. The modern list of symptoms includes irritability and mania, both of which the Hatter has. But there's also sleep disturbance, depression, visual disturbance, hearing loss and those telltale tremors.

You'll be glad to learn that short-term exposure to mercury can cause erethism, but it usually goes away if you can stay away from touching or inhaling mercury. Long-term exposure, such as dental professionals and chemical workers experience, can mean the symptoms persist. In any case, erethism is a rare disease.



The “Hatter” behaves strangely in Carols’ novel (as do many other characters), but his friends accept his oddities as being the usual.

But the phrase "Mad Hatter" never appears in the book; he's merely called the Hatter but that has not stopped generations of admirers and readers of the book from innocently describing the character as the “Mad Hatter”.

It is not surprising that Finn Bridge in developing his or her column adopted the name the Mad Hatter-as the name of the column, consistent with residents of Medicine Hat being affectionately referred to as “Hatters”, (being completely distinct from anyone in the hat industry.)

It remains a mystery today as to who the columnist was who ‘penned’ the “Mad Hatter” newspaper column.

I must confess as a retired lawyer (lawyers are the greatest "plagiarizers in the world"), I borrowed the “Mad Hatter” axiom for my website, as I style myself as, "The Mad Hatter Historian”....

My apologies to any “Hatter” I may have offended by this innocuous reference.

I hope you find this historical trivia of some interest!

If interested in more Medicine Hat history, go to my website at

<http://wjanhorn.ca>

Finally, I received from a reliable source who shall remain anonymous, that the original Finn Bridge was Garth Hopkins followed by Paddy Roe....some more Medicine Hat Historical trivia!

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