

## **Alberta's Ghostly Past**

**855 words**

**By Kim Hanson**

Thinking of jumping in the car for a road trip this weekend? Perhaps you and your family are craving an adventure. . . something a little different. Chances are you've experienced all that Alberta's spectacular National Parks have to offer. Banff, Jasper and Waterton populate and highlight the travel itineraries of many Albertan families.

And, for good reason! Clear mountain lakes, Rocky Mountain splendour and hikes through the forest can quench the deepest thirst for adventure. Alberta's nature on display in all its glory. But, our province has much more to offer. Dwelling on the roads less travelled will lead you to discover Alberta's ghost towns; gemstones in the rough, an eerie glimpse into what life used to be.

Merriam-Webster defines a ghost town as “a once flourishing settlement, wholly or nearly deserted - often as a result of the exhaustion of a natural resource”. This description is appropriate for those Albertan mining towns established in the early 1900's: Bankhead, Lille and Passburg, for example.

But, east of Lethbridge on Highway 61, (also known as the Red Coat Trail\*) lies a string of ghost towns that died for a different reason. Towns here sprung to life along the tracks of the Canadian Pacific Railway, folks moving west, eager to make a life for themselves. But drought, dust storms,

typhoid fever and vermin chased away those dreams. These pioneers ended up leaving behind their homesteads, their barns and their businesses, on the move again in search of prosperity. Once the residents left, the train left.

The landscape here is not rugged; it is not populated with mountains, rolling hills or aquamarine-coloured lakes. Here lies true Alberta prairie, filled with vistas of farmer's fields, sight lines clear to the horizon and an overwhelming sense of peace.

Wrentham is the first ghost town along the Red Coat Trail. The town is a picture perfect, still-life painting, with rich, deep hues of green, golden and blue. The loon's song is mournful and draws you into its call. There are no grocery stores or gas stations or cafes, but the library is still open, offering services to the neighbouring area. It's attached to an empty school and an overgrown "Field of Dreams" baseball diamond. Those that remain living here have modern homes planted across the street from the long-abandoned general store, the decaying grain elevator and acres of old, rusting vehicles. . . a fading dichotomy.

Continuing east, towns spring up every 10 or 15 kilometres. They have names like Skiff, Nemiskam and Etzikom.

Etzikom, located 20 kms from Foremost, has kept itself alive by constructing a museum in the old high school. The Etzikom Museum and Historical Windmill Center is a curious collection of remnants of the past. Inside are displays and collections of old musical instruments and old dolls. Outside in the school's deserted playground, old windmills are on display in all shapes and sizes. The museum is a thriving entity, juxtaposed against the derelict home just steps away on Oxborough Avenue. The museum is open from May to September and offers pie for sale in the shell of the town's

former diner.

Farther east still, closer to the Saskatchewan border, is Orion. Dark and menacing skies encased the old town in a spooky web. Although six residents still called Orion home in 2020, there were no signs of human life. Only felines wandering the empty gravel streets, hiding in the discarded rubber tire lying in the grass. Playgrounds, with swings blowing in the wind, that no child played on. A dilapidated railway section house, resembling an Alfred Hitchcock movie prop, loomed in the distance, languishing in the overgrown field of untended grass. Orion seems the ultimate ghost town.

The sense of serenity on Highway 61 is palpable. So much silence. Often, the landscape yields a flash from the past. Abandoned homes, visible from the highway but often inaccessible by vehicle, remain standing in fields of stubble. It's unfathomable to think what the homes' former residents, those hardy souls, went through. Packing up horse and wagon and moving on. Their homes and barns and graineries are all that remain of a life that didn't take root here. A deep abiding sense of respect for their struggle hangs in the air.

Not unlike a storm chaser who pursues adventure in nature, Johnnie Bachusky is a ghost town seeker. He is an Albertan, a writer and photographer, who preserves ghost town history in his two books; *Ghost Town Stories of the Red Coat Trail* and *Ghost Town Stories II*. Since childhood, Bachusky has possessed a fascination with the abandoned. . . he finds peace in the old, prairie towns, a way to “rekindle memories, feelings of passions once held. There I can recapture a piece of myself.”

He says, “I am not a religious man, but God is there amidst the silence and the ruins. There is a hidden voice that tells me they can never be forgotten.”

|\***The Red Coat Trail.** Highway 61 was renamed in honour of the North West Mounted Police, who kept the peace in this part of Alberta, riding and patrolling about on horseback.