

# A Short History of Olds

## Wagon Trains

In the years before the railways were built, the fur traders and settlers of the Canadian west were dependent upon wagon trains, driven by brave and hardy freighters (often Metis), who brought in livestock and effects for the new settlers, as well as necessary supplies for those already established. The 'bull trains' consisted of three massive wagons pulled by teams of 8 to 12 yokes of oxen, often travelling in brigades of up to 10 outfits. The wagon trains coming west from Winnipeg generally used the lighter Red River carts, whose ungreased wooden hubs on wooden axles screeched unmercifully as they slogged over the plains in all kinds of weather.

After the CPR reached Calgary in 1883, the C & E (Calgary-Edmonton) Trail increasingly rang with the "song of the wagons" as more settlers arrived and stage coaches began to transport mail and passengers over the rutted and often muddy route. The trail between Edmonton and Calgary was described by a man who travelled it in a wagon train in the fall of 1883 as "a mere cart track which followed the paths used by wild game, keeping to high dry ground and avoiding the low areas, sloughs and muskegs". The variability of the climate often posed problems for travellers on the C & E Trail. There were incidents of sleighs coming south in heavy snow, only to find the runners on bare ground south of Lone Pine, where a sudden chinook had melted the snow in a matter of hours. Lone Pine was recognized for many years as the dividing line between the dry to the south and the wet to the north, and the spot where freighters from the south often changed their wheels for runners.

## The Colourful Age of the Stopping House

Although there was very little settlement in central Alberta then, the number of travellers on the trail was increasing. There was need for places where they could be fed and lodged overnight. The stopping houses that were established about every ten miles were focal points in life of those days. They filled a vital need, not only as places of refuge during an arduous journey, but also as centres where news was received and disseminated, and as points of human contact for lonely people who had left behind all that they had known, to venture into an empty land.

It was the coming of the CPR to Calgary that ushered in the settlement of the west, but the movement began slowly. The great wave of immigrants did not begin to flood over central Alberta until after the C & E railroad had been built and the vigorous advertising campaign of a new government policy on immigration started to take effect. The very first settlers in this region were north of here, close to Bowden. At that time in history, the land from Calgary to Olds was bare and windswept, offering little shelter or firewood.

The earliest records of the Land Titles Office show ten entries made on 18 April 1885, covering an area about 10 miles north of Olds. More homesteaders claimed land to the north of Olds in the next few years. Until the railway reached Olds and stores were opened, Calgary was the nearest point to buy supplies and the trip by horse and wagon meant a two-day journey each way.

## A Village is Born

The year 1890 marks the beginning of the settlement which became the town of Olds. When the rail line reached the sixth siding (Olds) out of Calgary, a section foreman named David Shannon arrived on an open handcar. Mr. Shannon, a native of Ireland, was experienced at railway construction, as he had worked on the building of the Underground in London, England. At the Sixth Siding, Mr. Shannon provided living quarters for his family and established squatter's rights to a quarter section of land. This gained them the distinction of being the earliest residents of Olds.

On 27 July 1891, the first through train made the trip from Calgary to south Edmonton. That same month the CPR took over the operation of the C & E Railway and released its official list of names for the sidings and stations along the route. Sixth Siding had already been designated as a railway station point and work started on the building of the station and water tank.

A committee of CPR officials, charged with selecting names for the points along the line, suggested "Shannon", but this honour was declined by Mr. Shannon and the town site was named for a CPR traffic manager, **Mr. George Olds**. He was born in Gloucestershire, England in 1832. He came to Canada as a young man and worked for a number of railways in Canada and the United States, returning to Canada in 1886 to join Canadian Pacific as a General Traffic Manager. He held this position until his retirement 10 years later. Mr. Olds is buried in the Airdrie



**David Shannon**

cemetery. It appears that even before he retired from employment with the CPR, he lived for a time in the settlement that was named for him, running a store.



## Homesteaders Pour In

Because of the railway, the next few years saw a great increase in the number of settlers and also the business enterprises that sprang up to serve them. By 1894 the population of the hamlet had reached 100, and a form of local government was instituted. Much of the area had now been surveyed and was open for homesteading. Settlers flocked in; some families came singly, others came in family groups. With the granting of responsible government to the Northwest Territories in 1897, for the first time since coming west, men had the privilege of voting for a representative to the House of Commons in Ottawa (women would be granted the vote in 1916). Local affairs at this time were managed by an overseer, elected by popular vote. In 1900, Olds was registered as an incorporated village of the Northwest Territories. Mr. William Dean, a constable with the NWMP, had the distinction of becoming the first Mayor of Olds, when the town was incorporated in 1905.

The period around the turn of the century saw many exciting developments, as homesteaders rolled in by the train load and there was an explosion of growth in the business community. By their nature, those pioneers who ventured forth to make a new life on the frontier were dynamic leaders. Less adventurous souls stayed safely at home. In the story of those times some names are written large and bold, and many of those names are still alive in Olds, in street names, and carried by the descendants of the original settlers.

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