



MIKE THE CHIEF

The  
**BOUNTY**  
of  
**GODS:**  
& the Wreck of the  
Lone Star Ranch

1

**DARING 1901**

*Those who were healthy and young could taunt the gods.*

*Mike-the-Chief* dared—then he endured. It could have been no other way for him. This was his lot. He was the One—he was one of those pioneer-ancestors all but forgotten, until the day we dusted off the family album and brought it out of the basement. My image in the mirror compared dauntingly to those old photographs of Great Granddad Mike—he is long passed. And in many ways he is still present. In that, for me, perception yielded to reality, and a new understanding of my own time-bound life.

Looking at the photographs of Mike-the-Chief, it was the beginning of a journey that was to risk all

faiths and knowledge for me, in exchange for valuable insights.

Mike-the-Chief was Great Grandfather Mike. He owned the Lone Star Ranch. The first photo of him shows Mike at the height of his success. On that particular day of the photograph, for Michael James Stapleton, the sky was a perfect blue as only a sky can be in southern Alberta. Everything seems fine. However, this may be an illusion. In illusion and allusion all is not revealed.

We know that in Mike's day rancher-entrepreneurs were young and hardy individuals. They struck out on to the open prairie lands to make their mark. In some ways, it seems, they dared the *gods* to strike them dead. And unfortunately, sometimes *they* did.

Mike's sky, on that bright day, might have been any other *goddamned\** color, like those red skies on Mars. Who knows, they say the *gods* can do anything; in their jest, they might have made it mauve, maybe, to match the spring's crocuses.

In our sky, this world, the one you see; I see it as a geologist; in this, there is no illusion, there are no layers—it is all textbooks and science; it is our unmis-takable reality; there are no flighty rainbows nor room for mysticism for me. That is, until Mike's image stared back from Great Aunt Minnie's wardrobe mirror.

Then, in my perception, in this, the new would-be reality; it was to become *my* reality; there grew insight, notion and intuition. Then I listened and watched.

First, from photos, and bits and pieces of personal articles; then, in the words of letters and in family stories, my dead lost relatives—they spoke. Not right away, but eventually they did.

They spoke with voices of reconciliation. They appealed for openness of heart; they pleaded the case for commonality of spirit.

In this story, you may internalize, and come to understand; you will know from your own experience and from the experiences of those my lost relatives: You will hear and you will share. One thing you will see for certain is that we never know what in the hell is coming next, unless you can out-guess those *gods*.

Mike believed in *his* God. He thought the *gods* created things that were beautiful when something good was about to happen. And like the blue sky of Alberta, that something good did happen for Michael James Stapleton in 1901.

It was in Jenner country. Mike looked north over seas of prairie-lands, green fields of windblown grasses. They moved in rolls for 50 miles, until they blended with the sky in mirages of heat waves.

This would be home.

Jenner Town was just a village, a railroad siding, a few buildings on a knoll; it was perched in anticipation of bigger things, with morning sun reflecting off sectioned glass; these were windows like bright eyes; it was 50 souls, peering eastward down the C.P.R. line.

That sky, that view, the one Mike saw at Jenner—his was a romantic view. He was a would-be cowboy, a farmer, not a rancher at the turn of the century. He was a lone bachelor in the West, waiting for that time to bring Annie from Ontario.

Now those *gods*, in some crazy way, we and they, seem to be bound up in the complexity that is the depth and texture woven into Creation, the one that surrounds us. It finds its way from the blue of our un-earthly sky—not that soapy blue of romanticism, nor fragile blue in robin's eggs, it is the manifestation of cold hard realization—it is hard like the strength of my great grandfather, harsh like Earth's blue from outer space, chilly and deep like the color of ever-wearing corundum; a manifestation as real as the photo of Mike's

face, as comprehensible as the way he stares back, with the image of me, in the mirror.

For Great Granddad Mike, 1901 was the beginning of days of struggles. They were visible physical challenges. They were internal unseen struggles. Life was to become a tug-of-war that took place between those pioneers of the plains and their *gods*, and it lasted for 36 years.

This is the ethos of pioneer places in the West: Mike thought his God said to him, "Yes, you can take a risk, this time." That man from Petrolia, he had arrived at his concept of the heavens-on-the-earth, because Mike envisioned a great ranch in a great land, and he made the most significant decision of our family's heritage. He determined that with help he would make a home for himself and his Annie, and their children to be. But for now, at Jenner, he knew there was work to be done to make true those plans of *his*, and of his God.

There would be good times; cheering and happiness, cattle branding, two children, sheep and horses, saying a Catholic Mass over a heavy, walnut, upright family piano; there would be happy cowboys, and there were those *bad* cowboys too, working the open prairie territories—the flat and untamed plains with the unpredictable weather of southeastern Alberta. But there would be other times too, times when the *gods* were not so kind and approving. Sometimes they just don't care about us.

No one talks about it very much; this Canada, our ethos. It is born of explorers, like farmer and rancher-entrepreneurs, and great industrialists, who dreamed the dream and dared to be great. Being who we are as a nation, we tend not to dwell on these things very much. The newcomers were mostly Christians, although souls of every race and religion were included. They were

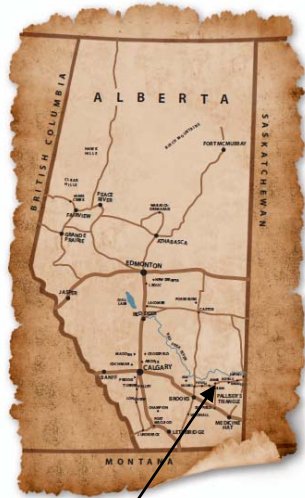
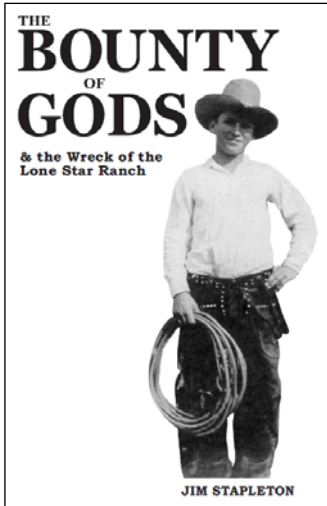
those who challenged in the face of uncertainty. Those pioneer-entrepreneurs are icons of spirit and spirituality, and in the face of obstacles like inclement weather and the generally lousy politics through the decades, I am proud to say that, in 1901, my great grandfather was one of them.

Those pioneer spirits may have lessons for us now; they could be trying to warn us that in spite of our intrepidity and determination to achieve certain things, or force a particular outcome, sometimes the *gods* have other ideas.

Reverence for those passed is wise.

Michael James Stapleton was the first son of Irish immigrants, born November 23, 1865; this was two years before Canadian Confederation.<sup>1</sup> Life began in Enniskillen Township near the oil town of Petrolia, in Southern Ontario, and Mike was raised as a farmer. Michael was a humble man, a man of his word and a devout Catholic from a long line of Irishmen back to County Tipperary, Republic of Ireland, and in about the year of 1896, Michael James promised Anna Elizabeth Anderson that he would send for her when he had established a place for a new family in the West. Annie was the first daughter of the Andersons, a well respected family of business people in Petrolia.

The facts about *Mike-the-Chief* and his brothers Pat and Tobe are that they traveled to the region now known as the Province of Alberta, and they established a grain farm a short distance northwest of Fort Macleod, near McBride Lake, 90 miles south of Calgary. In a while, the Stapleton brothers, the fighting-Irish Stapletons, came to the mutual agreement that one farm wasn't big enough for three men. Mike was anxious to make his own place, since he courted Annie, and she was in Petrolia, waiting.<sup>2</sup>



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Mike traveled alone, eastward, into southern Alberta, in search of prospective lands and a homestead for himself and Annie. He likely took the train along the Royal Line through Duchess, Patricia, Majestic, past Jenner, and possibly as far as Empress. He would have stopped here and there where there were new people and growing towns. Mike probably rented a horse and rode north from Jenner into lands that were open for lease from the government. He had experience with farming and raising animals. He knew that the short-grass country produced good, valuable, livestock. Old-timers claim that the short-grass beef is the best-tasting of the prairies. Mike inspected the area. Title maps showed large tracts of land available in unsettled territories for pennies an acre.

Those were unusually rainy years. When spring comes to this country with adequate rainfall, it can be lush and beautiful. Mike saw the magnificent view north from Jenner toward Red Deer River Valley. There is little doubt that he fell in love with this country. The dreamer in any of us could have imagined the ranching potential of all that open space.

Mike set the stage for building a ranch. The arrangements were made over a period of years. On October 8, 1902, he married Annie Anderson in Macleod. They had their first and only son Murray who was born on August 28, 1904. In 1907, according to the agreement that had been made, Mike sold his interest in the McBride Lake farm to his brothers and he purchased the homesteaded quarter-section on the Red Deer River known as the John Quail Ranch. Mike the entrepreneur, who had been successful farming at Macleod, had a good chance of making something out of this new Jenner opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

Round "One" goes to the Dreamers, but the match between "The Dreamers" and "The Gods" is not over.

In 1857, Irish-born explorer Captain John Palliser was sent by the Royal Geographical Society to prepare a report on the Canadian prairies. The “Royal” charter was granted by Queen Victoria in 1859. As leader of the British North American Exploring Expedition between 1857 and 1861, Palliser traveled the South Saskatchewan River system. After traversing the short-grass country of what is now southeast Alberta, and making observations, he reported that these were dry sandy lands and he claimed that they were unfit for agriculture. Palliser recommended that parts of southeast Alberta never be broken by the plow. This area became known as Palliser’s Triangle.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of Palliser’s warnings, the Government of Canada and the C.P.R. distributed advertisements in Europe and encouraged settlers to travel across Canada. By the Dominion Lands Act 1872 land became available in lots of quarter-sections, containing 160 acres, for a filing fee of \$10.00 plus the commitment to establish a homestead. Three million people dreamed the dream, and poured into the vast Canadian West between the turn of the century and 1914. In these wet years homesteaders could see grass growing as high as their knees, so they had no idea why John Palliser called these the “desert lands” and recommended that they never be farmed.

Mike established the ranch at Jenner, in spite of Palliser’s warnings. He must have seen some particular thing that encouraged him to consider the Red Deer River Valley as a permanent home. Maybe he felt that God would make a difference in the plan, for him, and his family. This place was located pretty much smack in the middle of that *god damned* Palliser’s triangle.

“Dare to be great?” Yes—sure. This is all too obvious—in retrospect.

“Dare to be great,” is a reference to a pyramid scheme known in Vancouver and popular during the 60s, where investors were invited to join a club, pay a large sum of money, listen to motivational speakers, and bet they could convince 3 more people—to “*join and dare!*” New individuals contributed, and sponsorships by previous members built another level in the pyramid. Despite the fact that such schemes are often illegal, sometimes it paid to dare to be great. Other times it was discovered, too late, that the foundation of such an entrepreneurial dream rests on an unreality, or a system that is fragile or fundamentally flawed. Likewise, it was a matter of *chance*, not *faith*—ranching in the Palliser triangle.

I guess we create our own problems. Sometimes the gods have nothing to do with it.



In spite of challenges, the *gods*, and *their* John Palliser, Mike built a pretty good going concern. The John Quail homesteaded quarter served as a central location for the ranch, in the midst of large tracts of land available for lease. These lands were taken over and administered through the devolution of powers by the Federal government to the territory that became Alberta, after it obtained provincial status in 1905. Mike and Annie moved to the Jenner freehold quarter on the Red Deer River in 1909.<sup>5</sup>

The home place had a main ranch house and outbuildings that were part of the original Quail homestead. That was why these lands were freehold title, or patented lands, as we call them.

The home quarter was situated on the south bank of the river in NW Section 17, Township 22, Range 9, West of the 4th Meridian. This location is at the apex of a hairpin turn that the Red Deer River Valley takes where the river meanders north in a four-mile loop.<sup>6</sup>

The Red Deer River is a slow, wide and normally muddy river, like a little Mississippi. It usually flows full to the base of its four-foot banks. The valley is flat-bottomed and a mile wide. Benches are paired terraces that lie between the valley floor and the plateau lands. These form a greater valley about two miles wide. Mile-long coulees connect the flood plain with flat upper benches. More coulees connect those bench-lands to the open Jenner prairie to the south.

Mike probably thought that with plenty of water available at the river, large tracts of land to graze, plus the protection of box canyon coulees for wintering cattle, the inexpensive government leases available in Palliser's Triangle might be worth a gamble. Such is the entrepreneurial spirit to dream, and once on such an odyssey, often stubbornness and determination cause a vision to become true.

Michael James Stapleton called the place the Lone Star Ranch.

The history of the Lone Star Ranch is very much a story about vision, planning and execution—simple cause and effect—but it is also the story of faith, hope and circumstance, and questions about the *acts of God*, and of governments.

The cow brand for the Lone Star Ranch was registered as an upright hairpin, representing the meander

of the Red Deer River channel, where the homestead was situated.

It was called the bar compass or the split key. The three point “lone star” was the Stapleton horse brand.<sup>7</sup> Michael James became known by local cowboys as “*Mike-the-Chief*.” Mike was the *Chief* and he was a lone star in the story about the Jenner ranch.

According to an account of the ranch by Roy Banta, who wrote *My Cowboy Years: Memories I could live without*, several large tracts of land were accumulated. The ranch was divided into several stations, or camps. The homestead was on the flood plain of the river. Mike assembled the home quarter, freehold land, and some Crown leases that comprised 19 miles along the Red Deer River. These were valley lands that were used for hay, winter pasture, and shelter. On the north side of the river, across from the homestead, there were bottom lands that could be hayed in good years.<sup>8</sup> Bench lands 150 feet above the valley floor extended east and west a number of miles. These lands were used for pasture and grazing. To the north and south, adjacent to the river valley, was the open prairie plateau where Jenner Station was situated on the Canadian Pacific Railway line. This was 7 miles south of the Quail homestead. The siding was laid down in 1914.<sup>9</sup> By the time of the First World War Mike nearly owned the whole *damned* country.

Roy Banta said that access to the ranch from Jenner was pretty good—on a map. There were two routes, or rather trails, from the homestead to town. One led straight south up the hill behind the ranch-house, south-west onto the bench-lands 150 feet above the river, then south-east to the top of the plateau, 425 feet above the river, then to the Jenner Road, and south to Jenner Station. That was 9 miles. Or you could ride east along the river valley for 3 miles, wind your way up

Gordon Coulee, and go 6 miles south. That was still 9 miles. Neither route was good. This is big country. Unless you've made the trip a dozen times, you may not appreciate the negative anticipation the family developed, for the difficulty of the trip, after a few years of doing it. In the winter or in spring, or most any other time, the trail was slick, steep, slumping or alternatively, hotter and drier than Death Valley. There are claims that 3 to 20 feet of snow drifted into the heads of some of the coulees. Boulders of granite left by glaciers and outcropping sandstones that shed chunks of ironstone were a few of the obstacles.<sup>8</sup>

Roy said that the ranch was a modern facility with running water, lights and bathrooms. The homestead was a scattering of buildings on the floodplain of the Red Deer River, centered on a large barn and a complex set of round corrals for sorting and treating horses and cattle. Most of the corrals and fences were made from logs that swept down the Red Deer River in the spring flood, lost from logging operations up-river around Sindre, in the foothills of west-central Alberta.<sup>8</sup>

We have a photo of the ranch. The prairies are covered with hundreds of horses and cows. Land owners must have wondered why John Palliser recommended to the Canadian government that this country never be turned to agriculture.

The ranching operation was built along the river and around the all-important water wells. There was a hand-dug well at the homestead, equipped with a windmill for pumping the water. There was rarely any problem for lack of wind in that country. Water was stored in a cement cistern about 6 feet in diameter on the hill above the ranch buildings and probably contained about five hundred to a thousand gallons of water. The top of the cistern was equipped with a float and wire level indicator through the cover so that, from

the ranch house, one could see the level of the water. If more water was needed or the water pressure was down, a cowboy could be called to go to the pump and engage the windmill. There was plenty of water for the cattle at the homestead.

The main building was Mike and Annie's home. Queen Ann and The Chief is how they became known. There was a large barn and corral complex; round corrals for separating and handling, treating, feeding, and branding cattle. There was a blacksmith's shop where branding irons and horse shoes were made, and later, trucks and equipment were repaired.

There was a small house where a couple by the name of Bob and Georgia Brodie lived. They were relatives of the famous aviator, Otto Brodie of the U.S.A. There was also a bunkhouse and a large hay storage building. There was an R.C.M.P. barrack by the homestead for a period of time. Apparently there had been some cattle rustling. Sometimes a priest would come to the ranch and say a Catholic Mass, using the family piano as an altar.

There were thousands of acres of summer grazing land north of the Red Deer River. Pretty soon Old Mike had his brand on everything that was alive and moving around in *his* country. Then they invested in an airplane. And they drilled an oil well at Turner Valley.

Mike's bull camp was in a canyon just south of the river at Jenner Ferry. There were large tracts of grazing lands east of Jenner road on the east side of the south bend in the Red Deer River. There were flat areas with steep slopes that acted as natural barriers to cattle on the benches.

On the plateau, south-east of the homestead, there was a good artesian spring and conditions were fine for calving. This was Mike's calf camp. There was a bunk-

house and some corrals at the calf camp and at the cow camp.

Ten miles south-east of the homestead was Halsbury and the horse camp. South of the village of Buffalo, 21 miles south-east of the home quarter, was Mike and J.R. Banta's sheep camp. It comprised most of Township 20, Range 6, around 24 sections, over 15,000 acres. There were 3,000 sheep out there between 1926 and 1930. The sheepmen were kitted up with horses, a covered wagon and supplies, and escorted 20 to 30 miles south-east of the homestead. Mike and J.R. had the sheep men move with the sheep for a month or so at a time.

Roy Banta, J.R.'s son, and cowboy Jim Spratt lived at the horse camp, about 22 miles south-east of the Lone Star home place. This became the British Block that is now the location of the Suffield military base. Roy and Jim Brodie recounted for the history book, *Prairie Crucible*, how they worked on the Lone Star Ranch with long-time and well known cowboys, Jim Spratt and Shorty Merino.

In all, the spread was 92,000 acres—about 140 sections. Each section is a square mile. The ranch was almost four townships of land. When the ranch was going full-out in 1926 and 1927, the herds were as large as 2,000 head of cattle and 500 head of horses. This is what family stories about the ranch tell us. The history books say that Old Mike claimed that he had 2500 head of cattle at one time. Only in the 1980s were the last of the feral horses rounded up and adopted out. They were ruining the wilderness pastures. Mike was a contemporary of, and knew, the famous ranchers, Pat Burns (Senator Patrick Burns), A. E. Cross, Guy Wedick and Negro cowboy John Ware. Ware ranched nearby, at Duchess. They were there for the Calgary Industrial Exhibition and First Calgary Stam-

pede of 1912. Not bad for one of the three sons of a farmer who rented land in Ireland, and owned his first land at Enniskillen in west Ontario.

Mike-the-Chief was a popular rancher in the Jenner area. He was a prominent member of the Western Stock Growers Association from 1912 until 1937, during which time he was First Vice-president. He also was President of the Empress (*Provincial*) Liberal Association for 12 years.

Many of the local people worked for my great grandfather at one time or another on the Lone Star Ranch. Considered one of the largest in Alberta, they said, "Stapleton didn't order a car, he ordered a train." Then it went off, full of cattle, to the Chicago markets. During the early part of the century cattle and horses went to a Swift Current packing plant for the preparation and shipping of meat to Belgium. Horses went by the hundreds to California. Ten thousand horses were shipped to Russia during the 30s.<sup>10</sup>

Mike's Lone Star cow brand was the inverted "hairpin" brand that represented the bend in the Red Deer River where the ranch was centered.

The Stapleton horse brand was a three-point star that may have represented Mike, Annie, and Son Murray.

Records show a bar under the three-point horse brand. However, the charred remnant of the brand at the Halsbury shed, which I photographed in 1989, did not have the underscore bar. This would be an important discrepancy for cowboys, separating animals at round-up, and in the 30s, those bad winter years, starving cattle roamed everywhere and had to be identified.

In the symbolic world, the world of pencil and paper, a brand is registered in the records. In the practical world, the concrete, the world is made of branding irons; Mike's were forged in the blacksmith's shop on the Lone Star Ranch. And those irons were knocked around quite a bit. In Mike's world, his experience in reality was not much different from iron. A vision is something other than that of reality. Mike's Jenner ranch was very much a notion, an idea, a vision; it was a dream come to fruition. Human history demonstrates again and again that dreams—come to reality—can be fragile. Sometimes they only last as long as the dreamer.

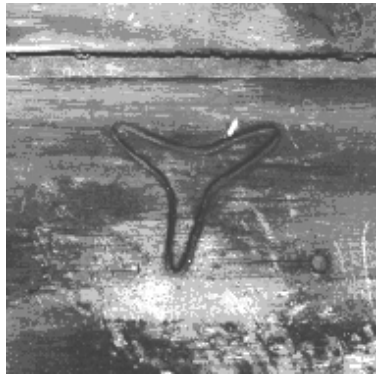
Old Mike got up early most mornings and sat at the end of his long kitchen table that was large enough for 20 hands. (This is a first-person account according to my father.) It was quiet around the ranch-house most of the time. The original Quail homestead was separated from the bunkhouse and the rest of the workers by a distance. And the grandkids didn't venture into the way of the old man early in the mornings. He was generally a quiet man, and a soft-spoken man, unless the *Irish* was provoked. Mike would get out his Winchester cigarettes, smoke one or two, and then make breakfast for himself while thinking and considering, alone, in the early mornings. He boiled hot water for coffee and routinely took some of the water and poured it over a bowl of shredded wheat. That was usually the time for Old Mike to think, over his breakfast, what to do next.<sup>11</sup>

## Halsbury Village



Below is the photograph of the horse brand of 1989 taken at a location where the brand had been tested on the inside wall of a shed at Halsbury in about 1935. A tracing of the brand reveals that the lone star was not perfect. Oddly enough, the bar under the brand is missing (*below*), or it appears to have possibly been wiped away for some reason. Even a fire brand can be wiped away.

Brand from the 1930s  
on the inside of an  
out-building at  
Halsbury, 1989



Split-key bar



Three-point star



Anna Elizabeth Anderson Stapleton

The Stapletons went for a holiday by steamer ship to Hawaii and returned late in February, 1929.<sup>12</sup> They went to the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. But the oil well at Turner Valley was dry and it nearly sunk the ranch, the airplane disappeared somewhere in the United States, and two devastating prairie-fires burned off the grazing lands in the spring and the summer of 1929; these fires also burned some of the sheep. Deep snows with heavy ice crusts prevented cattle and horses from winter grazing through some of the years in the 30s.<sup>13</sup> And Mike was pretty angry about the provincial government raising grazing lease rates to what he thought were exorbitant amounts on thousands of acres of Mike's land.<sup>14</sup>

What can we learn from these people, our relatives long passed? It seems there is a see-saw throughout our time-bound lives, between the human ego and the gods, the concrete versus the spiritual. We see this clearly, in the way that it played out in the lives of Great Grandfather Mike Stapleton and the other ranchers and farmers of the Palliser triangle. This is the condition—an unpredictable harshness, for those who dare to explore and develop lands like frontier Canada.

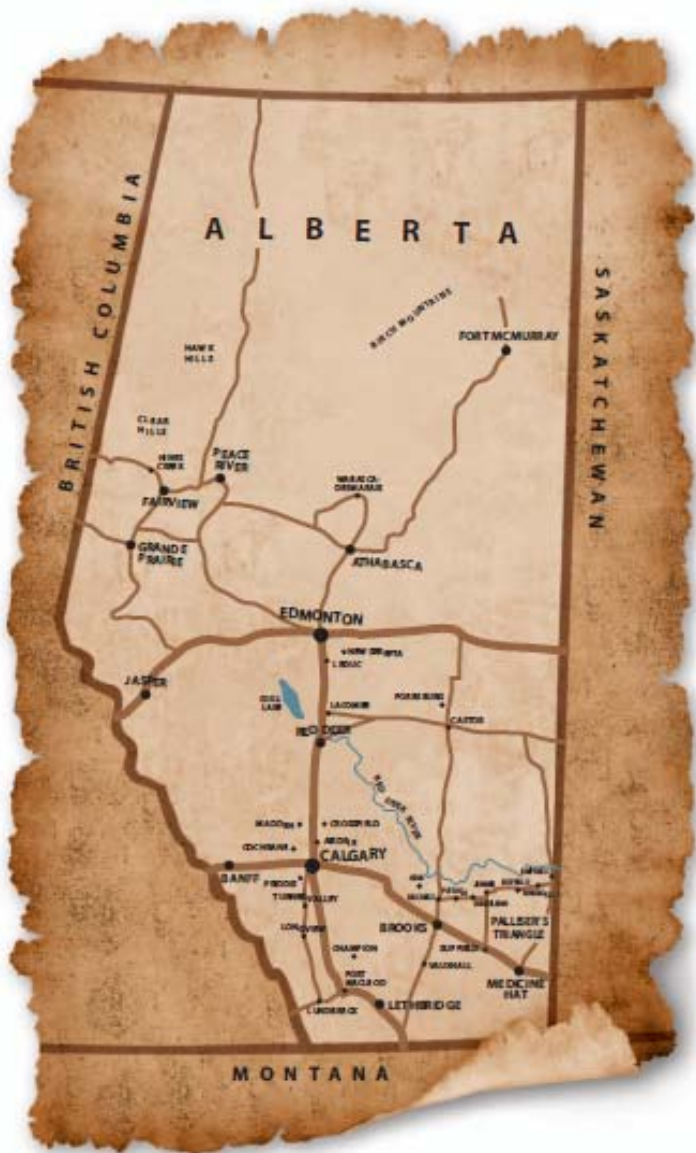
I can see Great Grandfather Mike, thinking. The evidence shows that he came to a conclusion: When everything is going great in this big country of ours, God almost always *seems* to intervene, in some way, sooner or later, and remind us that we are not owners, we are simply custodians, lessees, of this earth.

Reverence for those passed, our teachers, is wise.

*\*“goddamned” a blasphemy, the vernacular, an expression deeply rooted in the psyche; this is a quip, a pun, a comic interlude, also an edgy cowboy usage as in “goddamnit,” “goddamn;” a curse on the Great Depression or on God and Nature. Mike endures 36 years in Palliser’s Triangle. Losing all, faith begets the allusion—mirages, like the heat waves. In 1937, desolate, Mike’s health and his ranch are a wreck. It is the Kierkegaardian predicament, acting out of faith and not reconciling belief with reality. Even Nature, the color of the sky, the sky itself, are temporal manifestations—thus, God damned.*

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

ALBERTA

SASKATCHEWAN

MONTANA

HAWK HILLS

BOYD HIGHWAY

FORT MCMURRAY

CLEAR HILLS

PEACE RIVER

WASCO-ORISKANY

WINDY CREEK

FAIRVIEW

GRAND PRAIRIE

ATHABASCA

EDMONTON

VIEW DRIFT

LEBOUC

JASPER

EGG LAKE

LAKE Louise

FOXBURG

CAITON

RED DEER

WADSWORTH

EDMONTON

CALGARY

TURNER VALLEY

LOCHSIDE

CHAMPION

WEST MOUNTAIN

UNDERWOOD

BROOKS

SUPPER MERIDIAN

WILLOWHALL

LETHBRIDGE

JARVIS

WINDY CREEK

WINDY CREEK

WINDY CREEK

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## LANDS OF THE LONE STAR RANCH

Jenner, Alberta



Lone Star Cow Brand



Lone Star Horse Brand

By WW1 Mike-the-Chief had built the Lone Star Ranch into a spread of about 92,000 acres.



JOHN HARRINGTON

## 2

### PRIVATE JOHN HARRINGTON

**1915** *There is only one reality.*

Private John Harrington faced horror and lucid moments at Vimy Ridge in WWI and for some reason 54 years later he seemed to want to tell a stranger about it. This happened to me often as I traveled from farm to farm, offering to lease the oil and gas rights of land owners throughout the Western Canadian provinces—those cold, flat prairie-lands of winter that flowed from horizon to horizon, and it was never clear to me whether people were exceedingly honest in their desire to articulate that story told by the lines in their faces, or whether they were just deep-winter crazy, and des-

perate, so they saw in me a potential friend to unload on.

In the face of a wall of machinegun bullets, and imminent death, Pvt. John Harrington found a stark *reality*—cold and clear, and he conveyed to me certain insights about it: *Perception* is not *reality*; *reality* strikes and exposes the essence, the soul, in the experience of a near-miss.

“That Vimy was some show!” Mr. Harrington said to me.

The experience of Private John Harrington at Vimy was war; bombs, craters, trenches, and the horror of artillery barrages. Talking to John Harrington and envisioning his story made an indelible impression on my mind. What John had likely endured was more than I could imagine. What is in this reality? For him, in some ways the world began and ended on a small hill in France. It occurred to me that Private John Harrington faced two *experiential conditions* in the Battle of Vimy Ridge that did not leave him, like having taken a mind-altering drug or being held in suspended animation—one condition relates to *time*, the other to *action*.

Mr. John Harrington greeted me at his door, not like a soldier standing, waiting at attention, as he might have during the *Great War*; he was a man of experience—not really afraid of much; whether it be the condition of having a stranger on his porch, the possibility of a proposition of some kind, or if it were Father Death himself that had in fact arrived.

Harrington was a thin and grizzled old fellow. He was a unique gentleman of 73. He lived independently in a simple cottage near the farming community of New Sarepta. This was a white clapboard-sided place on a quarter-section, a hundred yards from the County road. As I walked up the three steps onto the veranda, and across the wide-open porch, Harrington appeared at the

door. Handrails swayed, pedestals were split and parted, paint flaked, drainpipes stooped, and the place creaked—now grey, once level—like my view of Harrington himself. Surely, all this was not long for the world, I observed; still noble but withering. “Stalwart of spirit,” I thought. That is, the enduring house, John, and his menagerie of slick looking animals, who accompanied Harrington to greet me at the door.

As I approached the house, he did not seem perturbed by my interrupting his schedule. He wore a new suit of work clothes, trim and all in black—he didn’t project any priestly manner of righteousness though—the man of experience—he was covered from head to foot in overalls, plus one of those beaver fur-lined hats with the flaps flipped up, and neoprene-skinned winter boots, probably the kind with thick felts inside. I guessed that he was headed for the barn; maybe he felt that he had all day to do his chores.

The veranda had a view of the whole farmstead; the yard—a red barn to northeast, open fields to the north, no fences, just a line of old trucks in front of the house and some dated machinery on the other side of a graveled driveway, in various states of repair.

A bright old gentleman, he looked businesslike. After a few minutes talking by the front door, I was invited inside to lay out the details of my proposition. In the thirty minutes of talking to John over the kitchen table, I made friends with his beautiful and affectionate animals. Certain things about John seemed fastidious, while others were awkward. The home; it was a simple affair, with strip-fir wood floors, plain pine furniture, homemade cupboards, and sectioned-glass windows overlooking the yard. Tile-patterned Lino covered the counter-tops and splashboards that surrounded a large white enameled sink. This was a typical 20s-style homestead. There were off-white walls and ceiling, yel-

lowed by years of an oil furnace or a gas stove. It was a common arrangement on poorer mixed farms in the aspen covered landscape east of Edmonton; a big room with a couple of bedrooms off to one side was all. The bush in northern Alberta didn't yield easily to homesteaders who could not, or would not, use bank financing to leap forward into expansions, like buying the latest machinery, or by acquiring additional sections of cultivated land.

John talked straight at me. He was not like some folks around there, either only interested in what they could get out of an oil company or frightened of the news a stranger might bring to the door. Harrington was none of that. When I offered him a lease on his mineral rights, he made a gentleman's agreement right on the spot.

It seemed a good bet that, having survived the test of time and war, John could find good merit in everything and anything, and there was no sweating the small stuff, each moment was of value to him; obviously he spent the time to take great care of his fine looking companion pets. Some people really have the knack for picking just the right animals and investing to make the best of them. On a farm, there is an obvious difference between animals that are ignored and those pets that are loved and well taken care of. In that way John made the best of everything.

Mr. John Harrington was a man of action: If there was an oil well to be drilled around there—he was going to be part of it.

John agreed to lease his oil and gas rights to me and asked for a ride to his lawyer's office, in town, to check the correctness of my documents. Although this may seem an odd request, it is quite within normal business practices, in the land business. It is always better to make an agreement that all parties have con-

fidence in, than to leave the farm with doubt in the air, or for a landman to contend with complaints from Lessors afterward. John phoned his lawyer in town and caught him on a spare moment. We got an appointment for an hour and a half later in the afternoon.

Driving slowly, with the old fellow, 12 miles to town on slippery roads, in the late afternoon, he offered to talk about his WWI experiences. In this, I would get to know the gentleman. He was a grand old man. I came to admire him. "That Vimy was some show," says John to me. I respected his spirit. He described the sound that a machinegun bullet makes—as it whizzes past your head.

"It was some show, that Vimy," old John said to me.

He said this phrase, "some show—that Vimy," again and again. And by saying that same line over and over, as he did, talking about that one thing, he built a certain enthusiasm for that one time, as if it were the most exciting and fulfilling *experience* he had ever had.

There was an inexplicable unreality to driving slowly along an all-but-abandoned road; in the middle of a white flat world punctuated by thin stands of skinny poplar trees, at 20 below zero when all is calm; talking about the mayhem of bullets—things exploding all around and the chaos of Vimy in the initial stages of the final assault by the Canadians—likely, near-desperation reigned—it must have been, "Get it over-with or die!" Such a contrast in terms; there was certainly no one shooting at John or me, here. No one was about to disturb our reality; it would be so nice if someone would; that is, to quicken our senses just a little. And yet, in the telling of the Vimy story, there might be a secondary *reality* in all of it yet to be experienced by me—and possibly by John.

“The flames and shower of lights—from some of that cannon,” John added. As if he still found wonder in all of it. “Some sight to see, you know—at night.”

I knew from documented history that there was nothing beautiful about artillery, or brute force moving earth. All the same, his words had credibility: I could see from John’s clean and tidy appearance that there was still the soldier in him; he was clearly connected to our reality; there was no hint of senility creeping into his description.

John and I met with his lawyer right on time and I answered a few questions about oil and gas agreements and the terms that had been negotiated on the freehold rights. Then, the lawyer completed the lease documents and John Harrington executed them according to his agreement. When the witness was taken and affidavits were sworn the whole process was complete as per a normal business transaction. You don’t meet many people like John Harrington. He didn’t waiver or waffle for a second. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. Things were black or white for him.

Driving with the old fellow back to his home, I listened to his story, about Vimy and that one particular moment; the sound of the bullets that passed his head, the moment which stayed on his mind; then he became a hero in my eyes—the *Hero of Vimy*. Private John Harrington was more than that to me. He represented someone whose experience *defined* reality.

He was the embodiment of that *realism* of *experience*: This is; something beyond ignoring a hangnail, or meditating through a painful dental procedure; it is the stark *reality*, clarity captured in that one second when one lurches off the precipice; that one rush danger junkies gravitate toward when base jumping—and my commonality with Private Harrington emanated from many years during the 60s as a teenage pilot and

prospector's guide. I logged-up plenty of near-death experiences in the mountainous bush-country of the eastern British Columbia Interior.

And what of the house?

Well, it was kind of collapsing around the old fellow. John didn't see it. You might say it was a confused analogy to John's life; falling, but great of spirit. Being clear and connected, he seemed to have some fascination with mechanical things, the concrete world; he had an obvious interest in the bits and pieces of machinery that were parked in front of his place. A Landman sees many things in the rural countryside. The condition of the house seemed out of character for an exacting kind of guy like Harrington. Carpentry may not have been John's forte. Maybe he had had a wife that passed away, and his motivation to keep the place up was spent elsewhere.

Dealing with people, in the value and context of their lives, a landman has to accept contradictions. They don't need to be reconciled.

And now, lingering thoughts....

From *my* perspective, the world comes in shades, not in colors—it is more than: yes or no, on-off, 1-zero—like the workings of a computer. What is in this black/white reality, the reality described by Private John Harrington?

For Private Harrington, during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, obviously the seconds slowly ticked by—and his experience was as simple as this: A bullet slices the air with a whiz —

“The bullet hit me”— “no it didn't.”

“I'm still alive!” OR

“No. I'm hit!”

“But what of the next second?”

A bullet whizzes — tick —

“The bullet hit me”— “no it didn’t.”

“I’m still alive.” — another bullet — another second.

This *reality*, discovered by Harrington, in its simplest expression, is—the existential—that focused moment of *Albert Camus*; Private John Harrington is fully alive—one second at a time. Harrington is the *reality of experience*. Similar to the counting of time illustrated by Camus in *The Stranger*; the central character becomes focused because he is to be hanged in the morning. Private Harrington is something more than the essence of Camus’ stranger. The stranger will be hanged. The seconds tick—the outcome is inevitable. In Harrington, the seconds are not simply counted. They are lived. They take an eternity to pass. The outcome is unknown. For now, we may treat the two conditions as the same experience because the nature of *realization* is the perception that is common to both, a clear and sometimes sudden comprehension of *reality*. In this, we will agree that *reality* is the *First Form*, a term and foundation in a rational expression and exploration—there is a requirement for a logical and reliable *reality*, a definition of something never wavering. It must be something we can all agree upon.

... *contuned*.

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*“WEELE, BOY, GODDAMIT!  
NOW, THIS IS GITTEN INTO THE SPIRITS.  
AND THAT’S A PLACE OF MYSTICISM  
—A BAD PLACE TO GO, FOR AN OLD COWBOY LIKE ME.  
UNLESS THEY’S DRINK’IN SPIRITS! WEELE ...  
— MAYBE THEM’S OKAY.”*



ROY

# 3

## THE SHEEP CAMP 1926

*The cowboys test early understandings of eternity.*

Being banished to the sheep camp at the far corner of the Lone Star Ranch was like being sent away from home—in a covered wagon, with a bunch of sheep, and a couple of dusty shepherd men, with odd accents—to a lonely place, for an *eternity*. Roy didn't mean it to be this way. It was a severe penalty. A cowboy had to do something pretty bad to end up at that place, worse than get drunk on a Saturday night and disappear for a few days. Roy was only 20. He didn't know. He just got mixed up with Jim Spratt and the other *bad* cowboys. Roy wasn't really old enough to be drinking with the

likes of those fellows. Now, he is condemned to the lands of the Middle Sand Hills of Alberta. And for Roy, if you ever thought it seemed an appealing idea that you should live forever, being a lonely cowboy would be a good way to experience the fact of eternity, living endless moments. They ticked by—one second at a time—and it would be to experience Mother Nature at her least friendly, with a couple of dirty dogs, and a few thousand sheep. It was tough to escape the lure and benefits of working on the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest ranch in the Northwest, and then reconcile the facts: You are isolated on a flat, dry, hot, stretch of America's Central Plains, at the sheep camp. It would be an increasing challenge day by day. Life stretched out before you as choices, paths like endless strings of spaghetti, and each meant exposure to the sun, boiling in the heat of Hell. If you were one of those rugged sheep herders then that was you're lot in life. Those British sheep men, they could withstand just about anything. They saw this whole experience as an opportunity to see new country. But that wasn't you, or Roy. You were a skilled horseman from someplace like Calgary, or maybe all the way from Texas. You didn't know much about those smelly sheep, or the dirty, angry, dogs, and you really didn't think you needed to. But in all of this was the message from the *gods* to the cowboys: "*Many forms, the One Spirit; one spirit—many voices.*" Sometimes the cowboys listened to those *gods*, especially at night, looking at the constellations, full of stars; other times, they couldn't make head nor tail of the heavens, they ignored the messages of the *gods*, and just went off to town looking for their re-supply of whiskey.

The man I came to know as Roy Banta was a delightful gentleman. He was no doubt a fun-loving, skillful and

hard-working cowboy, on the Lone Star Ranch, at Jenner. And he seemed to speak with only one voice. It was a voice of truth. It was Roy's voice; this was a voice of clarity. It was a Christian voice of simplicity. Other voices were not so clear and simple, as you will come to see in the following account.

On the evening of March 30, 1989, I received a telephone call from Roy Banta of Crossfield.

The Lone Star Ranch had only been mentioned briefly in my home during polite conversations, for example over a family get-together or Christmas dinner. My grandfather never talked much about the "old days." I didn't know anything specific about the ranch at all, or if in fact it ever existed.

Mr. Banta was 83 years old at the time that he phoned me and he introduced himself as "Roy." He claimed he was one of the original hands who had worked for my great grandfather. That was a surprise to me. I had only heard rumors about those turn of the century *old days* and the times of the first Calgary Stampede, 1912.

Roy Banta told me that upon seeing a request for information on Jenner, in a regional newspaper, he looked in the telephone book and phoned the first M. Stapleton he found. Apparently, the purpose of his call was to find a Stapleton that might be interested in hearing stories about the Lone Star Ranch from a man who had actually been there, or at least to hear a little about Alberta ranching history. Mr. Banta said that he knew a Mike Stapleton and his son. Roy said that he and a fellow that he knew as "Murray," who had been about the same age as Roy, worked with Roy on the Lone Star Ranch, at Jenner. Roy said that he was interested in ranching history and that Roy's father had

worked in a sheep raising partnership with an “M. J. Stapleton.” Roy Banta asked if I would be interested in doing some research on the old Jenner ranch. I thought about this and decided it would be a great opportunity to find out more about our family history. And consider the possibility of listening to the voices of our dead lost ancestors. ... *contuned*.

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Cattle crossing

# 5

JIM SPRATT

1937

*Who wins this bout between the "Realist!"  
and the "Entrepreneur?"*

Jim Spratt was a pragmatist, an American cowboy, and a well respected individual. If Mike-the-Chief was the visionary and entrepreneur then Jim Spratt was the realist. So much so, in fact, that he preferred to stay with the Lone Star Ranch and the Chief for 20 years, rather than take big risks and put more time into his own place.

Spratt was known as a skillful and knowledgeable ranch hand. Like many of the roaming cow punchers, he never seemed to care, or worry much, about where he would be next, except that he seemed satisfied to stay a loyal cowhand on the Lone Star Ranch, other than the times when he strayed into town, got drunk, and was sent out to the horse camp or the sheep camp. Even then, he was happy to go whatever way the wind blew, even in the days when Murray, Son-of-the-Chief, took over the Lone Star and Jim Spratt supported this new owner through all of the hard times.

Roy Banta fills in some of the details in his book *My Cowboy Years: Memories I could live without*.

“Jim was born in England in 1868. His family moved to the U.S.A. when he was a child. While migrating to the west by wagon train they were ambushed by the Indians and both of his parents were killed but he and his sister survived and went on to Texas.”

“Jim arrived in Medicine Hat with a cattle drive of Mexican longhorns between 1900 and 1905 at about 40 years of age.”

“He was a little over 6 feet tall, raw boned and weighted 220 lbs when I knew him in 1926. He was a crack shot with a rifle and a pistol. Also an expert with a 14 foot bull whip and could break the sound barrier with it, sounding like a rifle shot. He acquired a reputation of being a tough Texas cowboy.”

Roy and I went to the old homestead site. We were raking up horseshoes and bits and pieces of car and truck parts in the yard of the ranch, at what used to be the blacksmith's shop, and later the machinery repair

shop. There, Roy told me more facts about the ranch and ways of the work-ing cowboys.

Roy Banta helped complete a new house for Murray. That was one of his jobs on the ranch. Roy helped haul granite boulders to the site of Murray's new house, for the foundation of an Aladdin prefabricated log home. Roy claims that this was 1927. Murray would have been about 21 or 22 years old. Roy remembers this particularly because the plans for the prefab building were missing from the shipment that arrived from Winnipeg.

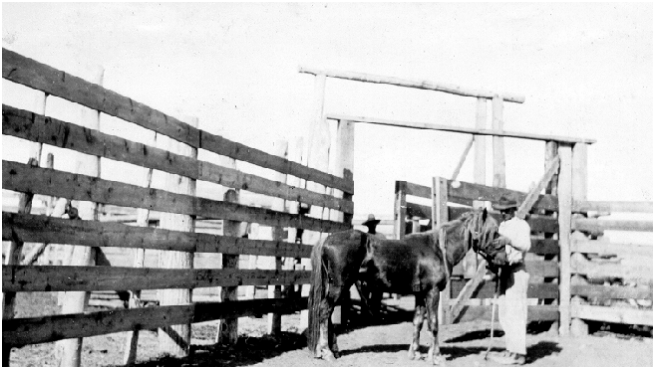
Murray was to marry Patricia Lemna and it was to be their first abode.

Patricia Lemna lived down Jenner road, south a ways. In the Lemna family there were five girls and one boy. All but Patricia returned to Chicago—date and reasons unknown.

Twenty years later, Murray and Patricia's Aladdin home was disassembled. It was loaded onto a barge and moved down the Red Deer River to another location.

Roy had firsthand knowledge about the workings of the ranch. He spent a lot of time with Murray in the 3 years from 1927 to 1929. Roy did not know the behind-the-scenes details about the ranch or its history, or about the different people that were involved, the New York family connections, other than the stories of Jim Spratt and my great grandfather. He knew Murray only as a cowboy. Roy was not able to keep track of any of the other people who worked on the ranch nor did he know much about their fate.

Cowboy Jim Spratt had living quarters at the horse camp about 20 miles south-east of the Lone Star homestead. Roy Banta and Jim spent two years living there, off and on, in 1928 and 1929. The two cowboys needed to be experienced on the range, especially in handling horses and herding cattle, in order to take care of things. That remote area was no location to be kicked by a horse, stomped on by a cattle beast or crushed by a bull. They have a nasty way of stepping on a person with a ton of weight or trapping you against a gate or corral fence.



Old Mike in the new corrals

The ranch had a bunkhouse and some corrals south-east of the homestead on the plateau and was called the calf camp. This was about 11 miles from the homestead. It probably had water for the calves and good pastures. Up on the plateau there were flat areas with steep slopes that acted as natural barriers to the cattle. There were lands east of the Jenner road and on the east side of the south bend of the Red Deer River. A good artesian spring was found there and conditions were good for calving. The cowhands roamed the territory, checking on the cattle and moving them from one pasture to another. The hardest work was during round up, calving and branding times. Then there were the winters. These were hard winters and moving animals around in temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees was dangerous and difficult work. It was tough enough without the deep snow and ice that occurred every few winters out on the Lone Star range.

Roundup and branding—Mike and the cowboys.



Roy Banta told me about a thing that he called a *soaphole*. This was the mystery of the Lone Star Ranch

that was a geological phenomenon. It is an odd coincidence that my studying these slippery minerals in the soils of the Lone Star Ranch would lead me to discover diamond indicator minerals and volcanic ashes five years later while exploring for diamonds the Peace River Country.

The “soap holes” were an important part of family folklore, that involved the ranch and difficulties that were encountered working these lands. As time went by, research turned up the “soaphole” as a legitimate form in geology and geomorphology, in American geological literature.

Geology is one of the ultimate expressions of human endeavor, where the science claims to be definitive but the source or basis of the discipline, is all myriad of imaginative renderings. That is, the geological profile is a stack of worlds, environs long past, and understanding them is a function of recreating erosional, depositional and tectonic environments, and then applying those visions to concrete, fathomable reconstructions.

“This is where the cattle would get stuck,” Roy points out to me, by the side of the Red Deer River. Our family never knew if the stories were true, about the cattle disappearing in bogs. Roy and I wandered around the place. And using my geological background, we made fieldnotes and gathered information about the mud pits that I had heard about. The parched bottomlands of the Red Deer River flood plain didn’t look a likely place for cattle to become mired in quicksands. We noticed that the Red Deer River had eroded a good way toward the original ranch house basement and foundations, in the last 75 years.

“You can see where the Red Deer River has eroded into the bank much closer to the foundations of the Aladdin house than before,” I said to Roy, as we photographed the bank of the Red Deer River and compared

the old pictures of the famous quicksands in the river and talked about soapholes.

## Soapholes



Mike on the left, Son Murray second from the right.

I had never heard of a soaphole before. Roy described the "soaphole" as a boggy area which, when dry on top, could not be distinguished from the local terrain. He said that if you rode your horse over it, the top crust could break and your horse could drop a leg into this soupy hole. He also said that an entire animal could sink out of sight in this, sort of, quicksand.

I asked the present owner of the Lone Star lands to show me one of these soapholes. He escorted Roy Banta and me to a place in a coulee at the foot of a sandstone cliff. The coulee ran a quarter mile up to the plateau on the south side of the Red Deer River. A spring in the coulee fed a small creek that ran down the ravine. Between the creek and the sandstone cliff was a slope (colluvial fan) that seemed to be consolidated sand. Ted walked up to a dark spot, perhaps three feet across. He

stuck his shovel into the dark spot, broke the dried crust, and revealed a pocket of what looked like quicksand. You would not have been able to pick it out, if you didn't know where it was. Although this soaphole was small, only a couple of feet deep, it really intrigued me.

These things were probably a hazard to men and animals around the ranch. Roy and Ted told me that these soapholes used to appear and disappear, and seemed to move around, depending on who knows what.

Mysterious.

I made a couple of more field trips to look at the soapholes and did some mapping and cross-sections in 1989 and 1990. Then I wrote a paper for a University of Lethbridge course on them.

The bentonite soils and Horseshoe Canyon sandstones contain volcanic ashes and impervious layers of shales that form an intricate layer-cake of aquifers and clay hardpan. When charged by cyclical wet decades, the charged basins of hard water that emerged in the clay and water-filled depressions, these become quicksands. They can be dangerous for cattle and horses.

The regional bedrocks are the Upper Cretaceous sandstones. They are porous. Water travels laterally through the various layers of sandy porous rock. The sandstones dip in a south-west direction. Various formations, or stratified layers, were laid down during successive inundations (depositional periods) by the Bearpaw Sea. This sometimes resulted in the laying down of clays amongst the sandstones and these compressed into shales. These shale layers are quite impervious to water. Water travels through the porous sandstones down to the beds of shales and along the shale layers. If an aquifer is charged from somewhere on the plateau above the Red Deer River valley by snow

melt or rainfall, and depending upon how long it takes to charge the aquifer that would determine the timing of when the soapholes would appear. The materials in the soapholes were of three components: water, large-grain sand and a greasy material, probably clay called bentonite. A greasy emulsion is formed when water mixes with the bentonite.

The soapholes are locations where a regional aquifer is charged by rainwater, this water descends to the shale layers, and the shales are breached at elevations near the bases of the coulee floors. Hydrostatic pressure causes the water to break through at weaker points on the colluvial fans. Water percolates through coarse sands and even transports some of this sand. Some of the formations around Jenner have layers of volcanic ash that were laid down 50 to 80 million years ago. These Kneehills tuffs and other volcanic ashes formed bentonite. Bentonite is very slippery alumina clay. It mixes with water and forms an emulsion. Bentonite clay dries hard in the sun. If you step on the soaphole and break through the top crust, you are really falling into an artesian well, filled with wet sand and the greasy bentonite clay. This is quicksand and these holes could become quite large. The soapholes seemed to move around. This is probably because when the weather is a bit different from year to year. The severity of the cold in southeast Alberta determines how much frost action there is and how and where the water-laden sands and shales are fractured. The location of the soapholes also probably depends on whether there is enough hydrostatic pressure in the aquifer system to cause a breakthrough in a particular area.

Hydrostatic pressure is likely the reason why we find pictures in our albums of cowboys trying to pull cows out of quicksand along the shores of the Red Deer River. These silts and sands could be a problem for

cowboys when they drove herds across the river to change pastures. In the coulee bottoms in spring, the cows fell into these holes in various places. When sands became saturated at an active artesian system, and mixed with the volcanic ash clays; a dry cover of bentonite and sand will not hold much weight, just enough for an animal to try to cross before it broke through. The animals became mired in this greasy grey alumina-clay and sandy goo.

There is science behind the mysterious soap holes, the inexplicable potholes of quicksand, and these are the foundation for a number of family stories and myths about the ranch. The soap holes do exist and they are no doubt a problem from time to time, especially the year after an unusually rainy summer. Such is the way of myth and mystery.

## **Jim Spratt Letters**

It was normal for the cowboys to report to Mike or Murray, by mail, from the far off locations at the camps. The historical account of Jim Spratt and the Lone Star Ranch is part of history and Jim described the life of Murray Stapleton, and his family, in what we refer to as “the Jim Spratt letters.”

These, the six letters, were transcribed by me from the penciled originals that Jim Spratt wrote while at the horse camp to my grandfather who was living with his family at the homestead on the Red Deer River. The letters describe conditions on ranches in southeast Alberta during the Dirty Thirties. They are communications from 1935 to 1938 from the head cowboy at Buffalo. The first letter from Jim Spratt is written at the horse camp and was carried to the CPR Royal Line north at Buffalo where they were transported by train to Jenner and picked up by Murray at the post office.

In the second letter, it appears that Murray is paying Jim in 1936 for the balance of wages owed from 1935.

Although the Jim Spratt letter of 1937 shows that he had given up on the future of the ranch, he encouraged Murray, and wrote what Murray needed to hear to keep going. Jim was using his own money to buy feed for starving horses and cattle at the horse camp.

The last letters describe the situation on the ranch in 1938 and how difficult it was to manage the herds; hungry animals on the open range; how the animals wandered over the territory foraging for food and often onto lands that were neighbor's properties. This was a terror; a fear and trembling, on an economic scale, for Murray and Jim, a breakdown of almost everything they knew. Murray Stapleton, first son of the Chief and

Annie, grew up on the Lone Star Ranch and he was not prepared for what he would now experience.

The historical facts are best described by Jim Spratt himself in his letters from the horse camp. Jim Spratt, being the senior man, manages the ranch with younger Murray Stapleton through difficult times. As a young man with seven children, Murray relied on Jim Spratt. In fact they presided over the ranch together, almost through to the end of the Great Depression.

These letters have been transcribed by me to the best of my ability, in that spacing and spelling has been left as true to Jim Spratt as I could make them, in spite of the fact that there were a few words and phrases that were not clear or were missing.

These are the six letters that Murray kept.

Horse Camp. Dec 10/35

Dear Murray received Beef & thanks. Been over in Coulee field S.W. of here. Herd tell of bunch of cows in their but could not locate them found where they had been but have drifted out or may be some of you have got them. & may be some body else stuff. Have 1 cow & calf over East again big heavy cow & is foot sore tender. & made arrangements for him to winter them give him \$4.00 to let them run at straw stacks. So dm icy would have about killed em both to drive them up their. So used my own heads ... damn poor head but it's all I got. Say wish you would have them fellows that is riding around up their look out for that Gillham Steer long yearling Black. White Spot in face. Brand CH on ribs as he wants him & let me know when you get him. Shut him up with stuff you're feeding & will try & get up and get him right away or let him come up there. Thanks. He will loose him now. Try & do this & keep me out jail a little longer. Yours Jim.

Horse Camp Jan/36

Dear Murray Jenner Canada

Please find Expense Bills in another Package look em over & send c.k. for em & thanks. Jim

Been poking around quite a bit got 8 more corral & put em on river at Jordon's Ranch. Guess will be all ok for a while. Was in good shape but getting foot sore. Found 2 more on Big river & 3 of Malloy's but got tired trying to drive them. So much ice. They are on good feed & shelter. Think they are all o.k. there until spring. Could not find no place to put them in Settlement. Weather not bad but so much ice & snow, hard getting around. Got in wash out & crippled pony on river the other day but is coming around all o.k. now. All the damage to me was I had to change drawers when I got home. Well look over these Bills & send bal. of wages for /35 & thanks. Wishing you all the best of health & good luck.

Jim

Horse Camp Feb 12/37

Dear Murray. Jenner, Alta.

Say, some of these yearlings of Kilpatrick is getting pretty thin & weak. Am supposed to feed them or let em die. Got yearling steer over at Sweeds. 2 at Gordon's. They seam to keep coming down river. No body riding guess. If you don't finish it some one else will. Now try & get a pencil & rite. Let me know bout those yearlings. Damned near as stiff a winter as last around here. Water all froze up. Got to melt snow guess if don't warm up pretty soon. Sent you my Expense Bills while ago. See if you can't send me a little money & thanks. Got to eat some way or other. Think I will try & get into politics or the movies. That's about the only thing that there is any money in nowadays.

Wele, hoping you're all well.

Yours truly, Jim (Over)

18<sup>th</sup> This not mailed yet. Trying to blow H out of things now. Bad going. Ice bout 1 foot all over. Am feeding colts when they come up every day or so. Will try town in a day or 2 once this Winter... 2 days trip. Sure Bad going. Think I will hafta try town city life next winter. Got your Social Dividends yet? Old Aberhart seems to be changing men a lot. Think will hit him for a job. I can do as well as the most of them is doing. Get my pockets full of \$ and quit. The old World is in one H of a mess don't you think.

Well be good & hello every body. Jim. Think moon is going in tomorrow so will try & get this of. Well guess I will quit, out of paper & only 1 straw.

Horse Camp Mar 14/37

Dear Murray Just alive or 2 received you're a few days ago & c.k.s. & thanks regards to little stud have made 6 or 8 rides looking for him but they are so wild cant get any wheres neer em. Seam to be scared to death. Been Dog men in here all last fall & early winter. they act as though they think I got dogs to for I make so dm much fuss on this ice talking praying & saying things but will try & run onto him some of this days. Kilpatrick colts all o.k. fed 6 of them for a while. Lots of feed but water is short an the Bum. Dogs sun some throw fence & a man got a dog. May get some more God help us & the lord save us. May be Old Aberhart's prayer for us here hes going to O.C. help Detricak. Now king get Social Credit money more settlers I reckon. Well be good.

Hoping your all well  
& best of Luck. Jim.

Horse Camp Dec 14/37

Dear Murray. Jenner. Received your c.k. a few days ago & thanks. Don't think this Job is going to amount to much. Have not herd from any of my Bosses yet. Don't expect to get anything out of it. Just a place to stop & a place to spend what money I can get a hold of. To many after it. Must be 20 or more with little bunches of stock & a bunch of kids etc. Well don't care much. To damned complicated to suit me any way. Am goind try & see Old Aberhart. May be get something their preaching or he might quit & get his Job. Never can tell. Always the first for everything. Don't think will be much stock left down here this winter if this spell don't break pretty soon. From 2 to 3 feet of pure ice all over this country. Not cold just but bad enough. Say there is 4 head of cattle in Buffalo Lease 1. (Lone Star brand) steer there getting pretty weak. Think the other is either Mclearys or Seuels (over)

Tried to get some of those river fellows to let em on the river but (they were) to damned miserable & selfish. Am going try & get im to day more feed. No feed or coal either half of time.

Well be good. Jim

& Hello to rest of folks & wishing you all a merry Xmas & nyear & best of Health.

Jim, Buffalo.

Buffalo. Mar 1/38

Mr. Murray Stapleton, Jenner Canada.

Hello Boy. Received yours Sat - & regards. 2 steers. 3 different guys told me (they) was yours. As the reason I wrote you was in town 1 day & see them of a long ways ... drove over to them & see what they wore for my self figured would take him to river if he was yours. But he was VZ Gordon's steer & B4 Brown & AA cow and calve. Andy Nesses so told them guys so Gordon got his. but think they tried to get some of them fellows to take them to river or feed them until he could get them but no to them ... yes plenty ice & snow here hard on every thing has been tween 2 & 3 feet on level. But is a little bare ground now the hill tops and rocks have hauled 68 or 70 Dollars worth of feed this winter & these old ponies look worse than I ever seen them. Don't think a man has any business with more than about 1 horse in this country any more until she gets back to normal again. Needs bout (over)

5 or 6 years rest. Think stuff will need feed for 6 weeks or 2 months yet. When this ice dose go, won't be no grass no how until it grows. Had ponies out in big field for a few days trying to rustle a little. Went after them over to the east fence a fast. Tired & sore to day. Snow lots of it 3 to 20 feet. Well the seat of my Britches drug my tracks out all the way so you can tell it was pretty bad going.

Well Hello to rest of the folks. Wishing you all the  
Best of

Health & good luck.

Back: [http://www.landandminerals.com/lone\\_star\\_ranch.html](http://www.landandminerals.com/lone_star_ranch.html)

*End...:* Chapter 13 “The Wreck of the Ranch,” page 301.

Page 303-335, APPENDIX I, II & III explanations,

Page 345, References and Bibliography,

357 pages with 40 photographs and illustrations.

The wreck of the ranch ...



what's left of the foundations of Murray's house,  
... "*The End*," but not the end.

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City or town—"Petrolea" and Michael Stapleton, English, Canadian, Place of Birth—USA, Detroit Michigan, boarded at Honolulu Feb. 9, 1929. Photocopies provided (London, Ontario: Mike Stapleton, Stapleton Researcher, March 8, 2007).

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### Chronology and Detailed Historical Context

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42. Children of MICHAEL MURRAY JAMES KERWIN STAPLETON and PATRICIA LORETTA LEMNA of Brutus, Alberta; b. Piper City, Illinois: i. WILLIAM JAMES STAPLETON, (Landman) b. 07 September, 1928, Calgary, Alberta; m. HELEN JOYCE DAVIES (banker), b. 26 June, 1927, Castor, AB, d. 26 December, 1996, Child of William James Stapleton and Helen Joyce Davies: MURRAY JAMES STAPLETON, B.A., (Landman) the author; b. 01 October, 1948, City of Calgary m. LYNDA ROSE LARKIN (teacher), b. 17 September 1950, City of New Westminster, British Columbia, m. December 22, 1972, Children of Murray James Stapleton and Lynda Rose Larkin: ROBIN SEAN MURRAY STAPLETON, (Engineer, M.Sc.) b. 31 December, 1979, Calgary, Alberta and MICHAEL JAMES STAPLETON, (Landman), b. 07 December, 1982, Calgary, Alberta; ii. MARY PATRICIA STAPLETON, b. 03 February 1930, Calgary, Alberta; m. EUGENE MCLEAN; b. Vulcan, AB, iii. MARGARET MARY STAPLETON, b. 12 December 1931, Calgary, Alberta; m. WILLIAM D. DICKIE; b. 28 June 1932, Regina, Saskatchewan; d. 22 November 1965, iv. MICHAEL MURRAY STAPLETON, b. 25 April 1933, Calgary, Alberta; m. HELEN ALDERMAN; b. 12 September 1935 of Wainwright, AB, v. COLLEEN ANN STAPLETON, b. 01 July 1934, Calgary, Alberta; m. ROBERT L. IRWIN; b. 08 October 1930, Vulcan, AB, vi. JOHN JOSEPH STAPLETON, b. 01 January 1936, Calgary, Alberta; m. IRENE MEYER; b. 29 May 1935, Viking, AB, vii. ROBERT FREDRICK STAPLETON, b. 14 June 1937, Empress, AB; d. 03 May, 1963, Santa Monica, California; m. BEVERLEY HAEH; b. 27 September 1939, High River, Alberta, viii. MAUREEN FRANCES STAPLETON, b. 01 November 1939, Calgary, Alberta; m. MOE ZALESCHUK; b. 04 September 1940, Meacham, Saskat-

chewan, ix. PATRICK GEORGE STAPLETON, b. 03 July 1941, High River, Alberta; m. (1) THERESA ST. HILLAIRE; m. (2) LYDIA V. ZIEGLER, x. SHEILA MARIE STAPLETON, b. 06 August 1944, High River, AB; m. DAVID M. TOUROND; b. 27 August 1942, Brighton, Sussex, England.

43. The Dirty 30s began and winters of 1936 and 1937 killed many of the horses and cattle on the ranch. Mike-the-Chief died 30 June, 1937. He was in severe pain during the end. He died of bladder cancer after surgery in Calgary. His funeral was at St. Mary's Cathedral in Calgary and he was interned in St. Mary's cemetery. Jim Spratt letters were written and mailed Dec 10/35 to March 1/38. Minnie (Mary Theresa Anderson Samuels) is said to have tried to work with the bank to save the ranch through 1938. World War II meant that an economic recovery started in 1939. Anna Elizabeth Anderson Stapleton (also Annie, or Gonn) died in 1950. Mary Theresa Anderson Samuels (Minnie) died January 26, 1959. Michael *MURRAY* James Kerwin Stapleton died 02 July, 1979.
44. Roy Banta of Crossfield, Alberta, initiated an investigation into the history of the Lone Star Ranch 30 March, 1989. The first field trip to gather data on the ranch was taken in spring of 1989. *Prairie Crucible: Roads of History 1891-1941-1991*, with some of Roy Banta's stories, was published by the Prairie Sod History Book Society of Medicine Hat in 1991.

Words roll out; then, a day or a week later, an editing session may or may not change the first draft. It could be draft 75, or draft 120 that makes the text feel and sound right. Then, the text seems to go back to the way it was before. The first draft of the manuscript took 4 or 5 weeks. When I was stuck for something to say about my grandfather, it took hours of staring at the blank screen and scribbling notes until out of desperation for a way to finish, I simply asked Murray what he wanted to say. I said, "Murray, just say what it is you want me to tell," and the words about Murray and his dejected

feelings, after the fall of the ranch, came out. Is it a writer in the zone or have the gods and spirits spoken? Who knows? But we have to listen if we want to hear. The first draft was always more precise than amended versions; those were the real words as I understood them. However, those *gods* are terrible at punctuation. They don't have much time for *nuance* in a world desperate for (*reality*) truth.

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Disclaimer: The author attempted to verify names and dates relating to the Stapleton family history and its collection while much of the text is created from stories handed down by word of mouth.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Stapleton: entrepreneur, landman, diamond prospector and teacher over 30 years. Using a degree in earth sciences—geomorphology, he writes the *Living and Working in Paradise* series that describes mineral exploration and development on the international scale—the challenges of doing business in multi-cultural environments—ethics and government regulation of the exploration industries.

*The Bounty of Gods* applies lessons learned over decades by the Stapleton family through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the history of the Lone Star Ranch, spirituality in the larger context, the interpretation of which played an important part in the lives of our ancestors. It is also a study of how entrepreneurial pursuits crash headlong into present-day aberrations of Canadian politics and bureaucracy, especially foggy, complex and often arbitrary tax structures that reduce the productivity of economies.

Contributions to Canada have been through teaching, writing and prospecting; making discoveries and reporting on them by publication, particularly the discovery of volcanic occurrences relating to the Late Cretaceous that added to our understandings of the geology and geochemistry of the Peace River Arch.

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