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# Stone Gods and Haunted Schoolhouses: Nostalgia and Vernacular Local History in Rosebud, Alberta 1960-1983

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Stone Gods and Haunted Schoolhouses:  
Nostalgia and Vernacular Local History in Rosebud, Alberta 1960-1983

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
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## **Abstract**

Scholars have often characterized the vernacular local history projects that proliferated across the rural Canadian prairies in the second half of the twentieth century as a grassroots response to demographic and technological change. Most academic surveys have emphasized how rural community historians articulated a mythic heritage identity by valorizing the ‘pioneer’ experience of agricultural settlement. This case study more intimately explores nostalgic commemoration of the past undertaken by local historians in Rosebud, Alberta as their community declined between 1960 and 1983. Rosebud’s historians sentimentalized autobiographical experiences of rural life, appropriated indigenous people as ancestral origin figures, and eulogized ‘wild western’ cowboys as icons of a lost frontier. Identifying and exploring these trends, this study concludes members of this rural community did not always conform to popular convention as they assigned meaning to historical experiences defined by liminality and impermanence rather than enduring stability or success.

## **Preface**

(a threshold poem)

History hides

In a stolen

Hollyhock embrace,

Staring out from this photograph

That devours my

Memories:

Two people looking past

The place I want

to begin.

Striding

Towards some distant storehouse,

Fierce and unknowable like

Ruby-bellied

hawks

As the sunset scorches

the quaking

And quite delirious

Prairie.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. David Marshall, whose good humour, patience and thoughtful reflection helped give shape and clarity to this study, which at times threatened to become overly idiosyncratic. Profound thanks also to Dr. Paul Stortz, who cultivated ambition when he first challenged me to enter graduate school and undertake a rural history project. Regarding the practical demands of my research, I am tremendously grateful for the welcoming assistance provided by George and Jewel Comstock, as well as Bonita Hudson at the Rosebud Centennial Museum. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support this study received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation.

Personal thanks to my dear friends Lana Selbee and Mark Woodhouse, for their readily available hearts and minds, and most especially to Connor Schancel for sharing my sense of adventure on isolated back roads, in pioneer cemeteries and small-town saloons and coffeehouses. Finally, I would like to thank my parents Margaret and Larry Holman, for inspiring me with stories about their rural upbringing as I undertook this project. I would like to dedicate this study to them, and to our own pioneer forebears who broke the earth open only a few short generations ago. We are already homesick for the world they knew.

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Sometimes at night, when the October wind whistles,  
And plays in the coulees, and tears at the shingles,  
I look outside and wonder,  
If this old house Grandpa built will blow down.  
...If it is midnight on the plains a thousand years ago.

-Wendell Hughes, "Midnight on the Plains."

## Introduction

Offering a folkloric counterpoint to the sleek sterility of modern agricultural infrastructure, the weathered boards and peeling paint of dilapidated rural buildings across the Canadian prairie West have often been sentimentalized as ‘pioneer’ heritage, commemorating personal and collective places of origin. To this effect, ethno-cultural historian Frances Swyripa has suggested the rural prairies contain a multitude of ‘storied landscapes’ revealing how euro-Canadian settlers ‘transformed a space into places’ with the emotional resonance of homes and communities.<sup>1</sup> However, while popular heritage narratives often celebrate how settlement pioneers struggled and eventually triumphed in their efforts to claim the prairie landscape, demographic change often meant landmarks anchoring these experiences to the material landscape rapidly fell into disrepair or disappeared altogether in the modern era. Rather than affirming an intergenerational inheritance, abandoned farmhouses and derelict grain elevators haunted rural landscapes like frail spectres from a bygone era, suggesting ‘...the mapping of meaning to the physical landscape’ by euro-Canadian settlers had often been contingent, fleeting and impermanent.<sup>2</sup> This was particularly evident following the Second World War, when widespread rural depopulation left pioneer landmarks decaying into historical curiosities, inspiring a pervasive ‘nostalgia for a disappearing past’.<sup>3</sup>

The range of cultural imagery conjuring the history of rural life across the Canadian prairies is reflected in commemorative coins engraved with meadowlarks and stalks of wheat, small town murals depicting stoic farm families breaking land, and oversized statues of crocuses, gophers and oxcarts enshrined as roadside attractions. Regional commercial products similarly

promote identification with rural heritage, exemplified by the iconic outline of a wooden grain elevator adorning bottles of ‘grasshopper’ wheat beer produced by Alberta’s Big Rock brewery. However, while pioneer imagery provides a fairly standard repertoire of regional symbols for the prairie West it often presents only an enigmatic trace to modern consumers. To this effect, popular Albertan country musician Corb Lund sings

‘The worn out western hat I got no longer smells like horse...

I guess I’ve left it all behind me now except for when I write

the slick ancestral praises of the ones who knew that life...’<sup>4</sup>

Evoking historically contingent experiences that few modern residents could claim to have directly encountered, admiration for rural history in the prairie West is often steeped in a similar nostalgia, casting modern life as less distinctive, fulfilling, and authentic than a valorized pioneer past. In part, this reflects the rapidity with which rural prairie life was transformed in the twentieth century.

A descriptive term, ‘rural’ is typically associated with low population density, reliance upon primary industry, and distance from major metropolitan centres.<sup>5</sup> Such conditions defined life for the majority of people in the prairie West prior to the middle of the twentieth century. However, after 1945 the regional dynamic shifted as displaced rural people flooded into urban centres, ‘uprooted by...economic transformation’ that rendered small-scale farming increasingly untenable.<sup>6</sup> Generally, scholars attribute this demographic shift to the ‘intensification of technological change, and the rapid concentration of capital resources’ in the agricultural economy, which made it possible for fewer farmers to cultivate more land.<sup>7</sup> While over sixty percent of the population in the prairie West was rural in 1941, historians estimate that proportion had dwindled to only thirty percent by 1981, suggesting roughly half of the prairie

farm population drifted out of rural districts following the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, urban centres swelled with people who no longer saw a future in rural districts, an influx which ‘...constituted one of the most significant migrations in Canadian history’ and dramatically transformed prairie life in the modern era.<sup>9</sup>

Immediately following the Second World War, the declining socio-economic vitality of rural prairie communities elicited academic and political concern, inspiring a number of government-sponsored sociological studies. Two of the best known examples include Jean Burnet’s *Next-Year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta* (1951), and a study conducted by P. James Giffen under direction of a Royal Commission concerning adult education and community life in rural Manitoba, recently republished as *Rural Life: Portraits of the Prairie Town, 1946* (2004). Exploring the impact of drought, economic depression and depopulation in the Hanna district of southeast Alberta, Burnet expressed concern that rural communities settled by agricultural pioneers only a generation before had already experienced discernable social and economic decline, indicating a failure to sustain ‘a satisfactory community life.’<sup>10</sup> Chief among the problems Burnet identified in this regard was an increased out-migration of young people, a loosening of ‘social fabric’ as recreational organizations disintegrated and traditional values of neighbourliness and community solidarity eroded, and increased ‘personal disorganization’ associated with the disorderly consumption of alcohol, mental disease, suicide, murder and violent crime.<sup>11</sup> Giffen similarly asserted the ‘low population density of rural areas...in the grain-growing areas of the West, places significant limits on the community institutions and infrastructure that can be maintained’, thereby reducing the cultural vibrancy and social stability of many rural prairie districts following the Second World War.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to a surge in externally sourced academic and government-sponsored studies, vernacular local history projects also flourished in rural prairie communities after 1945, reflecting grassroots responses to change and uncertainty in the modern era. Pursued by individuals as a personal hobby, or collaboratively by social groups and cultural organizations, ‘community-sponsored local histories alone sustained a small industry’ for several decades in the rural prairie West, peaking in popularity roughly between 1967 and 1985.<sup>13</sup> Ranging from dull and documentary to humorous and folkloric, they varied widely in tone. Often presented in a style suggesting a family scrapbook, they typically comprised personal anecdotes, family histories and oral history interviews, and incorporated documentary material ranging from photographs and newspaper stories to locally produced poems and artwork. While some conventions appeared across a broad range of amateur local history books, they can also be singular and enigmatic, reflecting the diversity of people and communities that have produced them. Nevertheless, most share a number of distinctively vernacular traits, including a prominent use of personal memory as a direct source of information about the past.

Interpreting past experiences in a creative, contingent, and highly subjective manner, people engaged in the act of remembering often recall with vivid immediacy emotional and psychological dimensions of particular places and events. For this reason, oral historian Lynn Abrams has suggested memory reveals ‘the relationship between material facts and personal subjectivity’ when it is called upon to assist with historical interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Relying upon personal memory to document their own autobiographical experiences for posterity, contributors to local history projects in rural prairie communities often acted as both archive and historian. Writing about the past in a highly subjective and self-reflexive manner, their work affirmed scholarly contentions that vernacular historians in Western Canada seldom ‘...displayed

scholarly detachment; their writing has tended to be informed by direct experience and animated by a passionate involvement...’ with their subject matter.<sup>15</sup>

Generally spearheaded by elderly residents and aging pioneers who proudly labeled themselves ‘old timers,’ many local history projects undertaken across the prairie West were inspired by an urgent desire to commemorate distinctively rural experiences threatened with obsolescence in the modern era. Often steeped in nostalgic emotion, the work of grassroots historians thus documented how “ruralness is more than location or an occupation, it is a way of life,” defined by subjective experiences as much as historical realities.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, old timers engaged in autobiographical self-reflection frequently interpreted their life experiences as a cultural heritage they wished to preserve for posterity. While history in scholarly contexts generally describes ‘objective’ attempts to document facts about the past, heritage is more transparently subjective, selectively imbuing certain aspects of the past with present-day meaning.<sup>17</sup> Conflating the articulation of collective heritage with historical documentation, residents of rural prairie communities articulated a fluid kind of vernacular historical consciousness, illuminating how ‘collective memory, the writing of history, and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind merge’.<sup>18</sup>

This case study undertakes detailed analysis of local history books published by residents of the rural community of Rosebud, Alberta between 1960 and 1983. Located approximately ninety-five kilometers north-east of the major metropolitan centre of Calgary in southern Alberta, Rosebud is situated in the rolling hills and coulees of the river valley for which it is named.<sup>19</sup> Ranchers originally settled the Rosebud district in the mid 1880’s, and old timers recalled ‘...the range around Rosebud was alive with cattle and horses’ until agricultural settlers began to arrive in greater numbers after 1910.<sup>20</sup> Like many rural prairie communities, Rosebud

owed its early growth to a homesteading rush triggered by the construction of a rail line, which made the district more accessible and appealing to prospective settlers. The Canadian Northern Railway first constructed a line through the Rosebud river valley in 1910, while the Gilbert Brothers Land Company also sold land held by the Canadian Pacific Railway and promoted the district to settlers, sparking early enthusiasm about the district's economic prospects.<sup>21</sup> Rapidly transforming open range to cultivate cereal crops, this surge of incoming homesteaders often forced earlier arrivals to adopt mixed livestock and grain farming operations.

By 1920 one local historian recalled 'Rosebud, a broomgrass and oat field town in 1913...' had grown exponentially, boasting a railway station, two general stores, three grain elevators, and a Chinese restaurant.<sup>22</sup> However, despite the enthusiasm of early boosters, as a rural service centre Rosebud never grew larger than a village, and had reverted to a hamlet by 1944.<sup>23</sup> In 1955 the Alberta Business Directory listed the population of Rosebud as 110 people, even though the unincorporated community continued to provide services to '...a district population of some 700 most of whom are engaged in grain farming.'<sup>24</sup> Industrial activity was also present in the Rosebud district in the 1950's, comprising two local coalmines and a number of producing oil wells, as well as three grain elevators and a seed cleaning plant. Other local services available in 1955 included a hotel, a new four-room school, two garages, two general stores, and two restaurants.<sup>25</sup>

By the early 1960's, signs of postwar revitalization in Rosebud had dwindled, and troubling evidence of the community's declining prospects as a rural service centre appeared in December of 1962 with the closure of the local train station. This was a symbolically potent event, as passenger trains had carried people in and out of the district for roughly fifty years, sustaining a sense of social and economic vibrancy. To this effect, a local historian observed

‘Forty-eight years ago Rosebud Station was busy with express, freight and passenger service, four passenger trains a day, all generally filled to capacity.’<sup>26</sup> The impact of a silent train station must have seemed an ominous indicator of Rosebud’s declining fortunes in the modern era.

In the decades that followed, Rosebud increasingly relied on tourism and the arts, and the community’s scenic beauty inspired members of the Crescent Heights Baptist Church in Calgary, as well as students from the University of Calgary and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, to establish a local summer arts camp in the early 1970’s. By 1977, this endeavour had evolved into a ‘Christian Creative Arts School’ offering alternative education in a rural setting.<sup>27</sup> In 1979, a sustainability study undertaken by environmental design students at the University of Calgary asserted Rosebud’s isolation and dwindling population threatened the organization’s long-term viability.<sup>28</sup> While arts programming in Rosebud subsequently appeared to have lost explicitly religious associations, throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century the community continued to be promoted as a picturesque leisure destination for regional tourists and urban day trippers. At the present time, the community’s website promises travellers a ‘refreshing’ pause to enjoy local theatre, museum and golf course in a beautiful river valley setting.<sup>29</sup> In 2011, 88 people continued to call the hamlet home, suggesting tourism and the arts have provided some degree of economic sustainability in recent years, although it does not appear to have created substantial growth.<sup>30</sup>

Local history was first popularized in Rosebud by John Julius Martin, an ‘old timer’ whose family had been among the first to settle in the district in the late 1800’s. Martin avidly pursued local history as a personal hobby, publishing a number of articles, books, and pamphlets documenting the experiences of early district pioneers. After his death in 1973, a dedicated mix of current and former residents built upon Martin’s legacy, collaboratively compiling a more

inclusive community history extending into the modern era. In 1979, they formed the Rosebud History Book Committee and an associated organization, the Rosebud Historical Society. Conducting research and collecting family stories from current and former residents of the district, they published *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* in 1983.

While Rosebud's historians were often highly selective, fragmentary and idiosyncratic in terms of the subject matter they commemorated, detailed content analysis reveals patterns affirming the scholarly contention that nostalgia '...is manifest as a particular relationship with the past...either a conscious longing for that past, a sense of regret ...[or] loss...or a preservation of the past by way of its idealization...' <sup>31</sup> As both producers and consumers of local history books, current and former residents of Rosebud who contributed to vernacular projects were uniquely empowered to transform 'contingency into meaning', interpreting temporary, transient or obsolete historical experiences as nostalgic signifiers of a shared identity in the modern era.<sup>32</sup> Benedict Anderson has famously described such cultural activity as the act of 'imagining' community,' creating affective bonds between people that transcend individual difference and 'command...emotional legitimacy' as manifestations of collective identity.<sup>33</sup> In a parallel manner, while local history projects in Rosebud were often intensely personal, they also highlighted commonalities, cultivating collective sentimentality by eulogizing 'lost' historical experiences perceived to define membership in the community.

This study contends local historians in Rosebud expressed nostalgia as a grassroots response to depopulation and decline, often commemorating the past in a manner that acknowledged the transiency and impermanence of formative rural experiences associated with the settlement era. To begin, the first chapter examines the context in which Rosebud's historians cultivated self-reflexive commemorative agendas as a nostalgic response to socio-economic

decline in the modern era. The second chapter contends Rosebud's historians expressed anxieties about the rapidity of change that had transformed their community by eulogizing formative autobiographical experiences as generational touchstones and historical benchmarks of rural life perceived to be threatened with obsolescence as they aged. The third chapter asserts local historians soothed concerns about Rosebud's declining stature as a place of origin by expressing an appropriative nostalgia for romanticized 'Indian' ancestors that bolstered euro-Canadian claims to possess an intimate, hereditary and almost indigenous relationship with the local landscape. Finally, the fourth chapter argues local history projects mitigated anxieties about Rosebud's decline by sentimentalizing the district's 'wild western' origins, celebrating iconic local symbols of frontier ranching as a shared cultural inheritance with an enduringly dynamic appeal. Taken together, these nostalgic motifs suggest Rosebud's historians did not react to evidence of depopulation and decline simply by lionizing local settlement pioneers, often plainly acknowledging instead the transiency and instability of the pioneer legacy in their community.

While aiming to enrich and expand scholarly perceptions of vernacular local history in the prairie West, this study draws upon existing historiography exploring development and change in the rural prairie West through the lens of local history. Perhaps the most seminal work in this regard is Paul Voisey's *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (1988), which serves as a robust demonstration of how academic historians can adopt the scale of local history to grapple with broader debates in a field of study. *Vulcan* made a significant contribution to rural historiography in Western Canada, arguing that no single theory could fully explain the complex process of community development during the settlement era across the prairie region. Voisey contended that the natural environment, frontier conditions, metropolitan influences and the settler's own cultural traditions comprised four fundamental forces that interacted in dynamic

fashion to shape local development in settlement communities.<sup>34</sup> His work provides a necessary foundation for this study, by demonstrating localized case studies can reveal how lived experiences in rural prairie districts were shaped by a highly variable interplay between the agency and personal will of residents, and the material conditions of their geographic location. Further, by emphasizing the uneven interplay of forces that shaped settlement experiences in the Prairie West rather than crediting any single explanation, Voisey illuminated the broader historical significance of local experiences, without obscuring their complexity and contingency.

Paul Voisey argued that successful academic local history “has limited and definite purposes, shuns events, and individuals in favour of structures and groups, and is interdisciplinary in theme and method.”<sup>35</sup> This criteria privileged rigorous analysis and scholarly distance over the celebratory self-reflection and colourful individuality that characterizes many vernacular local history books. While Voisey had personal roots in the Vulcan district in southern Alberta, his study retained the polished authority of analytic scholarship, deftly balancing quantitative social scientific methodology with qualitative considerations of rural life. Interestingly, while he often cited vernacular historians, Voisey did not explore at length how or why residents of Vulcan and neighbouring communities undertook these amateur projects to record their experiences for posterity. In this regard his work reflected a more general academic trend, as graduate students in the prairie West have often explored the work of grassroots rural historians in greater depth than established scholars.

Perhaps the most significant graduate study concerning vernacular rural history in the prairie West is Joanne Stiles’ M.A. thesis, *Gilded Memories: Perceptions of the Frontier in Rural Alberta as Reflected in Popular History* (1985). Stiles’ thesis provides an important foundation for this study, as she interpreted the fluorescence of amateur community history

books across the rural prairie West in the modern era as a historically conditioned, cultural response to demographic and technological change.<sup>36</sup> Surveying amateur historiography produced by rural Albertans, Stiles seemed surprised to find an ‘... overwhelmingly uniform impression of the character of pioneer experiences in late nineteenth and early twentieth century.’<sup>37</sup> In addition to being hardworking and self-sufficient, Stiles noted amateur historians repeatedly characterized settlement pioneers as ‘determined, resilient, and optimistic.’<sup>38</sup> Positioning pioneers as founding figures and portraying agricultural settlement as an ordinary experience, Stiles concluded the work of grassroots historians reflected collective anxieties shared by rural people as a broad demographic confronting rapid technological and demographic change in the modern era.<sup>39</sup> To this effect, she explained ‘...the uniformity of their imagery and the connections between the subjects they emphasize and contemporary matters of concern that identify their works as mythology.’<sup>40</sup>

This project does not seek to extensively revise the conclusions Joanne Stiles reached in *Golden Memories*, as casually reading almost any rural local history in the prairie West reveals pervasive characterizations of settlement pioneers as progressive symbols of rural strength and endurance. By way of example, one community historian in Vulcan percussively explained the meaning of the word ‘pioneer’ as “a deep gut feeling. It is not turning your back to the wind but turning up your collar and leaning into it...It is being able to say ‘TOMORROW’ and ‘NEXT YEAR’ rather than ‘OH! WHY DID I?’”<sup>41</sup> However, while acknowledging the mythic dimension of rural local history in the prairie West, this study seeks to expand on Stiles’ work in two ways. First, by narrowing the scale of analysis to consider a single community, this case study is better able to identify how immediate contexts of production influenced representations of rural experiences in vernacular local histories alongside popular pioneer mythologies. Second,

this study explores expressions of nostalgic emotion in an effort to move beyond the mythic centrality of settlement pioneers in scholarly surveys, thereby illuminating with greater depth the impact of autobiographical self-reflexivity and localized conditions on vernacular history projects in the prairie West.

Completed in 1985, *Golden Memories* was nearly contemporary with the popular history it studied, lending it an enduring immediacy. However, recent scholarship has offered scholars a more nuanced vocabulary with which to consider amateur historiography in Western Canada, by shifting focus to the vernacular character of its production. Historian Lyle Dick has characterized vernacular writing as a dialogic endeavour, often directly preserving the accounts of historical witnesses without subordinating their unique voices to academic agendas or arguments. To this effect, he observed ‘Vernacular writers have resisted synthesis and generalization... they have often... displayed the voices and perspectives of witnesses to history for readers to consider and evaluate for themselves.’<sup>42</sup> Dick’s scholarship illuminates two important points for the purpose of this study, which emphasize the value of thorough contextualization when analyzing the content of vernacular historiography for academic purposes. First, his case studies repeatedly contextualize the meaning of vernacular writing by considering the character, methodology, and intent of authors. In particular, he emphasized self-reflexivity, observing many vernacular authors ‘...drew on their own direct experiences as witnesses to history to add to our understanding of the people and events about which they were writing.’<sup>43</sup> Second, Dick observed ‘It is its strong connection to the local that helps ground vernacular writing within the experiential contexts within which it emerges’, rendering it imperative for scholars to contextualize nonacademic historiography in the immediate environment or community in which it was produced.<sup>44</sup> Put another way, Dick suggested broadly surveying vernacular material from

a regional perspective without proper contextualization can potentially obscure what was meaningful about such endeavours for the people and communities that produced them.

Lyle Dick has undertaken a number of case studies that have refined the analytical tools available to scholars interested in nonacademic historiography. However, in addition to having himself authored a scholarly local history of the Abernethy district in Saskatchewan, in studying vernacular historians Dick has tended to focus upon well-educated or intellectually-inclined individuals whose work was not always explicitly autobiographical. Therefore, while this study draws heavily on Dick's approach, it applies his insights to subtly different material, exploring vernacular authors engaged directly in interpreting their own life experiences for posterity.

Imbuing their work with nostalgic emotion, local historians in Rosebud were empowered to assess the significance of their own life experiences, both as individuals and as members of a rural community. For this reason, this study is powerfully influenced by *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (2010), Frances Swyripa's study of heritage initiatives in ethnic and religious communities across the prairie West. Swyripa situated her work in a wide-ranging regional context, recognizing a pervasive "angst" had crept across the rural prairies in the second half of the twentieth century that compelled many communities to produce 'local history books with evocative titles' reflecting their concerns about modernization.<sup>45</sup> However, *Storied Landscapes* moved scholarship in a new direction by simultaneously exploring the specific contexts in which rural heritage initiatives were undertaken across the prairies, sensitively engaging with their personal and affective dimensions as well as their broadly mythologizing tendencies. While the ethnic communities Swyripa examined were not necessarily defined by shared geographic locality, her study effectively demonstrated how popular heritage activities were often site-specific, such that a '...sense of identity or belonging was shaped by the

complex interplay among a physical and emotional attachment to the land at personal and group levels...<sup>46</sup> This study attempts to emulate Swyripa's interpretive approach by balancing analysis of content with careful contextualization, striving for a more nuanced exploration of how amateur history projects reflected contingent local and personal circumstances as well as popular mythologies across the prairie West.

While regional surveys have suggested grassroots historians responded to demographic change across the rural prairies primarily by promoting a triumphalist vision of settlement pioneers, by the 1960's local historians in Rosebud also mournfully intimated the pioneer legacy itself was threatened with obsolescence. To this effect, the foreword to *The Rosebud Trail* (1963) conformed to popular convention by lauding the achievements of settlers '...Who with Courage and Endurance Developed the/Open Plains/ For Our Safety and Comfort,' but also acknowledged the historical moment that had defined their achievements had rapidly '...Gone with the Whirling/Wheel of Time.'<sup>47</sup> To better understand a parallel tension between mythic celebration and nostalgic lament that often appeared to define local historical memory in modern Rosebud, the remainder of this study proceeds from the assertion that 'sensitive analysis of personal testimony can lead to a deeper and richer understanding of how the past is remembered, reworked and reconstructed by people in the present.'<sup>48</sup> A clear context for this approach will first be established by identifying the personal and social conditions that compelled Rosebud's historians to mourn the vulnerability of the pioneer legacy as much as its originary significance in the modern era.

## Chapter 1:

### Old Timers and ‘The Good Old Rosebud Days’

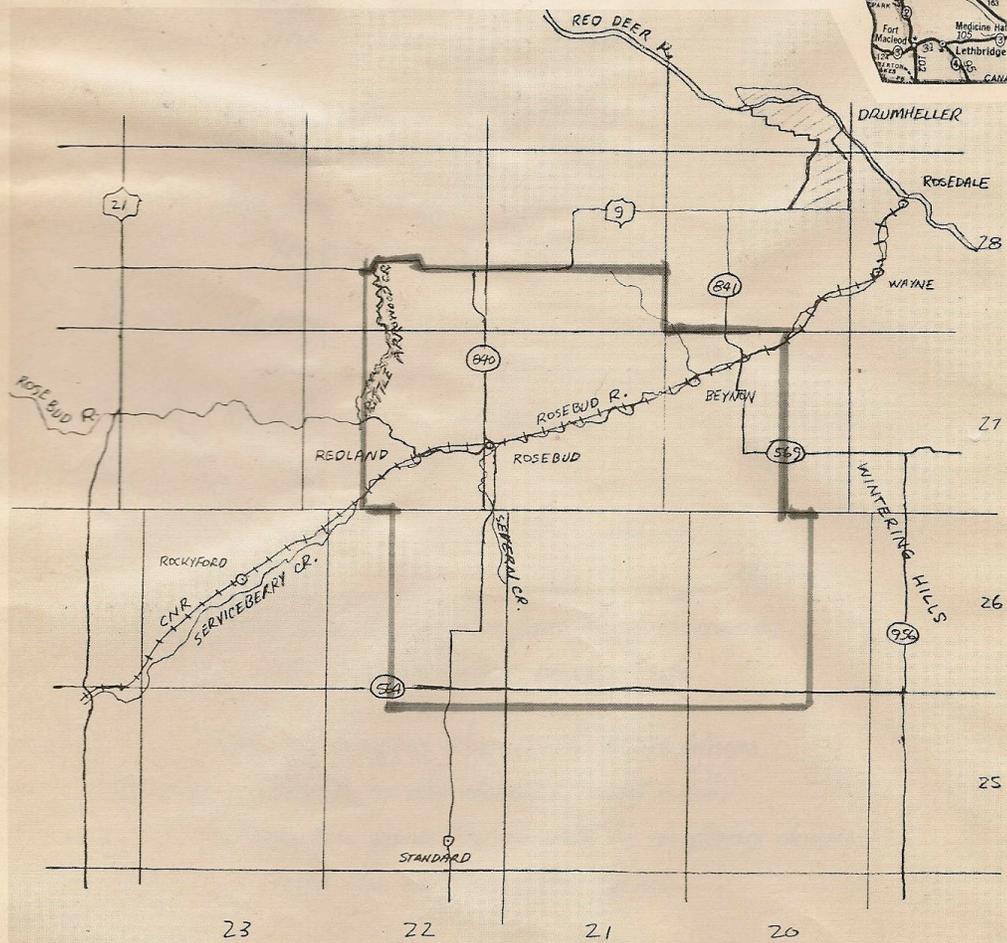
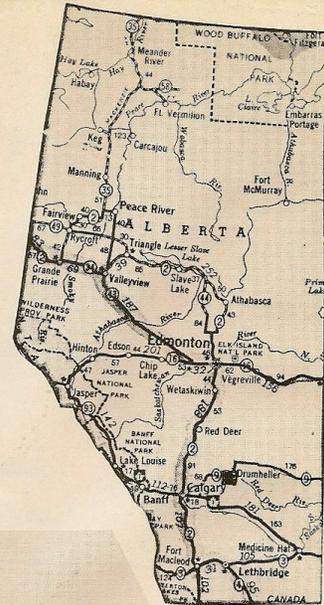
While nostalgia generally refers to a sentimental fixation on the past, it is also an inherently present-minded phenomenon, often acutely reflecting the contingent personal and socio-cultural conditions prompting its expression. Contextualizing expressions of nostalgic emotion in vernacular history projects can therefore prove remarkably difficult, as grassroots historians often interpreted their own experiences in an emotionally satisfying but idiosyncratic manner. However placed in a broader cultural perspective, particularly when nostalgic reminiscence privileges emotional hyperbole over factual accuracy, it may often be interpreted as a palliative response to rapid or disorienting trajectories of change over time. To this effect, David Lowenthal has asserted ‘a perpetual staple of nostalgic yearning is the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present.’<sup>1</sup>

Nostalgic local history projects flourished in the rural hamlet of Rosebud, Alberta between 1960 and 1983 as a grassroots response to depopulation and socio-economic decline. Following the construction of a railway at the outset of the First World War and a subsequent influx of euro-Canadian homesteaders, Rosebud developed into a rural service centre whose primary economic function was to provide goods and services to the agricultural population residing in the immediate vicinity.<sup>2</sup> While some local historians situated Rosebud within a much larger rural area relevant to their autobiographical experiences, contributors to the *Akokiniskway* project in the early 1980’s defined the

district as a relatively small geographical area roughly corresponding to township 27 at ranges 20, 21, 22, taking in the small rural communities of Rosebud, Redland and Beynon west of the fourth meridian, where prairies meet rolling coulees on the banks of the Rosebud river.<sup>3</sup> In 1914 this area was incorporated into the newly established Municipal District of Grasswold No. 248. However, reflecting decreased population density and a practical need to consolidate rural governance after the Great Depression, Grasswold was absorbed into increasingly larger Municipal Districts, becoming part of Serviceberry District No. 248 in 1943, which was subsequently absorbed into Wheatland County in 1954, of which Rosebud remains part at the present time.<sup>4</sup>

Rosebud's shifting municipal affiliations did not readily correspond to the grassroots sense of place expressed by local historians. However, adopting the geographical boundaries defined by *Akokiniskway*, census reports confirm demographic conditions in the Rosebud district were defined by depopulation and decline rather than ongoing growth or sustainability over the course of the twentieth century. In 1906 the three townships comprising Rosebud, Redland and Beynon remained nascent Euro-Canadian settlement districts containing only 67 permanent residents. This rapidly increased following the arrival of surveyors for the Canadian Northern Railway, and by 1911 the total population of this area had more than doubled, rising to 291 and continuing to climb to 490 people in 1916 as improved transportation infrastructure drew prospective homesteaders to the Rosebud. By 1921 the district population seems to have peaked at 763, sharply declining to 450 people only five years later in 1926. During the Great Depression this figure remained fairly stable, and even grew slightly to 473 people by 1941. However, the years following the Second World War witnessed more substantial

ON THE NORTH: The present No. 9 Highway, but including the Kirby School, Groenoveld's, Zern's, Humbolt School.  
 ON THE WEST: Four (4) miles west of the range line between Ranges 21 and 22, and including Greyhurst School.  
 ON THE SOUTH: One half (1/2) mile south of the Township line between Twp. 26 and 25 through ranges 22, 21, and 20.  
 ON THE EAST: NORTH OF THE ROSEBUD CREEK: East on No. 9 Highway from the Beynon Corner three (3) miles to the Rangeline between Ranges 21 and 20; then south to the Township line between Twp. 27 and 28; straight east to the Taylor Siding Road; then south to Rosebud Creek.  
 SOUTH OF THE ROSEBUD CREEK: All of Twp. 27 four (4) miles east of the range line between Ranges 20 and 21; to Twp. 26 three (3) miles east of the range line between Ranges 20 and 21; straight south into Twp. 25 until it intersects the south boundary.



2

**Figure 1.1** Author Unknown, map of Rosebud district, c. 1983. In *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses*, 2.

decline, as only 343 people resided in the district by 1946.<sup>5</sup> This trend continued in the decades that followed, and by the 1960's Rosebud, Redland and Beynon were classified by Census representatives as 'unorganized townships' bearing a total population of 340 people in 1961, and 316 in 1966.<sup>6</sup>

As a rural service centre, the community of Rosebud never grew beyond the size of a village, enjoying a peak population of 152 people in 1926 that had already declined to 114 by 1936.<sup>7</sup> Having lost village status in 1944, Rosebud subsequently appeared in census reports as an 'unincorporated place', defined by Statistics Canada as 'any cluster of five or more permanently occupied dwellings, in rural areas, locally known by a specific name but not having a local government or legal limits.'<sup>8</sup> Lacking clearly defined boundaries and often identified subjectively by Census enumerators, it should be noted that by the mid 1980's, Statistics Canada advised that comparison of population data for unincorporated places from year to year in census reports was 'not recommended.'<sup>9</sup> Bearing this in mind, census reports nevertheless indicate Rosebud sustained a population of only 53 people in 1976.<sup>10</sup> Three years after *Akokiniskway* had been published in response to Rosebud's apparent decline, little appeared to have changed, and the 1986 census report continued to list the hamlet as an unincorporated place populated by a total of 61 people.<sup>11</sup>

While census reports indicate depopulation was not likely experienced as a sudden or dramatic disruption of socio-economic order in Rosebud, the hamlet's viability in the decades following the Second World War was threatened by an increasingly apparent lack of growth that directly contradicted the hopes of early settlement pioneers. Often marginalized by insufficient economic diversity or geographic isolation relative to

metropolitan centres, similar difficulties confronting small service centres across the rural prairies were broadly recognizable by the early 1970's, when researchers from the University of Calgary asserted 'hamlets such as Rosebud...have been in decline and many are in danger of dying out entirely.'<sup>12</sup> At the grassroots level, current and former residents of the Rosebud district appeared to take solace in sentimental local history projects, preserving emotionally resonant accounts of distinctive rural experiences perceived to be threatened with obsolescence in the modern era.

John Julius Martin, a rancher and farmer whose family had numbered among the first nine Euro-Canadian families to settle in the district in 1897, first popularized the preservation of local historical knowledge in Rosebud.<sup>13</sup> A local old timer, Martin produced a number of articles, books and pamphlets documenting the experiences of early settlers in Rosebud, actively publishing from 1960 until his death at the age of eighty-five in 1973. Drawing extensively upon personal memories, John Martin's publications were suffused with melancholic, autobiographical reflections on Rosebud's rapid transformation from an idyllic open rangeland occupied by only a few ranchers in the 1880's, to a landscape dominated by grain farms and modern infrastructure after 1910. To this effect, Martin lamented 'In the short span of some thirty years, I witnessed the passing of the free range... I saw the big steam outfits turn the sod over where we had once...cut the wild prairie hay...' as he mourned the passing of early frontier conditions in the Rosebud district.<sup>14</sup>

Following John Martin's death in 1973, a group of socially prominent community members integrated his work into a multi-generational record of life in the Rosebud district, spanning early settlement to the modern era. In 1979 they formed the Rosebud

History Book Committee and proceeded to collect individual accounts and family stories from current and former residents, ultimately publishing *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* in 1983. Emphasizing their desire to create a comprehensive record of people who had lived in the Rosebud district, the History Book Committee explained they intended their project to ‘...include everybody, with no family left out.’<sup>15</sup> However, despite their collaborative methodology Committee members retained considerable control over the content and tone of *Akokiniskway*, imbuing their project with a celebratory sentimentality that reflected their own pleasant memories of community life. This generally unintentional self-reflexivity was mitigated by the Committee’s more clearly defined intention to bolster civic pride and social bonds in their community as it declined in the modern era. Invoking nostalgic appreciation for the ‘good old Rosebud days,’ the *Akokiniskway* project invited contributors to see their experiences as part of a shared historical narrative that would endure as an inspiring heritage legacy for future generations.<sup>16</sup>

A ‘spry and comical’ character, John Martin’s interest in local history emerged with vibrant immediacy from his own lifetime of experiences as an early pioneer and long-term resident of the Rosebud district.<sup>17</sup> Martin was born on his father’s homestead, approximately thirty-five miles south of Rosebud, near the larger community of Gleichen on October 21, 1888.<sup>18</sup> His family remained there until 1897, when they relocated to the Rosebud district, hoping readily available water in the river valley would improve their agricultural prospects.<sup>19</sup> As a youth, Martin attended local schools whenever possible, receiving lessons at home from his father when it was not.<sup>20</sup> While the extent of his formal education is unclear, Martin’s writing reflects a wealth of experiential knowledge

drawn from a wide variety of occupational activities undertaken in the Rosebud-Gleichen district during his lifetime.

Identifying himself primarily as a rancher, Martin worked with livestock in some capacity most of his life.<sup>21</sup> The geographic scope of his publications often reflected his vocational experiences as a range rider who had worked round-ups ‘... over an area of many square miles from the Hand Hills to the Little Bow River in the south and from Langdon to Bassano in the east’.<sup>22</sup> Further reflecting the arc of Martin’s life story, both *The Rosebud Trail* (1963) and *The Prairie Hub* (1967) were prefaced with maps detailing places of autobiographical as well as historical significance, some drafted in the author’s own hand. In addition to contributing to family farm operations, as a young man John Martin worked as a ‘line rider’ on the Blackfoot Reservation at Gleichen, where he had been ‘engaged...to ride for the Indian cattle that wandered off the reserve into farmer’s fields’ from 1910 to 1912.<sup>23</sup> In 1913, Martin returned to Rosebud to take up mixed farming on his father’s land, setting down personal roots by marrying a local girl in 1917 and starting his own family.<sup>24</sup> Supplementing his early agricultural pursuits, Martin also operated a livery stable in Rosebud between 1918 and 1919, and as a business owner became firmly integrated into the social and economic life of the community.<sup>25</sup> Despite this side venture and myriad other temporary employment experiences, mixed farming remained John Martin’s primary occupation, and as an elderly man he proudly asserted his family had continuously worked land in the Rosebud district from early settlement to the modern era.<sup>26</sup>

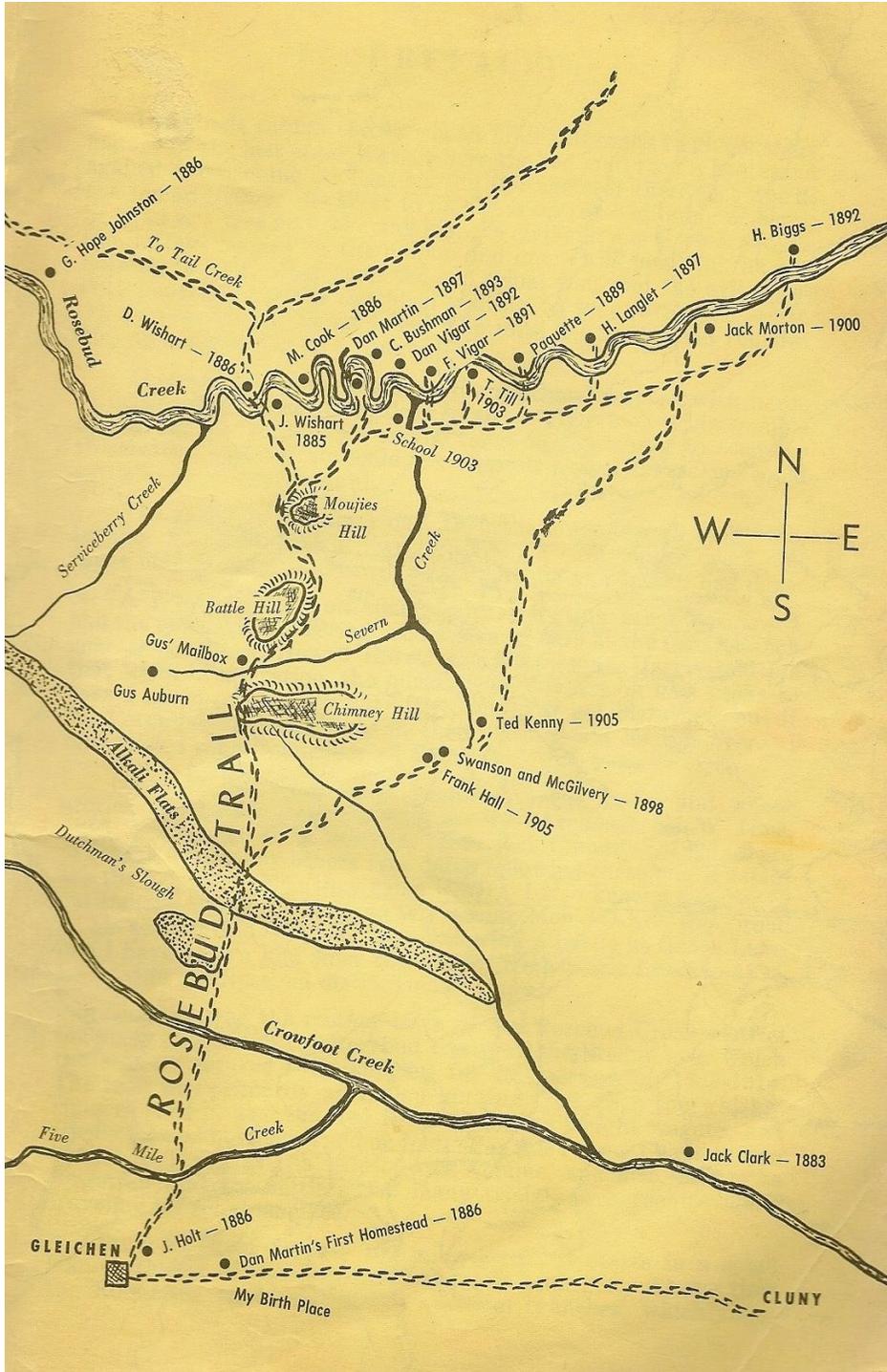


Figure 1.2 John Martin, Map from *The Rosebud Trail*, 1963. Unnumbered prefatory page.

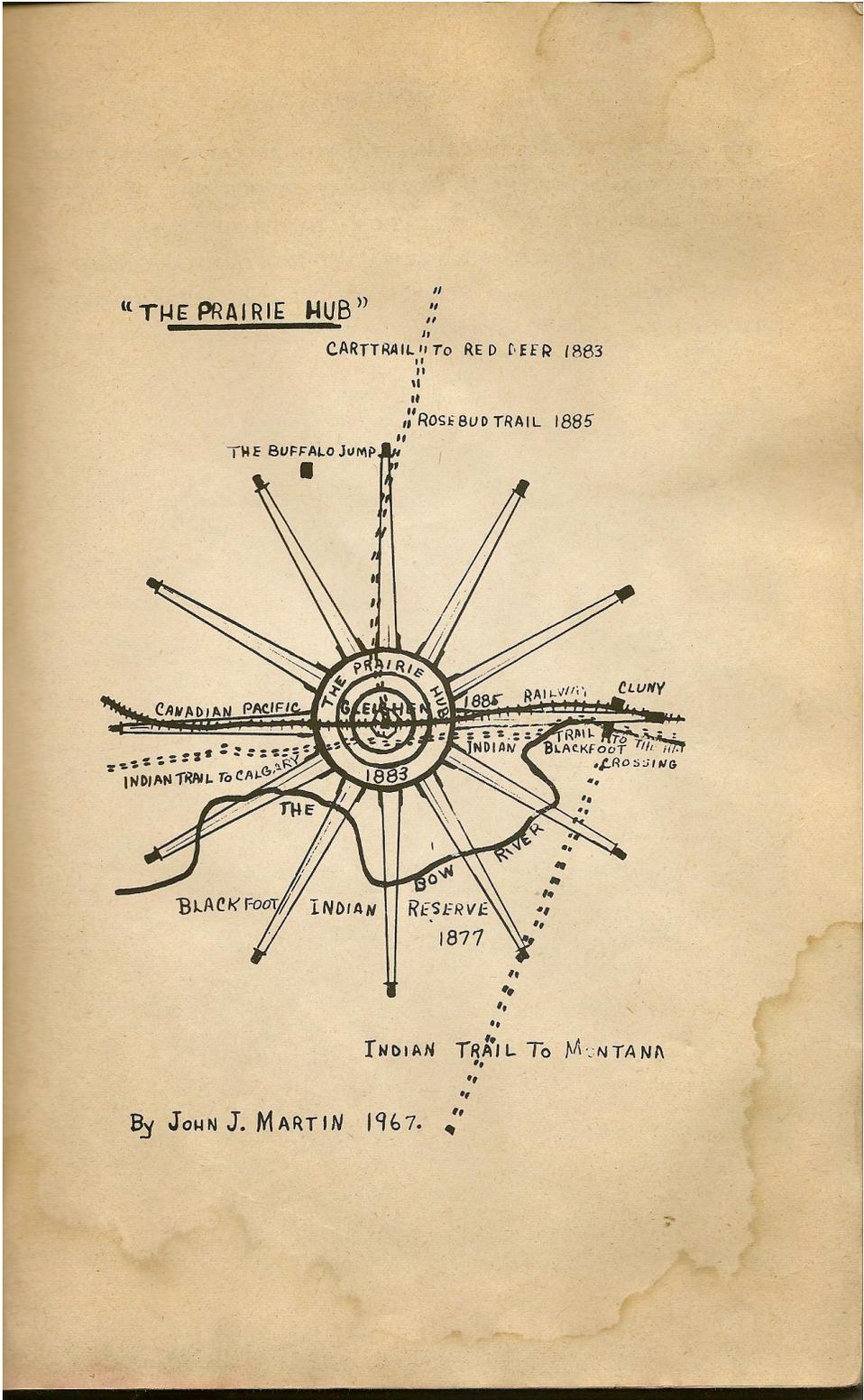


Figure 1.3 John Martin, Map from *The Prairie Hub*, 1967. Unnumbered prefatory page.

By the end of his life, John Martin was well known and widely admired in Rosebud as an unpretentious and resourceful community historian, whose ‘first stories were written with heavy lead pencil on large sheets of brown wrapping paper, on the back side of used ledgers, or on any available scrap paper.’<sup>27</sup> Martin’s interest in local history was inspired by a casual habit of collecting newspaper clippings in his youth, as he recalled ‘I gathered all historical articles which appeared and, as time went on, history became my pet subject and one I learned easily.’<sup>28</sup> This hobby gradually evolved into more serious endeavours to document personal experiences for posterity, and to collect stories about early settlement from other old timers in the Rosebud district before they passed on. To this effect, Martin explained ‘When I was getting along in years, I decided to write a history of my family and others with whom we had contact. This undertaking grew...[as] Our own history seemed to blend in with the rest and with the pioneering days...’<sup>29</sup> Expanding upon his own autobiographical accounts, the old timer compiled a wealth of material more generally related to early settlement in Rosebud and began publishing his work in the early 1960’s.

John Martin’s first significant historical publication was an article entitled ‘Prairie Reminiscences’, submitted to a ‘pioneer writing competition’ held by the *Alberta Historical Review* in 1960. Published as an Honourable Mention in 1962, the essay chronicled his family’s experiences as homesteaders in the Rosebud district.<sup>30</sup> In 1963, nearly twenty-five years of research culminated in the publication of Martin’s first book, *The Rosebud Trail*, which blended autobiographical accounts with stories collected from other local pioneer families.<sup>31</sup> John Martin designated *The Rosebud Trail* his ‘dreamchild’, a commemorative endeavour that preserved ‘...all the information I could

gather from old time friends who had passed on, so their names and their pioneering hardships would not be forgotten.<sup>32</sup> A second book, *The Prairie Hub* (1967), further expanded this endeavour, documenting Gleichen's history as the primary service centre for early settlers in the Rosebud district. From the late 1960's until his death in 1973, smaller publications characterized Martin's output, including *Westward Bound* (1968) a modest mimeographed book made available to the public for \$1.00 per copy, and two pamphlets covering topics of local interest, *The Dinosaur Valley* (1971) and *The History of Severn Creek Public School No. 852* (1973).<sup>33</sup>

As a vernacular historian, John Martin drew upon a seemingly inexhaustible archive of personal memories, and his depictions of the early settlement era in Rosebud crackle and snap with the energy and emotional intensity of lived experience. Inviting readers to enter a dynamic rural world of prairie fires, saddle horses, and walking ploughs, Martin offered readers a dramatically immediate window into a historical moment that had been rapidly subsumed by modernization in the prairie West. In his capacity as editor of the *Alberta Historical Review*, popular historian Hugh Dempsey was enamoured with the author's ability to vividly evoke the past through personal experiences, declaring 'Unlike many such efforts which lack the personal touch, Mr. Martin is able to bring to his [work]...incidents which help humanize local history.'<sup>34</sup> Martin's colourful, conversational writing style reflected a comfortable intimacy with Rosebud's history, inspiring his editor to similarly claim the author was '...unsurpassed for the telling of these tales, as he lived in the early west and speaks its language.'<sup>35</sup>

While John Martin's publications were lavishly praised for their authenticity, his self-reflexive approach to local history did not offer objective or consistently factual

documentation of early settlement conditions in Rosebud. Rather, Martin's pervasively nostalgic tone reflected how the bulk of his source material was subjectively drawn from personal memory or acquired through casual social interaction with other pioneers. Prizing colourful anecdotes and vivid recollection, advanced age and tall-tale hyperbole occasionally bent historical fact in Martin's publications, and he plainly acknowledged specific instances where it was difficult to tell whether certain "...stories were true or of the "Wolf, wolf" variety."<sup>36</sup> To enhance the perceived accuracy of his work, Martin occasionally supplemented his anecdotes with documentary information drawn from printed material. While none of his publications included a bibliography or formal citations, Martin frequently made in-text references to rural weekly newspapers and other printed records he could immediately access in Rosebud.<sup>37</sup> Blending experiential knowledge and personal reminiscence with written records and print-based material, John Martin's methodology affirms Lyle Dick's contention that vernacular historians can often be characterized as handymen, drawing upon a wide variety of readily available sources in a spontaneous, *ad hoc* manner.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the variability of his source material, Martin's interpretive framework remained consistently self reflexive rather than documentary. For this reason, the celebrated authenticity of his work was tied to his subjectivity as a historical witness, rather than the accuracy of his research. Conflating historical interpretation with autobiographical reminiscence, Martin's writing was often transparently emotional, and he frequently punctuated the flow of historical documentation in his publications with simply phrased but expressive poetry, sighing:

'Vividly the pioneer days come back in a dream,

And the endless prairies I have seen.  
I was happy and glad I looked ahead,  
but sadly I look back now, for the past is dead.’<sup>39</sup>

Personalizing the passage of time as something that ‘killed’ a more satisfying moment in his own life, Martin’s sentimental poetry presented his nostalgia for past experiences as a simultaneously historical and autobiographical phenomenon.

John Martin’s editor tied the nostalgic tone of his writing to his authority as an aging settlement pioneer who had personally witnessed a ‘...waving sea of prairie grass and old prairie trails, disappear forever.’<sup>40</sup> This was a prudent interpretation, as old timers of Martin’s vintage formed a recognizable social group in Rosebud for most of his adult life. Celebrated as historical authorities, long-term residents who had directly experienced the early settlement frontier in Rosebud and neighbouring districts enjoyed particular social prominence during the 1920’s and 1930’s, when the Gleichen Board of Trade regularly held dances and banquets in honour of local pioneers.<sup>41</sup> Far from being staged as sedate reunions for elderly folk, these were tremendously lively, well-attended affairs during the Great Depression. By 1933 their popularity had inspired the Gleichen Board of Trade to establish an Old Timers Association, dedicated to honouring men and women who had settled in the vicinity prior to 1900.<sup>42</sup> Social events sponsored by the Association proved equally successful, and in 1934 local newspapers reported one pioneer dance drew nearly six hundred people, with festivities carrying on until 4:15 in the morning.<sup>43</sup>

The popularity of the Gleichen Old Timer’s Association during the Great Depression affirms Eric Hobsbawm’s contention that rapid or disorienting change often

provokes cultural movements dedicated to valorizing social groups who are ‘...by common consent, regarded as the repositories of historic continuity and tradition’.<sup>44</sup> In a parallel manner the Old Timer’s Association performed a palliative social function in Gleichen and neighbouring rural communities during the Great Depression, translating pioneer experiences into a shared heritage through self-reflexive preservation initiatives and laudatory social events. In addition to stimulating social cohesion, they also soothed contemporary anxieties by explicitly drawing parallels between the historical experiences of local pioneers and the economic hardships and difficult living conditions of the 1930’s. To this effect, a speech given during an old timer’s banquet in 1934 proclaimed, ‘Our conception of hard times pales into insignificance when compared to the privations and hardships endured’ by settlement pioneers, and proceeded to point to the importance of community spirit and neighborliness in mitigating challenging circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to promoting pioneer heritage through festive social events, the Old Timer’s Association in Gleichen also promoted preservation of local historical knowledge related to the settlement era, proposing in 1938 ‘a log book be kept of all the old timers, such as photos, material relative to early settlement and the activities of its members’.<sup>46</sup> Valorizing pioneer experiences through such endeavours, the Association’s activities cultivated nostalgia for the frontier era among participating members, and John Martin recalled members attending Old Timer’s events regularly expressed a critical view of contemporary conditions, mourning how ‘...the good days were gone for the town and old timers’ by the 1930’s.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the original inspiration for his personal interest in local history, John Martin and his wife were involved in the Gleichen Old Timer’s Association by 1935.<sup>48</sup> However, following the Great Depression general interest in the

organization waned, and by the time Martin had become president of the Association in 1943 he claimed festive socializing had superseded meaningful celebration of local pioneers at community events, complaining from that point on ‘... no old timer was asked to speak at the oversized dinner to honor them’.<sup>49</sup>

The Gleichen Old Timer’s Association gradually dissipated, as members passed away or relocated following the Second World War.<sup>50</sup> However, an informal social network of elderly pioneers persisted in the Rosebud-Gleichen district well into the modern era, and John Martin’s reputation as a local historian was often enhanced by his personal connections to this group. By way of example, in 1967 historians at the Glenbow Institute in Calgary requested Martin’s assistance as a grassroots historical authority, asking him to query local old timers about early ranching operations in the Rosebud district. Encouraged by Glenbow historians to ‘get to church and get some more information’ for their project, social interaction between old timers clearly continued to bolster Martin’s authority as a local historian long after their formal association at Gleichen had ceased.<sup>51</sup>

As an old timer as well as a local historian, John Martin was admired for imparting ‘a love and interest in the early life of the Rosebud area’ to younger generations in the community.<sup>52</sup> In a reciprocal manner, the author found it particularly rewarding to receive letters from descendants of Rosebud’s early settlers, explaining ‘...how pleased they were to be able to read a history of their own families,’ that would be preserved for posterity.<sup>53</sup> While Martin’s work continued to garner praise after his death in 1973, local historians following in his wake did not precisely reiterate the old timer’s generational nostalgia for the early settlement era. Instead, inspired by

conversations held at an ‘informal social gathering of Rosebudites’ in the late 1970’s, a group of civic-minded current and former residents reframed local history as a broadly appealing, multi-generational narrative of community development.<sup>54</sup> In 1979, they organized the Rosebud History Book Committee under the broader designation of the Rosebud Historical Society, spending the next four years conducting research and collecting stories from over five hundred contributors, culminating in the publication of *Akokiniskway: By The River of Many Roses* in 1983.<sup>55</sup>

Members of the Rosebud History Book Committee pursued local history as both community service and leisure activity. Generally, joining the Committee indicated considerable personal commitment to civic volunteerism, and some members also contributed to heritage initiatives outside of their local history project, acting as caretakers of the local museum and organizing community reunions in the 1970’s and 1980’s.<sup>56</sup> However, administering the *Akokiniskway* project also affirmed the established social prominence of many Committee members in Rosebud, where they were otherwise recognized as successful and civic-minded community members. To this effect, Committee president Phil Comstock noted his family belonged to a ‘...local social whirl, a clique’ that had dominated Rosebud’s social life, and had included the families of many other Committee executives.<sup>57</sup>

Sharing similar backstories, many Committee members were of retirement age or older, and some, including Phil Comstock, no longer lived full-time in the Rosebud district.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the Committee’s immediate social context was itself profoundly sentimental and self-reflexive, as the *Akokiniskway* project reunited long-term acquaintances who had taken a keen interest in community life when Rosebud had been a

more vibrant place to live. The duality of its established purpose was apparent early in 1980, shortly after the group had begun to gather regularly, as members noted it would be necessary to ‘...endeavour to start meetings on time, do required business first and socialize after.’<sup>59</sup>

While appealing to Committee members as a sociable pastime, in more practical terms the *Akokiniskway* project was also inspired by the federal government’s New Horizons program, which made funding available to senior citizens pursuing community service initiatives across Canada.<sup>60</sup> Committee members may have learned about New Horizons funding through a local history project undertaken by the neighbouring community of Rockyford in 1977.<sup>61</sup> Located approximately twenty kilometers south-west of Rosebud, the Rockyford and District History Book Society successfully published *Rockyford: Where We Crossed the Creek and Settled* (c.1980) after receiving a New Horizons grant from the federal government.<sup>62</sup> Offering local historians in Rosebud an immediate precedent against which to measure their own progress, members of the Rockyford group also attended Committee meetings to offer their neighbours advice and encouragement.<sup>63</sup>

By February of 1980 the Rosebud History Book Committee had already been awarded a New Horizons grant and began to pursue a number of other fundraising opportunities for their project.<sup>64</sup> However, despite their financial acuity, members of the Rosebud History Book Committee asserted their endeavour was ‘not a money making project’ but a voluntary service activity meant to benefit everyone with personal or family connections to the Rosebud district.<sup>65</sup> To this effect, the Committee explained ‘It is hoped to include stories of all families that have at one time or another lived in the

area... The book will not be complete without the contributions of each and every family concerned.<sup>66</sup> To achieve this ambitious goal, in February 1980 the Committee mailed out a letter to current and former residents seeking family stories and individual accounts retelling experiences from all stages of Rosebud's history. They also cast a wider net, placing ads in newspapers and journals, including the *Western Producer*, *Report on Farming*, *Drumheller Mail*, and *Alberta Report*, asking former residents whose contact information was unknown to submit stories for publication.<sup>67</sup>

Hoping to preserve a comprehensive record of people who had lived in the Rosebud district, Committee members repeatedly emphasized the collective nature and documentary permanence of the *Akokiniskway* project, assuring potential contributors of their desire to ensure 'your family story will be a part of the Rosebud story.'<sup>68</sup> In this way, while the Committee's requests frequently assumed a pleasant, celebratory tone, they also expressed considerable anxiety about the hamlet's uncertain future. Seeking to impart permanence and stability to perceptions of the community in the modern era, they prevailed upon potential contributors with dramatic intensity to ensure evidence of their connection to Rosebud remained accessible and meaningful to future generations.

Integrating many different individual and family stories into *Akokiniskway*'s shared historical narrative, the Rosebud History Book Committee hoped to create a material heirloom that would function in perpetuity as 'a device for interweaving generations' with personal connections to their community.<sup>69</sup> For this reason, *Akokiniskway* was organized chronologically to encourage readers to 'follow families from first arrivals through to present day,' portraying Rosebud's history as a cascading, multi-generational story that connected the experiences of early pioneers to community

members in the modern era.<sup>70</sup> While maintaining a relatively linear narrative of local history, the History Book Committee was careful not to suggest any particular era of community development was more important or interesting than any other. Indeed, when requesting submissions, the Committee provided a set of guidelines that only loosely distinguished experiences contemporary with the ‘first breaking of the land’ from those occurring ‘as the district became more settled’ and accounts of residents who were ‘not early settlers.’<sup>71</sup> Using similarly vague but evocative language to separate ‘early days’ from ‘later years’, the Committee encouraged contributors to interpret their experiences as having played an equally valuable part in community development.<sup>72</sup>

The multi-generational perspective adopted by members of the History Book Committee distinguished *Akokiniskway*’s relatively subdued representations of Rosebud’s early settlement pioneers from the colourful portrait gallery of old timers that dominated John Martin’s publications. While Martin had valorized the precedence of old timers to assert his own authority as a historical witness, the History Book Committee portrayed Rosebud’s early pioneers as shared ancestral figures who had originated a collective story of community development that was still unfolding in the modern era. Forging connections between past and present experiences, their work affirms David Lowenthal’s assertion that ‘Heritage pride inheres no less in precedence than in perpetuity---unbroken connections, permanent traits... Maintaining or restoring such links confirms that the groups we belong to are not ephemeral but enduring organisms.’<sup>73</sup> Indeed, presenting *Akokiniskway* as something akin to a family scrapbook, the Committee invited younger generations to see themselves as part of a shared heritage legacy that they inherited and contributed to in equal measure. Simultaneously celebrating the past and looking to the

future, the Committee asserted their efforts were ‘proudly presented in memory of all our Pioneers...To their descendants who carry on, we say thank you.’<sup>74</sup>

While John Martin had overwhelmingly privileged the significance of old timers in Rosebud, after his death his work was integrated into *Akokiniskway*'s celebratory, multi-generational narrative as complementary source material and an inspiring precedent. Martin's enduring posthumous appeal in Rosebud was evident in the affectionate manner contributors to the community history book evoked his work, often simply noting ‘Johnny says’ when citing his books and pamphlets.<sup>75</sup> More formally, *Akokiniskway* was also prefaced with a special tribute praising John Martin for ensuring the experiences of Rosebud's early pioneers had remained accessible and meaningful to younger generations. Rather than reiterating Martin's mournful nostalgia for the early settlement frontier the editor of *Akokiniskway* ascribed an inspirational, present-minded quality to his work, claiming ‘Reading about our forbears and their exploits, we learn what interesting and enterprising people they were.’<sup>76</sup>

While the collaborative, multi-generational character of *Akokiniskway* appeared to discard the more privileged self-reflection of John Martin's work, members of the Rosebud History Book Committee exerted a similar influence on the community history project. Amateur local history books produced by rural Albertans have often been ‘filtered’ through dominant social groups, generally reflecting the successful experiences and gratifying memories of people who had ‘... managed to establish lasting family farms’ in the prairie West.<sup>77</sup> In a parallel manner, members of the Committee assumed the role of interpretive gatekeepers, ensuring the content and tone of *Akokiniskway* reflected their own generally positive experiences of community life. Pre-emptively

placing their project in a pleasant and positive light, the History Book Committee created cheerfully sentimental guidelines for potential contributors, placing emphasis on topics that reflected their own experiences as socially prominent, successful residents of the Rosebud district.

The commemorative nostalgia permeating the History Book Committee's guidelines suggests the group intended the 'deliberate cultivation of a group consciousness and sense of achievement around a particular interpretation and valuation of the past...' <sup>78</sup> Generally, the Committee urged contributors to view their experiences as part of a larger collective memory, suggesting they 'tell of their participation in community life,' by sentimentalizing dances, Christmas concerts and similarly festive social events. <sup>79</sup> While recognizing contributors might wish to 'Tell of their trials and tribulations', the Committee also sought to demonstrate how shared experiences of the community had mitigated negative personal circumstances for residents of the Rosebud district. <sup>80</sup> Participants were thus encouraged to recall '...their happy times as they became a part of the community,' implying enduringly unpleasant or dissatisfying social experiences in Rosebud would have been historically exceptional or anomalous. <sup>81</sup> At times, the Committee's guidelines transparently impacted submissions, as one contributor described their memories almost verbatim as evidence of 'happy times and participation in the community in those early days...' <sup>82</sup> Other times, the celebratory tone of the Committee's appeals to contributors directly transformed John Martin's melancholic nostalgia into more confident and optimistic perspectives on Rosebud's past, present and future. To this effect, one narrator in *Akokiniskway* recalled how an abandoned local business had been repurposed into a community fossil museum, excerpting John Martin's

account of the event in *The Rosebud Trail*. However, where the old timer had expressed ‘hope [that] it will not fail’, in *Akokiniskway* Martin’s words were subtly altered to reflect a more confident assertion: ‘this time we all know it will not fail.’<sup>83</sup>

To ensure the final content of *Akokiniskway* consistently reflected their own commemorative nostalgia for community life, members of the History Book Committee also directly edited submissions before they were approved for publication. In a promotional flyer for the project, the Committee required potential contributors to give permission for their stories to be ‘edited (not changed) for reason of space or repetitions.’<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in the foreword to *Akokiniskway* the Committee claimed contributed material had primarily been altered for length and to avoid repetition, explaining they had ‘...tried to be as gentle as possible’ in this regard.<sup>85</sup> However, family stories and individual accounts may occasionally have been subjected to a more thorough editing process that also enabled Committee members to mitigate the emotional impact of submissions recounting negative experiences or melancholic personal memories.<sup>86</sup> In one example of editorial interference, a man named Ed Carlson submitted a personal history relating his attempt to establish a farm in the Rosebud district, which concluded with the loss of his land during the Great Depression.<sup>87</sup> Kay Hymas, the primary editor of *Akokiniskway*, added a post-script to his story entitled ‘Ed Carlson’s later life’, noting the would-be farmer had moved to Drumheller after foreclosing, eventually opening a diner called the Silver Spike. Extending Carlson’s story, Hymas remarked ‘Rosebudites remember dropping in to the Silver Spike after a hockey game or the movies...’, effectively shifting the contributor’s emphasis on personal failure and hardship to a lighthearted social experience that would more positively resonate with readers.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the editorial and administrative machinations of the Rosebud History Book Committee, the broader social context in which *Akokiniskway* was undertaken as a collaborative, community-oriented history project influenced how participants chose to portray their experiences for posterity. As historical witnesses, contributors to community history projects were typically empowered to interpret their experiences subjectively, lending collaboratively produced books a unique multi-vocality. However, rather than representing a wide diversity of historical perspectives, rural Albertans participating in local history projects have often interpreted their experiences in an overwhelmingly positive manner, ‘...undoubtedly influenced by... knowledge that their opinions will be read by the other residents of their districts.’<sup>89</sup> Contributors to local history projects thus often appeared to romanticize historical reality as a matter of personal pride, downplaying negative experiences to enhance or maintain social status, revealing the enduring influence of civic ‘boosterism’ in rural communities across the prairie West.

As agricultural settlement stimulated rapid community development across the Canadian prairies in the early decades of the twentieth century, ‘boosters’ asserted a direct correlation between economic growth, social progress, and a civic attitude that encouraged ‘cohesiveness and positive thinking’.<sup>90</sup> To encourage conformity, they aggressively policed public attitudes, denouncing negativity or criticism as socially unacceptable ‘croaking’ or ‘knocking’.<sup>91</sup> By 1912, their perspective pervasively conditioned civic culture, broadly asserting ‘Boosting was essential to progress and prosperity; good citizenship and boosting were synonymous.’<sup>92</sup> However, after the Great Depression, fluctuating economic conditions and the uneven impact of agricultural

modernization tended to mute commercial visions of unlimited growth in most rural prairie communities. Indeed, the promotional zeal of boosterism generally lapsed into more modest ambitions in the modern era, ‘...reworked into a broader social concern often focused around the work of service clubs and community enhancement’.<sup>93</sup>

Prior to the Great Depression, civic-minded residents in Rosebud had enthusiastically promoted local prospects for commercial growth by evoking the ‘fanciful goals and frothy rhetoric’ of the booster ethos.<sup>94</sup> To this effect, a local poem written in 1917 appears midway through *Akokiniskway*, describing the rural hamlet as

‘a charming little city  
...Which some day will be famous  
If its citizens have their way...’<sup>95</sup>

However, as Rosebud declined after the Second World War, socially prominent residents adapted the commercial thrust of early boosterism to promote local service initiatives and bolster social cohesion and civic pride within the community. This is evident in the *Akokiniskway*’s laudatory sentimentality, as members of the History Book Committee encouraged contributors to sentimentalize the ‘good old Rosebud days’ even as the hamlet declined in the modern era. Offering current and former residents an emotionally compelling opportunity to affirm the enduring value of their personal connections to Rosebud, *Akokiniskway* retained the resilient optimism of the booster ethos by promoting fond memories of the past rather than bold visions of future prosperity.

Seeking to promote their nostalgic brand of civic boosterism, members of the History Book Committee often linked the commemorative function of the *Akokiniskway* project to ‘homecoming’ community reunions that had been intermittently held in

Rosebud since the early 1970's. The first of these events had been a calculated attempt to counter anxieties raised by the district's declining population, which had compelled the Rosebud United Church to cease regular operations in 1972.<sup>96</sup> A vibrant social institution, the United Church had functioned as 'a community centre where the members of all congregations enjoyed concerts, meetings, and dramatic presentations.'<sup>97</sup> Its closure materialized the rapid pace of decline transforming everyday life in Rosebud in the 1970's, stimulating a pervasive sense of nostalgic vulnerability within the community. To this effect, a special article in *Akokiniskway* explained residents 'were saddened by the necessity to close the Rosebud Church', noting bleakly 'We feel that somehow we have failed all those good people who worked so hard' to maintain its religious and social functions.<sup>98</sup>

Drawing nearly three hundred participants, Rosebud's first homecoming reunion offered a comforting contrast to the closure of the hamlet's United Church in 1972, demonstrating the persistence of community ties in an era otherwise characterized by insecurity and loss.<sup>99</sup> As attendees shared pot luck suppers, baseball games and special church services, a familiar social atmosphere evoked happy memories and offered respite from mounting evidence of Rosebud's decline. Just as the Gleichen Old Timers Association had celebrated pioneer heritage to alleviate the hardships of the Great Depression, community reunions in the modern era appeared to sooth apprehension about disappearing social institutions in Rosebud by looking to a fondly remembered past. In a parallel manner, homecoming events also heightened local awareness and appreciation for common historical experiences, articulating a shared identity among attendees that temporarily transcended the modern hamlet's decline.

Reflecting on the established popularity of community reunions, the Rosebud History Book Committee began strategizing early in 1980 to incorporate their community history project into a special Homecoming being planned to celebrate the centennial anniversary of local Euro-Canadian settlement in 1983.<sup>100</sup> Working with service clubs to organize the event, members of the Committee incorporated *Akokiniskway*'s celebratory sentimentality into the heightened atmosphere of heritage appreciation accompanying Rosebud's centennial in 1983, hoping to promote sales of the community history book published later that year.<sup>101</sup> The event in turn provided a triumphant conclusion for *Akokiniskway* itself, and the book closed with pages featuring documentation of the festivities. Presenting Homecoming '83 as evidence of Rosebud's enduring emotional significance, the History Book Committee proudly proclaimed 'When it comes to celebrations, our tiny Hamlet need not take a back seat' to larger communities.<sup>102</sup>

Celebrating local history and civic pride, Homecoming '83 powerfully complemented the commemorative function of *Akokiniskway* by performing nostalgia through social activities, including a dance and pancake breakfast as well as theatrical pageantry, musical performances, and poetry readings that portrayed Rosebud's history as an inspiring heritage legacy.<sup>103</sup> A more explicit connection to *Akokiniskway* was forged during the performance of a special song written for the event, evoking the title of the book as well as its multi-generational narrative through a chorus that invited attendees to sing:

'By the river of many roses  
...Where children grew up and had children  
To proudly walk side by side.'<sup>104</sup>

The pageantry of Homecoming '83 also conformed to the Committee's emphasis on collective memory in less formal ways, celebrating shared experiences of community life and sparking particularly poignant reminiscing when a square dance 'brought back many happy memories of an era past, but not forgotten.'<sup>105</sup>

As the population of the Rosebud district declined throughout the second half of the twentieth century, vernacular history projects empowered multiple generations to articulate a 'sharper definition of selfhood and community' in a nostalgic context that mitigated pressures faced by the community in the modern era.<sup>106</sup> Peter Seixas has theorized extensively on the cultural function of historical consciousness, concluding "a common past, preserved through institutions, traditions, and symbols, is a crucial instrument...in the construction of collective identities in the present."<sup>107</sup> However, rather than attempting to document the past objectively, vernacular historians in Rosebud subjectively addressed the distance between past and present, interpreting change and the passage of time as a simultaneously historical and autobiographical event. Eulogizing fondly remembered, formative experiences of rural life that had become inaccessible or obsolete as they aged, they expressed nostalgia to create "contemporary social boundaries" and bolster collective identity as Rosebud declined in the modern era.<sup>108</sup>

## Chapter 2: Lost Pages and Fading Memories

Across rural Alberta, academic surveys have indicated the ‘most compelling motivation expressed for publishing frontier history based on personal experience is the perception that such knowledge is a rapidly disappearing resource.’<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the local history book phenomenon that swept through many rural prairie communities in the second half of the twentieth century often produced ‘lieux de memoire’, a term coined by French historian Pierre Nora in the 1970’s to describe archives, museums, and other formal or officially contrived repositories of information about the past that appeared ‘...to stop time, to block the work of forgetting...to materialize the immaterial’ by mimicking or even supplanting organically occurring memory.<sup>2</sup>

In 1966, the house John Martin had lived in for nearly fifty years near the hamlet of Rosebud suddenly burned down, destroying a portion of the old timer’s records and historical writing. In *The Prairie Hub* (1967), Martin explained this tragedy left a ‘vacuum’ in his published work, claiming ‘...what was on the lost pages cannot be remembered.’<sup>3</sup> Transparently anxious that collective memory in modern Rosebud had become a vulnerable cultural commodity as he and other old timers aged, Martin’s sentiments were echoed over a decade later by members of the Rosebud History Book Committee, who similarly characterized their community history project as an imperative attempt to collect and preserve information about the past they felt would otherwise become inaccessible to future generations. To this effect, they urgently entreated potential contributors in bold capital letters: ‘DON’T LET YOUR FAMILY BE

FORGOTTEN!' when requesting submissions for *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* (1983).<sup>4</sup>

Clearly anxious to translate fading memories into a more durable record of past experiences for posterity, Rosebud's historians reflected the commemorative aspirations of a rural demographic placed under considerable pressure in the modern prairie West, '...torn from its memory by the scale of its transformations but all the more obsessed with understanding itself historically...'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, their work often affirmed Pierre Nora's contention that *lieux de memoire* flourish when pervasive change seems to outpace a given culture's capacity to retain meaningful connections to the past, appearing '...at the same time an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears,' surviving only as a reconstituted object' through historical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> However, Rosebud's historians also plainly acknowledged their work could never supplant living memory, as John Martin asserted, 'We all know from books what happened on the prairies...But words are only symbols of experiences.'<sup>7</sup> Similar sentiments surfaced throughout *Akokiniskway*, as one contributor explained '...memories; sometimes happy, sometimes sad, keep crowding in only to blur my vision and blot my print. Memories live on and print on paper only brings them to the surface.'<sup>8</sup>

Acknowledging the inadequacy of written words to recapture lived experiences or communicate the emotional content of personal memory, Rosebud's historians often expressed nostalgia as bittersweet yearning 'for an unrecoverable past'.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, their work affirms recent scholarship that has blurred Pierre Nora's sharp distinctions between memory and history, suggesting the French historian inadequately accounted for 'the range and variability of historical writing' as both a documentary and

commemorative exercise.<sup>10</sup> While they clearly sought to create *lieux de memoire*, John Martin and contributors to *Akokiniskway* unabashedly eulogized lived experiences and generational benchmarks that had become obsolete or inaccessible as they aged.

Confronting the distance their own lives bridged between past and present, they readily criticized changing conditions as a threat to the persistence of memory in Rosebud, articulating a sense of displacement and loss that permeated the historical records they left behind.

Drawing historical authority from his status as an old timer and long-term resident, John Martin often seemed to be ‘...mourning the passing of something held dear’ when documenting how he had witnessed Rosebud develop from settlement frontier to modern agricultural community over the course of his lifetime.<sup>11</sup> Having arrived in the Rosebud river valley with his family in 1897, Martin claimed he had been privileged to encounter the prairies as open range, an idyllic natural landscape that had not yet been transformed by large-scale agricultural settlement. To this effect, he recalled ‘...grass waved in the summer breeze as far as the eye could see. Not a plough was in sight on the natural prairieland that was covered by buffalo grass and prairie wool, endless and majestic!’<sup>12</sup> However, rather than articulating a sense of progressive change tying past experiences to present-day conditions, John Martin praised the raw natural beauty and abundance of open range as the benchmark of a bygone era, evoking an edenic prologue to a rapid and disorienting trajectory of change.

Following the Second World War, rural Albertans popularly perceived the ‘frontier period’ to have spanned the decades between 1880 and 1929.<sup>13</sup> Assuming a much more specific timeline, John Martin asserted Rosebud’s pioneer era had begun with

the arrival of the first Euro-Canadian settlers in the mid 1880's, and came to a rapid conclusion in 1910, when the Canadian Northern Railway began constructing a line through the Rosebud river valley. Martin claimed the arrival of the railway sparked an influx of new homesteaders pursuing cereal agriculture, who quickly outpaced ranchers as the dominant social group.<sup>14</sup> By the First World War they had transformed the local landscape almost beyond recognition, as the old timer recalled '...as far as the eye could see was black and seeded to grain. Gone was the rancher's paradise that the first settlers ...thought would never pass away.'<sup>15</sup>

Historians have generally agreed the frontier landscapes claimed by early Euro-Canadian settlers across the prairie West in the second half of the nineteenth century were rapidly transformed by the unprecedented numbers of homesteaders who arrived after 1900.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, John Martin claimed the Rosebud river valley '...remained static from the arrival of the first settler...' until the Canadian Northern Railway began to construct a branch line through the district in 1907, when he recalled '...two men in a buggy arrived at Rosebud Creek with surveying instruments---time had caught up with us.'<sup>17</sup> This pivotal moment portended the transformation of open range into a manufactured environment of agricultural homesteads, only a few decades later 'centuries of prairie grass that grew upon the fertile soil [were]...replaced by man's grains.'<sup>18</sup> By the 1960's, the landscape encountered by early pioneers had been entirely subsumed by the chaotic clutter of modern infrastructure, as Martin observed 'Today the country that was all prairie is a busy network of graded roads and highways.'<sup>19</sup>

Romanticizing open range as an idyllic and timeless natural paradise, John Martin generally failed to acknowledge how he and other old timers had directly contributed to

the passing of Rosebud's ranching frontier alongside homesteaders who flooded into the district during the land rush that followed the railway. Passages documenting Martin's youth clearly situate his family within an intermediary wave of settlers whom historians have classified as mixed farmers rather than frontier ranchers, as they undertook small-scale cultivation of the land while grazing livestock on open range.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in recalling childhood impressions of the prairie near Gleichen, Martin described a landscape in transition, in which his own presence foretold and manifested unprecedented environmental change. To this effect, he recalled:

'...the quiet and peaceful prairies, in about 1893; from the cabin doorway I observed the blue canopy of the heavens touching the horizon- the end of space covered with an inverted bowl of blue. A warm breeze from the southwest carried in its wake the ozone of freshly broken sod, a product of a million years of decaying vegetation, stored up for the use of mankind.'<sup>21</sup>

More directly, Martin acknowledged how his family had immediately engaged in transforming the natural landscape upon their arrival in the Rosebud river valley in 1897, explaining 'There wasn't any farming...at that time, except for garden and potato patches here and there', noting with evident pride 'Dad soon had five acres under cultivation, the most in the district.'<sup>22</sup>

Even though early stockmen on the northwestern plains of North America often adopted farming techniques as reliance upon open range proved untenable, W.M. Elofson has contended many persisted in identifying as ranchers 'as much out of tradition... than as a precise reflection of what they were actually doing on their spreads.'<sup>23</sup> Building on his father's pioneering efforts and capitalizing on the same homesteading rush he would

lament as an elderly historian, Martin had supplemented his own income as a young man by ploughing up rangeland for other settlers, gradually establishing his own mixed farming operations over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> However, he similarly disregarded strict accuracy, and persisted in labeling himself with the more romantic appellation ‘rancher’ in a 1916 Census report, even though his own father’s occupation was listed as ‘farmer’ that same year.<sup>25</sup>

While Martin’s autobiographical recollections illuminated how open range had comprised only a liminal and impermanent stage of Rosebud’s development, the author resolutely asserted his own generation of early ranchers in Rosebud had neither anticipated nor welcomed the degree of change they encountered with the advent of the plough. To this effect, he claimed “We who rode the open range never dreamed of the coming change- fences, highways, cars, tractors, and taxes to pay on high priced farmlands’.<sup>26</sup> Often casting his generation as displaced victims rather than participants in the passing of open range, Martin documented how some old timers actively discouraged prospective farmers from staking claims during Rosebud’s land rush. In one example, Martin shared the barroom boast of a local stockman who recalled coming across a tent of sleeping homesteaders, promptly removing the canvas and exposing them to the elements, concluding, ‘Believe it or not, they ...sold their outfit and took the train back east...That’s one good turn I did for we ranchers.’<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, Martin offered his readers more introspective and somber reflections upon the passing of the ranching frontier in Rosebud, casting his own generation of old timers as helpless victims who could only ‘...witness a monster iron horse turn the sod/And destroy the prairie grass

seeded by God' as homesteaders flooded into the district following the arrival of the railway.<sup>28</sup>

Historians have demonstrated convincingly that the era of open range ranching on the northwest plains of North America drew to a close largely because of 'misplaced confidence' in the ability of the unaltered landscape and regional climate to support livestock with minimal supervision or assistance.<sup>29</sup> However, John Martin often implied the end of free range ranching had been the fault of incoming homesteaders and the advent of cereal agriculture. Evoking the plough and the act of breaking sod as symbols of generational loss and false progress, he explained, 'The ranchers had their day, then the lowly plough took over, turning the vast prairie "wrong-side-up."<sup>30</sup> In broad, elegiac strokes, he characterized the advent of agricultural development in Rosebud as the end of a more dynamic era of local history, contending, 'Once the open plains filled up with people and the railway came, towns with country stores, churches, and schools sprang up everywhere- the great pioneer days came to a close.'<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Martin romanticized Rosebud's early settlement era as an 'originary moment' more raw and demanding than anything subsequently characterizing life in the district, but also more personally fulfilling for those who had experienced it.<sup>32</sup> To this effect, he claimed, 'The old prairie range days, though tough and rugged, provided a free way of life that was mostly enjoyable. Your losses and gains were your own, unless you were working with bank money.'<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting mournfully upon 'the changing age and ways of doing things...' John Martin's nostalgia for open range as a raw frontier environment was often accompanied by a marked antipathy towards technological change.<sup>34</sup> Often, he echoed sentiments

more generally expressed by rural local historians in the prairie West, who popularly shared the ‘perception...that technological advance...contributed to the decay of society.’<sup>35</sup> To this effect, in *The Prairie Hub* Martin lamented how technology had rapidly transformed agricultural practices, explaining ‘Seventy-five years ago a tremendous amount of labor was needed to grow a bushel of grain. Today it can be done in ten minutes....Larger farms and machinery of the modern type can grow enough to feed the population, doing in a few hours, tasks that once took days.’<sup>36</sup> While Martin described these developments as a ‘revelation to all the pioneers who witnessed it’, he also mourned the dehumanizing impact it seemed to have sustained on the way of life experienced by the earliest settlement pioneers.<sup>37</sup>

Martin’s critical perspective on technological change often seemed a popular manifestation of debates ongoing in the intellectual culture of Canada more generally. Indeed, historian R. Douglas Francis has argued that since the late nineteenth century many of Canada’s leading intellectuals struggled to reconcile awareness that technological change had become a cultural imperative in the modern era with uncertainty about how it might impact the traditional mores and structures of human society.<sup>38</sup> Often, their interpretation of this ‘technological imperative’ revealed a concurrent desire to ‘retain or salvage a moral order’ that technology, with its capacity to transform everyday experiences and mentalities, appeared to threaten or usurp.<sup>39</sup>

Following the unprecedented implementation of destructive technology to take human lives in the First World War, R. Douglas Francis contended Canadian intellectuals increasingly perceived technological change as an industrial process with dehumanizing potential. In the prairie West, Francis suggested this perspective was evident in the novels

of Frederick Philip Grove, whose themes often suggested that a loss of individual agency and corrosion of traditional values were symptomatic of farming becoming an increasingly mechanized and industrial practice. While technological advance promised to liberate farmers from the demands of manual labour, Grove expressed concern that reliance upon new technology to improve material comforts came at the expense of moral fortitude, causing people to live their lives serving ‘mechanical values that are the antithesis to the spiritual component of human nature.’<sup>40</sup>

While John Martin often appeared to echo the moral anxieties of intellectuals like Frederick Philip Grove, as a vernacular author he tended to express concerns about technological change in terms of its practical impact on rural people in the prairie West. In addition to asserting machines had eroded the value of human labour, he critiqued technological change and the industrialization of farming as the root cause of demographic change that had damaged the viability of many rural communities across the prairies. To this effect, Martin insisted ‘...with the passing of time...Invention has replaced the thousands of hands that were required to stook and thresh grain and many of these workers have joined the ranks of the unemployed in the cities.’<sup>41</sup>

To further support his reservations about technological change in the Rosebud district, John Martin traced the economic hardships and environmental degradation of the Great Depression to the destructive power of the plough. To this effect, he claimed ‘I saw this same once grassy range turn to dust in the dry years...to become grave mounds for the steel horse that had turned it over.’<sup>42</sup> However, evoking the broader devastation of the Depression to validate of his critical view of agricultural development, Martin downplayed the fact that he did not personally suffer unprecedented hardship during the

1930's, even overcoming pre-existing financial difficulties midway through the decade.<sup>43</sup> Preferring to present the Depression as a collective trauma, when *The Prairie Hub* was published in 1967 he identified himself as one of only two old timers '...alive today who witnessed the disappearance of the Rosebud rangeland sixty-five years ago, and saw the area turn to dust' during the 1930's.<sup>44</sup>

As John Martin was over seventy years old when he began publishing local history, his melancholic perspective on change may simply reflect how as an elderly man, he associated the passage of time with a loss of personal vitality. Sentimentalizing the landscape that had defined his youth as 'a regenerative place', Martin depicted open range as a lost paradise that was perennially reconstituted in the act of remembering.<sup>45</sup> To this effect, he proclaimed 'When I am old at setting sun...In memory, I hope to recall anew,/The valley of the Rosebud, in morning dew...[and] herds of cattle pasturing on the range'.<sup>46</sup> Rendering youthful experiences more dynamic and appealing than the conditions defining old age, Martin's romantic descriptions of the early settlement landscape were often complemented by wistful reflections upon his own impending mortality, mourning, 'The sands of our life are swiftly falling... Sorrowfully, it is appalling/How soon we go.'<sup>47</sup>

Romanticizing open range as an alluring symbol of lost youth, John Martin eulogized the passing of the frontier environment as a generational benchmark for Rosebud's old timers. In this regard his work conformed to popular convention, as vernacular 'pioneer' historians have tended to assign much greater significance to the formative impact of frontier conditions upon settlers across the Canadian prairie West than their academic counterparts.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, academics have traditionally downplayed the

enduring cultural significance of the western settlement frontier in Canada, drawing upon the theories of economic historian Harold Adams Innis to emphasize the ‘subservience and dependency’ of settlement districts as hinterlands reliant upon hegemonic metropolitan centres located elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> Chief among the proponents of ‘metropolitanism’ in Canada was historian J.M.S. Careless, who asserted the western frontier north of the forty-ninth parallel was often dependent upon the ‘extension of metropolitan power’, which was dynamic and innovative in its own right.<sup>50</sup>

Within the past decade, metropolitanism has been subjected to academic criticism in Canada, as W.M. Elofson has contended historians perpetuating Innisian paradigms often inadequately accounted for ‘the power of the frontier environment’ upon individuals who encountered the prairies as a ranching frontier north of the forty-ninth parallel prior to the First World War.<sup>51</sup> Commemorating open range as nothing less than a symbol of lost personal and generational vitality, John Martin’s publications offer compelling support for Elofson’s argument. Indeed, following his death the old timer himself was eulogized as the romantic embodiment of a bygone frontier era, as his editor explained ‘John loved the free way of life on the...range and never quite forgave its violation by the plough’.<sup>52</sup> Characterizing open range as an immediately dynamic and invigorating encounter with frontier conditions that continued to define the generational identity of early settlers in Rosebud well after they had passed into historical memory, John Martin often seemed to echo instead the mythic tenor of American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who in the late nineteenth century asserted westward expansion had served a progressive, revitalizing function in the political and cultural development of the United States.<sup>53</sup> It should also be noted, while the intellectual appeal

of metropolitanism traditionally assigned the western settlement frontier only marginal national significance north of the forty-ninth parallel, academics studying the development of rural communities at the 'micro' level of local history have similarly proven much more willing to acknowledge that frontier conditions often influenced the behaviour of prairie settlers alongside other factors.<sup>54</sup>

Reflecting on change and the passage of time, John Martin expressed an unfulfilled yearning 'to see, and not to dream' the open range, lamenting the inadequacy of historical writing to recapture the tangible immediacy of lived experience.<sup>55</sup> While Martin's romantic yearning often reflected a high degree of autobiographical self-reflexivity in this regard, it also revealed the 'generational filter' informing his perspective on the past, moving beyond the author's personal experiences to commemorate old timers collectively as displaced pioneers of the Rosebud river valley.<sup>56</sup> Seeking to document how the local landscape had appeared in the 'minds of ranchers of the 1890's' Martin devoted entire sections of *The Rosebud Trail* to detailed documentation of individual coulees, sloughs, and springs that had functioned as landmarks in the early settlement era.<sup>57</sup> His efforts garnered special notice from reviewers, who praised the old timer for commemorating 'the landmark of yesteryear...that bore such picturesque names as Rap-Up Coulee, Jackknife Coulee, The Old Man's Bed, Lantern Coulee.'<sup>58</sup> While these place names evoked a colourful past, they also tied permanent features of the natural landscape to the deceased 'human actors' who had laid claim to the land when it had been open range.<sup>59</sup> In this regard, Martin suggested the names old timers had given to natural landmarks in the Rosebud district served as 'a lasting reminder' of the district's earliest pioneers.<sup>60</sup>

The generational anxieties motivating John Martin to commemorate the historical precedence of old timers also inspired him to document early pioneer burial sites in the Rosebud-Gleichen districts. For immigrant settlers seeking to make new homes in the rural prairie West, Frances Swyripa has asserted the act of interring loved ones in unfamiliar places often ‘...forged deep emotional ties with the soil...and thus to a specific place... nurtur[ing] a broader sense of belonging and community’ in many settlement districts.<sup>61</sup> However, Martin’s work as a local historian drew attention to the fact that early pioneers often ‘died and were buried without a record being kept of their demise by any local or government official’ in a variety of places deemed suitable for this immediate need, well before official community cemeteries had been established.<sup>62</sup> Often inadequately marked to stand the test of time and the elements, or located on land subsequently acquired for agricultural or municipal development, Martin suggested many old timer’s graves were being forgotten or effaced in the modern era. To this effect, in *The Prairie Hub* he noted a child’s burial site in a field near Standard had been destroyed by agricultural activity, noting ‘A grave marker could be seen from the road for several years, but in late years it has been ploughed under.’<sup>63</sup>

Alongside sporadic documentation of individual pioneer gravesites, John Martin eulogized a decaying pioneer cemetery at Gleichen that had gradually come to abut a landfill as the community developed modern infrastructure. Claiming ‘...the graves that were not moved...are now lost in the frassy [sic] field’, Martin observed only subtle depressions remained in Gleichen to commemorate some of the district’s earliest pioneers.<sup>64</sup> This was a matter of personal significance, as the author’s mother and two of his brothers were buried in pioneer graves that had similarly been ‘lost’ in the Gleichen

area.<sup>65</sup> However, Martin's concern for unmarked or forgotten pioneer graves may have also stimulated a collective desire to more permanently commemorate pioneers whose historical precedence could not be traced to a material reference point in the landscape. Indeed, at the present time a fieldstone cairn dedicated to local pioneers can be found in the south-west corner of Rosebud's community cemetery. While it is not clear whether Martin was directly involved in the creation of this monument, it addresses his concerns about the vulnerability of old timers as historical figures in Rosebud, reminding visitors that their ancestral bones were often laid to rest during the frontier era in unmarked sites, rendering the entirety of the local landscape a commemorative space.

John Martin's concerns about generational displacement often obscured the plain fact that the author was a long-term resident of the Rosebud district, able to take comfort knowing the land his father homesteaded would be passed on to his own children and grandchildren.<sup>66</sup> By contrast, most contributors to *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* (1983) belonged to families who no longer had immediate ties to land in the Rosebud area, having relocated due to declining economic opportunities or retired to larger urban centres as they aged. Despite having equally compelling reasons to echo John Martin's anxieties, most former residents presented leaving Rosebud as a choice, asserting they continued to associate the area with pleasant chapters of lives that had satisfactorily led them elsewhere. To this effect, one contributor explained 'I look back to my time spent in the Rosebud area...as a happy pleasant time', while another described the district as 'a place I hold dear in my memories.'<sup>67</sup> Similarly foregoing personal expressions of regret or loss, most contributors sentimentalized Rosebud as a fondly remembered home and community, even if they no longer lived there.

While generally insisting that leaving the Rosebud district had been a personal choice rather than compulsory or unanticipated displacement, former residents contributing to *Akokiniskway* often described visiting the district after relocation as a sentimental pilgrimage. To this effect, one contributor to *Akokiniskway* explained: ‘Although we no longer live in the Rosebud community, we...occasionally drive out



**Figure 2.1** Pioneer Cairn, Rosebud Cemetery. Author’s photograph, July 2014.

through that area. It is always with real pleasure that we recognize old familiar landmarks, giving a feeling of pride and nostalgia for both the district and our old friends.’<sup>68</sup> Such accounts support Frances Swyripa’s contention that pilgrimages undertaken by the descendants of euro-Canadian pioneers to sites associated with personal and collective origins across the prairie West affirmed ‘the emotional impact of place and beginnings’ on individual and shared identities.<sup>69</sup> Documenting the act of

returning to Rosebud after moving away similarly empowered former residents to assert the persistence of their emotional bonds to the district. As one narrator observed ‘we return each year to our hometown for picnics, canoe trips down the river...to return just because we want to.’<sup>70</sup>

As well over two-thirds of *Akokiniskway* documented the experiences of settlers who had arrived in the Rosebud river valley after 1913, most contributors sustained little of John Martin’s critical perspective on the passing of open range. Choosing instead to celebrate how they and their families had transformed Rosebud from empty grassland into a populated agricultural district dotted with welcoming homes and communities, they generally portrayed technological change as having been progressive and beneficial. Indeed, while John Martin portrayed the arrival of the railway as an unwelcome intrusion into the idyll of open range, contributors to *Akokiniskway* proudly claimed ‘without the railroad, the Rosebud River Valley would never have become the home it did for so many people.’<sup>71</sup> Similarly, while the plough manifested emotions of loss and displacement in Martin’s writing, in *Akokiniskway* it was celebrated as a symbol of promise and potential. To this effect, when reflecting upon his arrival in the Rosebud district as a prospective grain farmer in 1919, Ed Carlson explained ‘I dreamed how I’d change those stoney hills to golden wheat fields and have a spacious home that would be known far and wide for its hospitality.’<sup>72</sup>

Published a decade after John Martin’s death, *Akokiniskway* often portrayed younger generations as incumbent old timers, conferring originary status upon farmers who homesteaded in Rosebud during the railway-induced land rush as well as the frontier ranchers who had preceded them.<sup>73</sup> While Martin commemorated open range as a

signifier of his own generation's precedence in Rosebud, contributors to *Akokiniskway* conferred prestige upon more recent arrivals who had established community infrastructure, labeling organizers of school districts 'Pioneer Settlers' and 'founding fathers'.<sup>74</sup> *Akokiniskway* also documented how stewardship of Rosebud's pioneer heritage had been taken up in a self-reflexive manner by younger generations as the original old time ranchers passed on, noting the community museum had been established in 1967 by the 35 members of the local Lion's Club, '...all but two of them farmers...'<sup>75</sup> Describing the museum's ceremonial opening, contributors recalled members of the service club '...had grown beards and their wives dressed in old-fashioned long dresses for the occasion...[taking] us all back in time a hundred years.'<sup>76</sup> Hyperbolically summoning a heritage dating back a full century from 1967, well before euro-Canadian settlers laid claim to the Rosebud river valley, a much more generalized, inclusive and flexible view of pioneers had clearly supplanted Martin's generation following his passing. Indeed, even modern residents who had only recently come to reside in the district were invited to identify with old timers in *Akokiniskway* simply because of the rural conditions they encountered in the community. To this effect, one recent arrival explained 'Although we came to Rosebud almost 100 years after the first settlers, we felt like pioneers, nonetheless'.<sup>77</sup>

*Akokiniskway* generally documented the formative experiences of younger generations, who had little reason to reiterate John Martin's plaintive nostalgia for open range. However, just as Martin had romanticized the landscape that had defined his youth as an idyllic foil for changing conditions threatening his identity in old age, contributors to *Akokiniskway* contrasted memories of Rosebud as a 'thriving community' prior to the

Second World War with its declining stature in the early 1980's.<sup>78</sup> One narrator described Rosebud as a welcoming hub of activity prior to the Second World War, recalling:

‘Saturday was the busiest day of the week in Rosebud. Everybody came to town. The stores stayed open late and were packed with people shopping and visiting. In nice weather the children got together on main street to play games...The main street and vacant lots were lined with the various conveyances used for travel.’<sup>79</sup>

Eulogizing Rosebud's formerly buoyant social environment, contributors to *Akokiniskway* sentimentalized their community exactly as countless other local historians had done in declining rural service centres throughout Alberta in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> To this effect, one narrator explained ‘The Rosebud community in the thirties and forties was an interesting and exciting place. We had four passenger trains each day, and on Saturday nights there were so many people in town that there was no place to park on any of the main streets. ...I recall many of the things we did in those times with a great deal of nostalgia.’<sup>81</sup>

In 1979 sustainability researchers from the University of Calgary noted residents of Rosebud ‘repeatedly stressed the importance of their historical background; that a link with the pioneer past was very desirable in both existing and future...buildings’ within the built environment of their community.<sup>82</sup> Similar sentiments guided many contributors to *Akokiniskway*, who insisted the hamlet had once been a ‘truly pioneer’ environment, replete with wooden sidewalks and horses roaming through main street.<sup>83</sup> Often asserting that the community had been a more authentic and interesting place prior to the Second World War, nostalgia for more primitive conditions tended to function as a critical foil for modernization, empowering contributors to pass judgment on changes they had

witnessed in the physical environment of their community. To this effect, one contributor observed ‘The place I remember has drastically changed now. The buildings are different, with new roads and electric lines...It is greatly improved in creature comforts, but I would prefer the way we did things then...’<sup>84</sup>

In addition to romanticizing the ‘pioneer’ atmosphere created by threatened characteristics of Rosebud’s built environment, contributors to *Akokiniskway* lauded the social benefits they believed had been uniquely available to them as residents of a rural community in the past, insisting ‘There was a spirit of comraderie [sic] in our little town and a closeness that seems to come only in small communities’.<sup>85</sup> While John Martin had pointedly emphasized the environmental trauma of the Great Depression to validate his critical view of technological change, contributors to *Akokiniskway* overwhelmingly praised the social solidarity and support they felt had enabled community members to collectively endure the emotional and economic difficulties of the 1930’s in Rosebud. To this effect, one narrator explained, ‘Everyone else was in the same position and with the things that were provided off the land, made-overs and make-do’s, there was no reason to be depressed. I would call them the friendly years of my life. Everyone shared what they had and we were happy.’<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, simple verses lauded the palliative comforts Rosebud’s social environment had offered during difficult times, sighing, ‘Loneliness, drought, depression, war, poverty echo/through the years./Singing, picnics, laughter, fellowships, wash away the tears.’<sup>87</sup> These overwhelmingly positive representations of hardship in Rosebud conformed to popular convention, as local historians across Alberta similarly sentimentalized neighbourliness as a defining characteristic of rural

communities, a social advantage that had often enabled earlier generations to triumph over otherwise devastating adversity.<sup>88</sup>

Documenting how modern Rosebud had become ‘only a spot on the landscape’, current and former residents often mourned the closure of local businesses as evidence of declining prospects and diminished social resources in their community.<sup>89</sup> One elderly man recalled how the hamlet had formerly been ‘...a good little town with two garages, a good store and hotel. When the hotel closed down and there was no place to get a cold bottle of beer on a hot day, Rosebud went dead.’<sup>90</sup> Others simply listed the many businesses and institutions that had vanished from the streets. One contributor thus claimed ‘During the first 15 years of living in Rosebud the Van Laars have seen the closing of Batdorf’s garage, Murray’s Massey business, The Rosebud Hotel, the curling rink, the school, store, United Church, and Omer’s confectionary and barber shop.’<sup>91</sup> As businesses dwindled and streets were left silent, the modern hamlet seemed a lonelier, less interesting place, inspiring one contributor to observe ‘...today I understand there is not much left of a good prosperous town.’<sup>92</sup>

While the closure of businesses inspired mournful acknowledgement of Rosebud’s decline, *Akokiniskway*’s generally roseate sentimentality lapsed into more plaintive expressions of bereavement when contributors confronted the disappearance of rural schoolhouses they had attended as children. Defining the collective identity of younger generations just as open range had done for old timers of Martin’s vintage, schoolhouses were lauded for providing an immediate sense of home and comfort to the people they served. Fondly remembered as multi-functional social spaces, they had promoted community cohesiveness and fostered a shared sense of identity among

residents of small school districts often comprising an immediate area of only a few kilometres. Located southeast of Rosebud, Rabbit Lake School was portrayed as ‘...the hub in the wheel of everything worthwhile that happened in our little community, which possibly took in a radius of five miles.’<sup>93</sup> The school serving Redland was also hailed as a vibrant ‘social centre’ that had hosted funerals, church services, card parties, and political meetings in equal measure.<sup>94</sup> Even the Grasswold schoolhouse, which had opened in 1916 with only a small enrolment of ten children, garnered praise as ‘the heart and the soul of the community’ of farm families it had served six miles south of Rosebud.<sup>95</sup>

Narrative accounts throughout *Akokiniskway* suggest most rural schoolhouses in the Rosebud district were closed during the 1940’s, although some buildings were shuttered earlier, while others remained open into the 1950’s. In practical terms, the closure of rural schools often seemed to have disintegrated the social bonds sustaining smaller rural communities in the Rosebud district. To this effect, contributors explained when the school at the rail siding of Beynon closed, ‘...it was almost impossible to keep our little community intact...’<sup>96</sup> In more emotional terms, school closures were perceived to have left the rural landscape a lonelier, less welcoming place. When the Grasswold School was relocated in 1947, Kay Hymas recalled ‘... it was with a feeling of sadness that the neighbours across the road, watched the little one-roomed schoolhouse jacked off its foundation and hauled to Rosebud, ’ where it eventually became a ready-built addition to a private residence.<sup>97</sup> More dramatically, the closure of Redland School in 1951 inspired a poetic eulogy mourning the building’s absence from the landscape:

‘Where native grasses now grow tall  
...Echoing laughter, catcalls, cheers...

Courtier-children bestowing the Christmas play.

...Above this empty stretch of pasture land

Where neither moon by night, nor sun by day

Can ever shine on Redland School again.’<sup>98</sup>

Haunted by the laughter of children and the remembered warmth of human activity, contributors to *Akokiniskway* mourned the decay and disappearance of rural schoolhouses in the modern era with an emotional intensity demonstrating their enduring significance as generational touchstones for the people they had served.

In 1972, John Martin published a pamphlet documenting Severn Creek, the first school district established in the Rosebud river valley in 1903. Martin had intermittently attended the Severn Creek school, and fondly kept framed pictures of school picnics he had attended in his home.<sup>99</sup> Foreshadowing accounts in *Akokiniskway*, he too seemed concerned the relocation or destruction of schoolhouses would diminish awareness of their historical significance, erecting a cairn of fieldstones to mark where the first Severn Creek schoolhouse had been constructed one mile south of Rosebud.<sup>100</sup> Yet Martin’s sentimentality for the Severn Creek schoolhouse was rather pedestrian when compared to his plaintive yearning for the earlier frontier conditions that defined his identity as an old timer. Indeed, when documenting the fate of Rosebud’s original schoolhouse, Martin simply noted the building had been closed in 1909 and was subsequently purchased by his brother, observing in plain descriptive language that it remained ‘.. in good shape though empty with the windows boarded up’ in the early 1970’s.<sup>101</sup>

As symbols of encroaching civilization and harbingers of the more developed social infrastructure that ultimately subsumed early settlement conditions in Rosebud,

rural schoolhouses did not excite a great deal of personal nostalgia in John Martin's work. However, just as Martin had mourned open range as the defining feature of a nearly forgotten era, contributors to *Akokiniskway* sentimentalized schoolhouses as evocative symbols of shared generational experiences that seemed poised to pass out of living memory as the buildings decayed and former students aged. Indeed, narrators often appealed to collective identity when describing the experience of attending rural schools in *Akokiniskway*, stating 'we remember' on behalf of fellow students when reminiscing about conditions that had disappeared with the passing of time, eulogizing community-minded teachers alongside the long-vanished trails they had once followed children across open fields to their schoolhouses.<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere, contributors noted their particular schoolhouse had witnessed 'a whole generation ...[passing] through its doors...' offering former students a collective reference point with which to define the trajectories of change they had witnessed in their lifetimes.<sup>103</sup>

Sentimentalizing schoolhouses as generational benchmarks, *Akokiniskway* reflected a broader regional phenomenon that was largely absent from John Martin's work. Indeed, between the 1960's and 1980's amateur historian John Charyk enjoyed tremendous success as an author of popular histories targeting 'the one-room school generation' in the Canadian prairie West.<sup>104</sup> Having himself attended a rural school, Charyk sentimentalized the experience in vernacular terms, emphasizing the 'joy of remembering our days in schools now demolished and replaced by ultramodern central ones from which something intangible but valuable is missing.'<sup>105</sup> Similar sentiments surfaced throughout *Akokiniskway*, particularly when contributors struggled to reconnect with the same schoolhouses they had attended as children. One narrator recalled visiting

the school he had attended as a child on a detour through the Rosebud district in 1948, explaining the ‘...building was still standing where it was when I attended. I looked in the window hoping to see my old desk. Instead, all there was a patch of tentest on the ceiling.’<sup>106</sup> Such passages suggest many former students were questing after opportunities to reconnect with something rural schoolhouses represented about the past that had become increasingly difficult to define as they aged and confronted the obsolescence of formative childhood experiences.

To illuminate their ineffable human stories, community historians occasionally anthropomorphized rural schoolhouses as community members, mourning their own decline and displacement from the prairie landscape as if they possessed human voices. One such article in *Akokiniskway* exclaimed ‘Sixty years since I, Humboldt School, came into being...as I reminisce about those past six decades, feelings of joy and sadness sweep over me.’<sup>107</sup> Given a voice to tell its story, the Humboldt schoolhouse took evident pride in the significant role it had played in the lives of farm families and their children, reliving a typical school morning when ‘...the Forsch children are trudging through the snow, or rain, or sunshine, from the west; the Sailers from the northwest; the Offers from the northeast...’<sup>108</sup> Reflecting the anxieties of an aging demographic, the building likened its decaying condition in the modern era to the decrepitude of old age, sighing ‘...my time has passed, my outbuildings are gone, my windows boarded up, and for some years I was used as a granary. Now I sit alone, facing the west, dreaming of other days.’<sup>109</sup>

Eulogizing places and spaces associated with personal and shared beginnings, local historians portrayed the Rosebud district as a psychological and emotional space as

much as a distinct locality or geographic location on a map, affirming Frances Swyripa's contention that '...landscapes are both physical places and places of the mind'.<sup>110</sup>

However, just as they committed ephemeral memories to paper with imperative urgency, they often mourned the fragility of physical landmarks in their community as evidence of rapid and irreversible change. Commemorating abandoned schoolhouses and mourning frontier conditions that had ceased to define the local landscape, they struggled to preserve how dramatically different the 'pioneer' past had been for posterity when physical evidence of those differences was either threatened or had disappeared entirely. Despite generational differences, they often collectively expressed nostalgia as mournful homesickness, lamenting change in the modern era as the cause of displacement or alienation from their own formative experiences.

### Chapter 3:

#### **'Vanished Travois Trails' and Moccasins for Pioneers**

Responding to Rosebud's declining relevance as a collective point of origin in the modern era, local historians recurrently valorized local settlement pioneers as progenitors of a distinct and admirable way of life. To this effect, one contributor to *Akokiniskway* explained: 'It is with love that I...write the story of my parents, for they were among the real pioneers of this western country. To them all we owe so much. They were the people who began ways of living, ways of coming together in groups, ways of building up a community.'<sup>1</sup> Laying claim to a collective heritage rooted in the ancestral achievements of pioneers, Rosebud's historians articulated "exclusive myths of origin and endurance, endowing [community members]...with prestige and purpose" even as many current and former residents confronted an unanticipated threat of geographic and emotional alienation from their hereditary homes.<sup>2</sup>

Defining and disseminating pioneer heritage, Rosebud's historians contributed to popular regional mythology in the Canadian prairie West by celebrating agricultural settlers as 'mythic' collective founding figures. Less conventionally, they also attempted to claim an ancestral relationship with the indigenous people who had originally resided in the Rosebud river valley, revealing a latent, perhaps unconscious desire '...to establish a relationship with the country that pre-date[d] their arrival and validate[d] their occupation of the land.'<sup>3</sup> Often overlooking correlations between aboriginal dispossession and euro-Canadian settlement, Rosebud's historians portrayed indigenous people as romanticized 'Indian' archetypes, filtering historical fact through an appropriative,

ethnocentric cultural lens that ultimately served commemorative agendas within their own community.

To preserve clarity, the term ‘Indian’ in this study refers only to popular euro-Canadian perceptions of indigenous people, often expressed through pervasive cultural stereotypes intended to naturalize colonialism in North America. From the outset of their endeavour to explore and colonize the continent, Europeans perceived indigenous people “through a screen of their own prejudices and preconceptions.”<sup>4</sup> Historian Robert Berkhofer has argued European settlers in North America “primarily understood the Indian as an antithesis to themselves...civilization and Indianness as they defined them would forever be opposites.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, Daniel Francis has asserted popular perceptions of indigenous people held by Euro-Canadians were similarly tied to claims their traditional cultures ‘could not be modernized’, such that ‘Indians were defined in relation to the past and in contradistinction to White society.’<sup>6</sup> Specifically, as they seized control of the North American continent, it became fashionable for European settlers to view indigenous people as romanticized ‘noble savages’, doomed by a lamentable inability to evolve or adapt to change. This colonial discourse asserted aboriginal people were innately static, suspended in a primitive state that “belonged to a noble and tragic past but had no role in the future” of the modern world.<sup>7</sup> In this way, their dispossession was interpreted as inevitable and morally imperative, affirming the progressive, dynamic character European colonizers attributed to their own culture.

Academic historians including J.R. Miller and John Tobias have argued the original residents of the prairie West did not passively surrender to their fate as ‘an administered people’, often actively resisting coercive measures undertaken by the

Canadian government through treaties and assimilationist policies intended to erase indigenous cultures from the sociocultural fabric of the nation-state.<sup>8</sup> While these scholars have done much to change perceptions of indigenous people as historical agents in the development of the prairie West, for much of the twentieth century popular cultural discourse on the same subject remained pervasively colonial, illuminating ‘the power of one group to define another in ways that preclude self-definition.’<sup>9</sup> Broadly relegated to the margins of vernacular narratives that otherwise valorized pioneers, indigenous people have rarely been afforded the dialogic self-representation local history projects generally offered euro-Canadian pioneers and their descendants in rural communities.<sup>10</sup>

In part, the near-absence of indigenous voices in rural community histories reflected the plain fact that most euro-Canadian settlers arrived in the prairie West well after indigenous people had been culturally and geographically marginalized by economic degradation and repressive policies restricting their opportunities to interact with incoming homesteaders.<sup>11</sup> Having rarely encountered indigenous people, most settlers did not feel personally implicated in their displacement, often perceiving the prairies to be void of human inhabitants upon their arrival.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, vernacular historians working in rural Albertan communities typically interpreted the historical significance of indigenous people in prehistoric terms, describing aboriginal cultures as an organic feature of the natural landscape that had existed before the arrival of pioneers.

While the muted presence of indigenous people in local histories produced by rural prairie communities often reflected a degree of historical reality, it was also culturally motivated. As the original inhabitants of the prairie landscape who had been dispossessed by incoming euro-Canadian settlers, indigenous people challenged pioneer

claims to precedence, undermining their mythic status as founding figures in many rural prairie communities.<sup>13</sup> Thus, local historians across the rural prairies typically marginalized the presence of indigenous people in their work, preferring to romanticize them as a passive attribute of the ‘pre-settlement landscape’ rather than as human agents capable of impacting the settlement process.<sup>14</sup> As euro-Canadian community historians typically made little effort to engage contemporary indigenous people or include authentic indigenous voices in their projects, this interpretive strategy ensured aboriginal displacement ‘...seldom disturbed group narratives’ that otherwise heroized agricultural settlers.<sup>15</sup>

Most local history books published by rural Albertans after 1967 were given titles that unambiguously affirmed the originary significance of the settlement experience for euro-Canadian communities.<sup>16</sup> Conforming to popular convention, rural communities neighbouring Rosebud published local history books under titles suggesting exclusive and uncontested euro-Canadian ownership of the landscape and its human narratives, including *Carbon: Our History our Heritage* (1986), and *Rockyford: Where We Crossed the Creek and Settled* (c. 1980). These titles commemorated how the settlement process had empowered immigrant settlers to formulate new place-names, and ‘to claim and define the land according to their own criteria, reconfiguring it around their own experiences and populating it with their heroes and stories.’<sup>17</sup> By contrast, *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* (1983) seems an enigmatic and perhaps counter-intuitive choice on the part of the Rosebud History Book Committee, forgoing the centrality of the settlement experience and drawing attention to the intimate and proprietary relationship

indigenous people had sustained with the Rosebud river valley prior to the arrival of euro-Canadian settlers.

Initially, the Rosebud History Book Committee intended to hold a contest allowing contributors to name their final publication.<sup>18</sup> However, in August 1982 Kay Hymas suggested in her capacity as editor that the book be titled ‘akokiniskway’, a Blackfoot word meaning ‘river of many rosebuds’.<sup>19</sup> Committee members seem to have encountered the term in an unspecified book of Albertan place names and through research conducted at the Glenbow archives in Calgary.<sup>20</sup> The name does not appear to have previously enjoyed popular or colloquial use among the euro-Canadian population of the Rosebud district, as Committee members found it necessary to clarify whether it was one word or two, recurrently shifting their pronunciation and spelling.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, at Hymas’ suggestion, the original list of titles proposed for Rosebud’s history book was narrowed from sixty to three, and ‘Akokinisk Way’ was adopted by an overwhelming majority, with thirteen out of nineteen attending Committee members casting votes by secret ballot in favour of the distinctive appellation.<sup>22</sup>

Acknowledging some discomfort about the appropriation of Blackfoot language to describe their community history project, the Rosebud History Book Committee sought approval from popular historian Hugh Dempsey, who had written a number of books and articles about the Blackfoot in Alberta and had personal connections to the Kainai nation through his wife.<sup>23</sup> Noting with apparent relief that Dempsey had been ‘pleased with the name’, they also requested he provide contact information that would enable them to present a special copy of *Akokiniskway* to representatives from the Blackfoot reservation at Gleichen.<sup>24</sup> While these gestures suggest the Committee

genuinely desired to honour the Blackfoot as original inhabitants of the Rosebud river valley, the contents of *Akokiniskway* overwhelmingly privileged the experiences of euro-Canadians who had subsequently displaced them. The disconnect between the evocative aboriginality of *Akokiniskway*'s title and the absence of indigenous self-representation throughout the book offers a compelling illustration of the tensions and ambiguities underwriting the appropriative nostalgia Rosebud's historians directed towards their 'Indian' subject matter.

*Akokiniskway* repeatedly legitimized euro-Canadian occupation of the Rosebud river valley by asserting its enduring appeal as a home for agricultural settlers and their descendants. The bulk of the publication documented how euro-Canadian settlers in the Rosebud river valley had '...set about creating...landmarks and claiming the space as their own', superseding indigenous precedence as they built homes and communities with their families and neighbours.<sup>25</sup> In the late 1970's, sustainability researchers from the University of Calgary observed Rosebud was popularly perceived to have 'historically been a place of retreat, refreshment and renewal'.<sup>26</sup> Subtitled 'by the river of many roses' *Akokiniskway* similarly sentimentalized the Rosebud river valley as a welcoming prairie oasis, and narrative descriptions of Rosebud's natural landscape further evoked the beauty and abundance of an inherited garden, rather than the challenge and hardship of an uninhabited wilderness.

Commemorating euro-Canadian settlement as the triumphant development of appealing domestic characteristics that seemed inherent in the local landscape, one contributor to *Akokiniskway* claimed Rosebud's first pioneer had been inspired to settle in the district when he 'saw the sun rise down the valley, shining upon thousands of budding

wild roses,' a scene of alluring natural beauty that held the promise and potential of home.<sup>27</sup> Former residents grew similarly sentimental when recalling abundant wildflowers as an identifying feature of the local landscape, as one contributor noted 'When I tell people the name of my first childhood home, they react visibly to "Rosebud", and it is necessary to explain about the roses.'<sup>28</sup> Alongside the garden motif, contributors often spoke affectionately of 'cosy Rosebud coulees' that had provided unique recreational opportunities that enabled residents to lay claim to the natural abundance of the river valley.<sup>29</sup> One narrator recalled exploring Rosebud's coulees as something akin to a treasure hunt, exclaiming 'In one coulee we found oystershell, in another petrified wood, Indian artifacts and dinosaur bones might be anywhere.'<sup>30</sup> The proprietary nature of these experiences was also evident in the profile of Beynon settler Hans Holman, a man fondly remembered for taking '...great pride in what he always called his beautiful Coulee. He showed visitors the springs, spruce trees, wildflowers and all the winding roads he made.'<sup>31</sup>

Lush narrative descriptions of coulees and wild roses in *Akokiniskway* sentimentalized the beauty of Rosebud's natural landscape as evidence of its innate suitability for pioneer settlement and enduring domestic appeal, as one contributor proclaimed '*Rosebud* was a Natural Beauty spot to raise a family... ..We are all proud to call *Rosebud* our *Home*.'<sup>32</sup> Repeatedly legitimizing euro-Canadian occupation of the Rosebud river valley by sentimentalizing their own emotional bonds to the local landscape, contributors to *Akokiniskway* acknowledged the precedence of indigenous occupation primarily by evoking an ancient, vanished people with little contemporary relevance to pioneers or their descendants. Indeed, the community history book defined

the ‘beginning’ of local history as the advent of euro-Canadian settlement. Thus, following descriptions of prehistoric fauna, the second article to appear in the community history book immediately identified Indians as ‘prehistoric’ occupants of the Rosebud river valley, asserting ‘we cross that border from *prehistory* into the... *history* of our Indians’ only ‘after the whiteman arrived to dominate this area.’<sup>33</sup>

Segregating indigenous people from narratives detailing the development of euro-Canadian homes and communities, local historians suggested the original inhabitants of the Rosebud district had conveniently vanished from the landscape with the advent of agricultural settlement. To this effect, contributors to *Akokiniskway* explained ‘By the time the first pioneers showed up along the Rosebud in the 1880’s most of the Indians had either died of diseases, had been killed off in Indian skirmishes or had been packed off by Treaty No. 7 to the Blackfoot Reservation at Gleichen.’<sup>34</sup> Consequently, most euro-Canadian settlers encountered indigenous people only through lingering cultural artifacts, evoked alongside coulees and wild roses as a distinguishing feature of the natural landscape. Contributors to *Akokiniskway* often recalled finding stone hammers, arrowheads, and Indian gravesites as exotic but inconsequential experiences that rarely cast doubt upon their own claims to the land.<sup>35</sup> Occasionally, these discoveries inspired commemorative sympathy, as Ed Carlson recalled: ‘When I first arrived there were signs of an Indian campground still visible by Rabbit Lake...a campground for a vanishing people. It should have been preserved for all time but I’ll bet it is today a wheat field.’<sup>36</sup> Others assigned autobiographical significance to these experiences, as one narrator recalled an unexpected encounter with a tattered tipi in a coulee near Beynon, asserting ‘my own contact with these ancient people is ghostly...one of my scariest childhood

memories’.<sup>37</sup> However, contributors to *Akokiniskway* consistently interpreted these experiences as evidence of their own innate cultural superiority, adopting patronizing and possessive language that suggested settlement pioneers had inherited ‘our Blackfoot Indians’ as an organic feature of the natural landscape.<sup>38</sup>

Reflecting on material evidence that indigenous people had made the Rosebud river valley their ancestral home, contributors to *Akokiniskway* imbued the modern community with a more ancient and mysterious past than settlement pioneers alone could impart. To this effect, the author of one article detailing the district’s pre-history observed ‘...at the time the Druids were building mysterious stone structures in Europe, prehistoric people on the prairies were building “medicine rings” and manufacturing stone artifacts of equal antiquity’.<sup>39</sup> Seeking to inherit an ancient, primitive culture alongside wild roses and coulees as signifiers of place in Rosebud, contributors to *Akokiniskway* asserted ‘...it’s not difficult to conjure up accurate images of our prehistoric Indians if we include the unique insights provided first, by John Martin...[and] by tales our parents told us...’<sup>40</sup> Offering younger generations an emotionally satisfying precedent, the elder local historian had often similarly defined Indians as remote prehistoric fauna rather than a discernable chapter of human history, naming ‘roaming buffalo, native mankind, [and] wild animals’ as ‘nature’s gift to the western prairies’.<sup>41</sup>

While appealing to younger generations in Rosebud, John Martin also interpreted Indians as nostalgic signifiers of the early settlement era that defined his own historical identity as an old timer. Indeed, alongside roaming cattle and endless prairie vistas, he evoked ‘... Indian encampments, o’er the grassy lands’ and ‘the vanished travois trails of native bands’ as iconic symbols of the open range he had encountered in his youth.<sup>42</sup>

Further, seeking to assert the historical precedence of his own generation, Martin drew nostalgic parallels between early settlers and displaced indigenous people, suggesting both groups had been similarly marginalized by agricultural settlement and the loss of open range. To this effect, he mourned ‘...the passing of the buffalo trails deep with age, the travois trails of the red men...the huge cattle ranches with not a fence in sight, and the Indian’s free nomadic way of life- all brought to an end by the plough’.<sup>43</sup>

Despite asserting the authenticity of his ‘personal knowledge of the Indians’, John Martin’s complex, often contradictory representations of indigenous people reflected an uncomfortable tension between information derived from firsthand experiences and the romantic appeal of ‘Indian’ tropes and stereotypes.<sup>44</sup> Martin often drew upon his occupational experiences at the Blackfoot reservation at Gleichen, where between 1910 and 1912 he work as a line rider managing livestock as well as an “issuer of rations”, interacting directly with an indigenous community being actively pressured by government officials to abandon their traditional culture and assimilate into ‘modern’ euro-Canadian society.<sup>45</sup> His sentimental fixation on Indians as nostalgic icons of a bygone era was also inspired by personal relationships with individuals such as Peter Ma-Kon, a Blackfoot man engaged by Martin’s parents to break land near Gleichen, whom the old timer described as ‘the friend of my childhood days’.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps reflecting the influence of more sustained and direct interpersonal contact with indigenous people than was typical of contributors to *Akokiniskway*, or vernacular local historians across rural Alberta more generally, John Martin acknowledged aboriginal communities had imprinted upon the prairie landscape their own map of culturally significant landmarks and place-names well before euro-Canadian settlers had

it as their own. To this effect, he recalled the nascent pioneer community of Gleichen had still born traces of ‘Indian’ trails ‘leading to a favourite campsite and hunting ground, or an old battlefield...’ in the early settlement era, haunted by the lingering presence of people only recently dispossessed from their ancestral home.<sup>47</sup>

Acknowledging aboriginal precedence and the legitimacy of indigenous claims to the prairies as an ancestral home, John Martin asserted, ‘In the name of the Great Spirit, the Indian claimed the West to be his, from the beginning of time; he lived as a free man, obeying his own civil and moral laws.’<sup>48</sup> Expressing sympathy for the dispossession of the prairie’s first people, he observed ‘All was serene for the noble red man until the white man rounded him up and put him on a reservation.’<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Martin asserted the displacement of indigenous people simply demonstrated the cultural superiority of euro-Canadian pioneers who brought ‘seeds of a new and better life’ to the original occupants of the prairie West.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps seeking to palliate any lingering guilt that might implicate settlement pioneers and their descendants in the marginalization of Rosebud’s original inhabitants, he persisted in portraying indigenous people as immutable Noble Savages, a tradition-bound archetype who ‘Reluctantly.. carries on and conforms to a new order; but in reality.. is still in memory, a redman of the plains.’<sup>51</sup>

While Euro-Canadian authors often emphasized first-hand knowledge of ‘Indian’ subject matter, they often failed to recognize how their work legitimized or perpetuated existing ethnocentric tropes and stereotypes.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, while John Martin drew historical authority from personal interactions with indigenous people, he often evoked the trope of noble savagery to express admiration for traditional Indian culture while implying aboriginal displacement from the land had been both inevitable and morally

imperative. In part, this may reflect the impact of his audience, as amateur local history in rural Albertan communities was written primarily for people with personal ties to pioneers in the districts being documented.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps seeking to provide readers a more emotionally satisfying historical narrative, Martin sentimentalized indigenous people as primitive ‘redmen of the plains’, praising their innate intimacy with the natural world while intimating their traditional way of life had been doomed with the advent of euro-Canadian settlement.<sup>54</sup>

Portraying indigenous people as noble savages forever defined by a bygone era, John Martin appropriated ‘Indian’ landmarks to demonstrate his own precedence as an old timer in Rosebud. Martin claimed many local landmarks and vernacular place-names originated from Indian stories inherited by the old timers who took possession of the landscape in the late nineteenth century. In one example, Martin recalled attending annual picnics held by ‘the Gleichen old-timers’ in his youth at a landmark known as Hammer Hill. After recounting sporting events, games, and music performed at these picnics in the early 1890’s, he explained the landmark’s name ‘had its roots in the day of the buffalo’ when it was believed by early settlers to have been a contested kill site, sparking a conflict between competing bands of Blackfoot and Cree armed with stone hammers.<sup>55</sup> Layering the social experiences of early settlers forming new communities onto existing Indian landmarks, John Martin suggested his generation inherited an almost indigenous intimacy with the landscape, subsequently passed on to their descendants as pioneer folklore.

The most compelling illumination of John Martin’s appropriative nostalgia for Indian landmarks appears in the author’s recurrent fascination with an indigenous

monument referred to as the 'Stone God' of Ribstone Hill.' Originally located in the Sunnynook district approximately one hundred kilometres east of Rosebud, Martin described this landmark as one of many similar sites encountered by early settlers atop coulees and hills in the rangeland of central and south-eastern Alberta. An impressive boulder incised with mysterious markings, it seems likely the object was in fact a ribstone, a sacred indigenous object carved with a backbone and markings suggesting the powerful form of a bison.<sup>56</sup> While Martin did not explicitly identify the Stone God as such, he explained the landmark possessed spiritual significance for bands of Cree who frequented the Sunnynook district to honour ancestral spirits 'though dead, yet alive in the stone.'<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the Stone God first came to Martin's attention through tales told by his brother-in-law Dave Brereton, a cowboy who '...often saw wandering bands of Indians stop on the top of Ribstone Hill... offer up prayers to the stone god', leaving offerings of tobacco and pemmican.<sup>58</sup>

In June 1912, John Martin removed the Stone God from Ribstone Hill, having been paid \$75.00 by the Western Art Association to send it from Gleichen to Fort Qu'Appelle in southeastern Saskatchewan by rail, after a five day journey over the prairie undertaken with a team of horses.<sup>59</sup> This venture transpired at a dinner Martin's brother-in-law had hosted for a government official, who subsequently mentioned the Western Art Association's intention to erect a cairn commemorating the signing of Treaty no. 4 with the Cree. Martin claimed the God of Ribstone Hill '...seemed the proper object to incorporate in the monument they were about to make' given its perceived spiritual value for Cree people who frequented the Sunnynook district.<sup>60</sup> Disregarding the landmark's local significance, Martin sent the Stone God to Fort Qu'Appelle, only to later learn it

had never been incorporated into the treaty cairn. Forty-four years later, the old timer located the object at the National Museum in Ottawa in 1956, although the reason for its extra-regional appropriation was never made clear.<sup>61</sup>

As a local historian, John Martin appropriated the Stone God of Ribstone Hill as a euro-Canadian icon of ‘Indian relic landscapes’, conflating its indigenous provenance with his own generational claim to historical precedence in the prairie landscape.<sup>62</sup> Martin first documented his encounter with the Stone God in his autobiographical essay ‘Prairie Reminiscences’, published in the *Alberta Historical Review* in 1962. Martin’s story prompted a letter to the editor of the journal, written by a woman named Lois Buckley who had homesteaded with her family in the Sunnynook district in 1909. In her letter, Buckley claimed ‘I am quite sure I am one of about three persons living who ever saw the Indian god on top of Ribstone Hill. It was less than half a mile from our house.’<sup>63</sup> In turn, Martin devoted an entire section of *The Prairie Hub* to early settlers in Sunnynook who had interacted with the landmark in its original location, noting with evident delight that as a young girl, Buckley ‘...often had lunch and studied her lessons while perched on the God of Ribstone Hill.’<sup>64</sup> Martin also noted Buckley visited the landmark after it had been rediscovered at the National Museum, including a photograph of the elderly lady smiling next to the enigmatic object in *The Rosebud Trail*.<sup>65</sup> Incorporating the experiences of other old timers to assert the Stone God’s significance as a pioneer landmark, John Martin’s historical publications reified his physical appropriation of the landmark as a range rider in 1912. Indeed, while occasionally acknowledging its indigenous provenance, Martin’s fascination with the object was powerfully self-reflexive, celebrating its significance as a folkloric symbol of the early

settlement landscape that helpfully distinguished the generational experiences of old timers from more recent arrivals who had never seen the monument in its original location. Having emptied the landscape of a generational touchstone as well as a local landmark, as an elderly man Martin seemed to acknowledge that removing the object had been an appropriative act with unanticipated consequences, observing ‘for many years these “gods” were landmarks; now, many have been taken away to museums.’<sup>66</sup> In this regard, Martin’s multiple retellings of the Stone God’s saga affirmed David Lowenthal’s contention that ‘turning once-sacred local and tribal legacies into public commodities ... divests them of social meaning.’<sup>67</sup>

Reflecting upon his personal culpability in the theft of the Stone God, John Martin asserted the object had ‘lost its identity’ when it had disappeared from Fort Qu’Appelle, anthropomorphizing the monument as an unwilling exile from the landscape that had given it power and purpose.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in a poem entitled ‘The God of Ribstone Hill’, Martin spoke in the ‘voice’ of the former landmark, seeking to recreate its spiritual and social significance for indigenous people and old timers alike, proclaiming ‘For a million moons have I here in comfort lain/A power to the Cree Indians and a beacon to the riders of the plains’. However, by the end of this poem, Martin acknowledged displacement from the land had robbed the God of its former potency and enacted a kind of death, as the monument sighed wistfully ‘I know of the coming of my last day/ When I will be taken from my resting place to a city far away.’<sup>69</sup> Even after the object had been rediscovered in the National Museum, Martin struggled to translate into written history his memories of the imposing God as it had been on Ribstone Hill, assuming the ‘voice’



**Figure 3.1** Author Unknown, Photograph of Lois Buckley and the Stone God, 1961. In *The Rosebud Trail*, unnumbered section between pp. 100-101. See also 'Index to Photographic Section,' 187.

of the landmark to explain to modern readers 'My history is not in a book, but in the hearts of men./My ancient record will never come from a pen'.<sup>70</sup> In mourning the Stone God's modern identity as a museum artifact with a storied past, it is tempting to suggest John Martin was commenting on his own threatened identity as an old timer whose formative experiences had become increasingly obsolete and inaccessible in the modern era.<sup>71</sup>

While *Akokiniskway* overwhelmingly relegated indigenous people to a remote prehistory, and John Martin appropriated Indian landmarks as nostalgic symbols of a bygone era, characterizations of the district's first agricultural settlers often traced collective heritage to indigenous people as the original inhabitants of the district. Indeed, as the first agricultural settlers to permanently reside in the Rosebud district, James and Eliza Wishart were portrayed less as archetypal pioneers imposing a foreign civilization onto a threatening wilderness, than as quasi-indigenous founding figures in their own right. In *Westward Bound* (1968), John Martin characterized the Wisharts as diplomatic travellers in search of a family home, romanticizing their encounters with indigenous people in a semi-fictionalized narrative of their journey from Manitoba to the Rosebud district in the early 1880's.

Through fictionalized dialogue in *Westward Bound*, John Martin conformed to popular conventions often found in amateur local historiography across the prairie West, portraying Indians '... as improvident, colourful characters who early settlers feared needlessly' as they established new homes and communities.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, at the outset of their journey, Wishart's wife expressed fear her family would be assimilated into western Indian tribes, confessing to her husband "It would be an easy matter for them to absorb us into any one of their many bands and nobody would ever hear of us again."<sup>73</sup> In response, Wishart assured her of their safety if they remained "on good terms with the Redmen, who claim as their birthright, the prairie west."<sup>74</sup> These sentiments were affirmed in a revelatory encounter with a Blackfoot community, when the settlers were invited to a festive intertribal meeting with conspicuously peaceful and welcoming overtones.

Initially, Martin suggested the prospect of direct interaction with the Blackfoot caused James Wishart to retract earlier assurances, as the pioneer admitted "...it seems downright foolish to be guests at a pow-wow put on by pagans...It looks to me like a torture party for the Indians and we are walking right into it."<sup>75</sup> Yet upon arriving at the encampment and encountering festive décor and colourfully attired people Martin insisted '...they beheld the most wonderful sight of their lives. It was a scene...that few white men had ever had the pleasure of seeing.'<sup>76</sup> Emphasizing the welcoming attitude of their hosts, Martin suggested the Wisharts had been foolish to give in to popular misconceptions about Indians, asserting their fears were overcome when it became clear the Blackfoot wished to share their ancestral land and traditional culture with the newcomers. In his account the pioneer family witnessed a formal oration in which 'The Chief spoke at length for unity of purpose and for peace with the different tribes and with the few white people who were in their lands. He said "May they be peaceful citizens, and not scorn or scoff at our way of living or thinking."<sup>77</sup>

Fifteen years after the publication of *Westward Bound*, the Wisharts were profiled in *Akokiniskway* by their great-granddaughter, whose source material comprised family stories as well as archival research.<sup>78</sup> She asserted the couple had been born in the Red River district of Manitoba, but hailed from 'Orkney forefathers' who had first arrived in North America in the late eighteenth century as employees of the Hudson's Bay Company at a time when 'There were no white women in Rupert's Land'.<sup>79</sup> In plain terms, this family historian acknowledged Eliza's grandparents had been Scottish fur traders who married 'Cree Indian women'.<sup>80</sup> Reflecting this mixed heritage, the Wisharts

were characterized in *Akokiniskway* as diplomatic, culturally permeable settlers who ‘could speak in several tongues: Cree, Sauteaux, French and English...’<sup>81</sup>

John Martin did not transparently acknowledge the Wisharts’ mixed cultural background in his publications, asserting instead James Wishart had been born in the Orkney Islands.<sup>82</sup> Revealing an apparent cultural shift between the 1960’s and 1980’s in which indigenous ancestry became more socially acceptable in predominantly euro-Canadian prairie communities, the Wisharts’ descendants proudly acknowledged their family ‘had a little Indian’ in their cultural background when *Akokiniskway* was published in 1983.<sup>83</sup> The Wishart family also published an additional magazine article and a book on the subject, crediting John Martin’s stories about James and Eliza Wishart in *The Rosebud Trail* for inspiring further investigation and subsequently bringing to light their family’s mixed provenance. Prior to this, the Wisharts’ grandchildren explained they had been ‘unaware of our Aboriginal background because our family had concealed it’ fearing they would be subjected to prejudice and discrimination.<sup>84</sup> However, by the time they learned the truth in the 1960’s they believed they had ‘nothing to fear’, conducting research through the Hudson’s Bay Company archives to confirm their suspicions before publically celebrating their mixed cultural origins.<sup>85</sup>

Rather than openly acknowledge the mixed background of the Wisharts, John Martin suggested the pioneers acquired a quasi-indigenous intimacy with the Rosebud river valley through transformative experiences with the local climate and geography. Dramatizing a folkloric tale about a blizzard that overcame James Wishart between Rosebud and Gleichen in 1887, Martin claimed the settler spent three days and nights wrapped in buffalo robes, buried in snow under a rock ledge in the coulees after failing to

heed the warnings a 'Blackfoot Indian forecaster' named Crane Bear.<sup>86</sup> Martin portrayed Wishart's survival as a spiritual experience, suggesting he had suffered strange delusions as the storm raged by claiming 'At times he would dream or imagine that someone was with him, and would speak, saying "It is I, and you are me."' and he felt he was not alone.'<sup>87</sup> Through sheer physical endurance Wishart survived the storm, freezing his feet so severely his toes had to be amputated in its aftermath. In this way, Martin suggested the blizzard manifested indigenous attributes that perhaps covertly or unintentionally acknowledged Wishart's mixed cultural heritage, explaining Rosebud's first pioneer '...had to wear moccasins for the rest of his life', dancing Red River jigs in conspicuously indigenous footwear at local gatherings.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to crediting encounters with the local landscape, John Martin suggested the Wisharts acquired Indian characteristics through their friendship with High Eagle, an itinerant Blackfoot hunter who occasionally resided near their homestead. Martin described High Eagle as 'the old familiar Indian', a friend and neighbour who performed odd jobs for early pioneers.<sup>89</sup> A benign interpreter of traditional indigenous knowledge, Martin asserted High Eagle helped acclimate Rosebud's first pioneers to their new home. Martin claimed the hunter's friendship was offered freely and immediately upon the arrival of Rosebud's first settlers, explaining 'Before the first day was out, the Wisharts had an Indian caller...[High Eagle] was their first neighbor, and became a lifelong friend.'<sup>90</sup>

John Martin emphasized High Eagle's friendly attitude towards Rosebud's first pioneers, claiming the hunter possessed '...no ambition to be a warrior and did not believe in scalping nor in tribal battles...'<sup>91</sup> He also implied High Eagle had been

exceptional and distinct from other Blackfoot people, asserting his family ‘travelled around very much on their own, hunting and having very little to do with other members of the tribe.’<sup>92</sup> Perhaps symbolizing consent to euro-Canadian occupation in the Rosebud river valley, High Eagle’s relations with the Wisharts supported more general assertions local historians made about the welcoming and quiescent nature of displaced indigenous people. Indeed, the hunter’s biography provided contributors to *Akokiniskway* a useful opportunity to claim ‘...the first settlers on the Rosebud found the Blackfoot, despite the sudden and drastic change in their life-style, friendly and helpful.’<sup>93</sup>

Emphasizing generous acts of friendship that often rested upon the sharing of traditional knowledge, High Eagle imparted to the Wisharts an almost indigenous intimacy with the landscape. Martin asserted High Eagle invited the Wisharts to share a meal at his own camp soon after their arrival on the Rosebud and performed welcoming acts of kindness, providing balsam salve for worn feet, and even helping the pioneers haul logs and construct buildings at their homestead, assisting them in claiming land as their own.<sup>94</sup> The author also noted High Eagle’s wife taught Eliza Wishart how to use local medicinal plants by sharing traditional knowledge.<sup>95</sup> Martin explained Eliza subsequently became a local wise woman ‘skilled in the art of using Indian medicine’, praising her knowledge of ‘...roots and herbs known only to the native Indians and the few white people who were taught where to find them, and how to use them.’<sup>96</sup> However, he seemed to attribute these ‘inherited’ Indian characteristics to interactions between Eliza and High Eagle’s family rather than acknowledging her own indigenous ancestry.

While it is tempting to suggest Martin’s folkloric explanations of the Wisharts’ Indian attributes was intended to obscure their mixed cultural origins, it is difficult to

ascertain whether he possessed sufficient information about their background to warrant such calculated myopia. By contrast, he clearly characterized the Blackfoot hunter as a representative of a dying way of life who could never have assimilated into the nascent euro-Canadian community he had assisted. Emphasizing High Eagle's preference for a nomadic, semi-traditional existence, Martin romantically dubbed him 'the wandering spirit of the plains,' while *Akokiniskway* similarly asserted High Eagle had demonstrated no desire to assimilate into the community, living instead as 'a wanderer' whose 'great love was hunting'.<sup>97</sup> Tellingly, James Wishart's death neatly removed High Eagle from local historical narratives, as Martin explained the hunter 'left his favouret [sic] camping ground at Rosebud after his great friend Jim Wishart died in July 1906,' subsequently living among the Blackfoot at Cluny until his death at the age of eighty-two.<sup>98</sup>

While not viewed as a community member in his own right, High Eagle was nevertheless commemorated as an originary figure associated with the emergence of euro-Canadian communities in the Rosebud river valley. The sole indigenous person to warrant individual documentation in *Akokiniskway*, his page-long biography was segregated from the bulk of the community history book, appearing immediately before the first of many sections documenting euro-Canadian residents of the Rosebud district. This conformed to popular convention, as indigenous people were rarely referenced in the portions of community history books devoted to individual profiles or family histories.<sup>99</sup> However, the ambiguous 'threshold' position of his biography with regard to the multigenerational family histories that followed suggest the Blackfoot hunter was adopted as a kind of benevolent, honorary ancestor to whom modern community members could symbolically trace some aspect of their collective heritage.

Appropriated as an ‘inherited’ symbol of traditional Indian knowledge in publications that otherwise consigned indigenous people to a distant past, High Eagle was praised for having ‘...related much of the early history of the Indians’ to early pioneers on the Rosebud.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps seeking to bolster his authority as a historical witness, John Martin recalled meeting High Eagle in 1895, citing the Blackfoot hunter alongside ‘a number of old Indians who had plenty to talk about’ as early sources of local historical information.<sup>101</sup> Explaining how Rosebud’s first pioneers had acquired indigenous knowledge of the area, Martin asserted what High Eagle told James Wishart ‘...about landmarks, etc., forms the base of Rosebud history’.<sup>102</sup> Affirming Martin’s sentiments, the Rosebud History Book Committee similarly laid claim to an intercultural chain of local historical knowledge that could be traced back to High Eagle by way of Martin’s work as a local historian.<sup>103</sup> The Committee also attributed the title of their community history book to High Eagle, claiming the hunter had told ‘John [Martin] the name given to the beautiful valley. It was Akokiniskway... “river of many roses.”’<sup>104</sup> Appropriating the Blackfoot word along with the man who had ‘shared’ it with early pioneers, *Akokiniskway* effectively claimed euro-Canadian possession of the district’s indigenous place-name through High Eagle’s generous benefaction.

Local historians often appeared to appropriate ‘Indians’ as ordinary figures in an effort to bolster identification with the Rosebud district as an ancestral home and collective point of origin in the modern era. In part, this may have reflected a higher degree of direct interaction between pioneer newcomers and indigenous people during the early settlement era than was typical of most rural prairie communities. However, commemoration of ‘Indian’ landmarks, place-names, and ancestral figures claimed as

heritage symbols by euro-Canadian community members also appeared to reflect anxieties inspired by modern evidence of depopulation and decline. Relegated to the prehistoric margins of community history and romanticized as Noble Savages, the appropriative nostalgia directed at indigenous people in Rosebud nevertheless suggests many current and former residents found it necessary or appealing to supplement pioneer heritage when searching for durable and resonant symbols of their shared origins in the modern era. Romantic nostalgia for Indians thus appeared to satisfy an emotional need, reinforcing a sense of ancient, transcendent belonging and inherited intimacy with the landscape to soothe contemporary concerns about the apparent impermanence of the communities euro-Canadian pioneers had built in the Rosebud river valley.

## Chapter 4: All Hat No Cattle

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, rural Albertans rather uniformly lauded pioneers as heroic founding figures whose valourized capacity for endurance, fortitude, and courage originated a distinct and admirable way of life.<sup>1</sup> However, confronting Rosebud's obsolescence only a few generations after the arrival of the district's first settlers, local historians often prized memorable stories inspired by unconventional characters as much as ennobling tales of pioneer virtue. Casting about for evidence their community had once been a thriving and exciting place to live, they proudly commemorated pranksters and eccentrics alongside 'maverick' cowboys and rodeo performers, exaggerating local colour through tall tales and folklore that effectively transformed local history into a 'wild' western heritage.

Following the Second World War, many rural prairie communities confronting demographic change began exaggerating or even fabricating local colour, altering the appearance of local buildings, holding themed festivals and constructing large roadside attractions to encourage tourism and enhance community appeal.<sup>2</sup> Approximately seventy kilometres south of Calgary, Paul Voisey observed residents of High River increasingly depicted their town '...as an old-fashioned ranching district with a wild and colourful past' even as it gradually evolved into a bedroom community for urban commuters.<sup>3</sup> Selectively romanticizing a brief and liminal stage of local history, Voisey observed the High River Pioneer and Old-Timers Association published a book detailing the era of frontier ranching before 1900, a 'cut-off date [which] conveniently eliminated the era of agricultural settlement and town development...and instead focused the book entirely on

the era that promised to yield more excitement.<sup>4</sup> Rather than offering readers laudatory tales of morally upright pioneers, Voisey observed *Leaves of the Medicine Tree* (1960) ceded centre stage to early frontiersmen who ‘delivered hard drinking, wild pranks, high stakes poker...[and] gunplay’<sup>5</sup> to a local audience eagerly hoping to reconnect with a dynamic and unconventional past.

Just as the residents of High River cultivated appreciation for an exciting frontier heritage to lend distinction to their community in the modern era, John Martin dedicated *The Prairie Hub* (1967) to the famous American impresario William ‘Buffalo Bill’ Cody alongside old timers, Indians, railway scouts and missionaries in the Rosebud-Gleichen district.<sup>6</sup> A celebrated frontiersman, Cody immortalized an entertainment spectacle known as the Wild West Show, featuring trick riders and sharp shooters alongside staged re-enactments of frontier battles between archetypal Cowboys and Indians.<sup>7</sup> Often promoted as accurate portrayals of historical events, these performances were bolstered by an aura of authenticity provided by the participation of living frontier legends such as Annie Oakley, Gabriel Dumont and Sitting Bull.<sup>8</sup> Popularizing a romanticized vision of western settlement as a heroic clash between civilization and wilderness, Cody’s pageantry conflated history with myth, enjoying tremendous popularity from the latter decades of the nineteenth century until the end of the First World War.<sup>9</sup>

John Martin dedicated an entire section of *The Prairie Hub* to the exploits of Buffalo Bill, claiming ‘In the shows ...Cody put on, he lived some of his past life over again’ reviving the frontier for new audiences long after it had ceased to be a tangible reality in the Western United States.<sup>10</sup> In a parallel manner, Martin invited readers to view his publications as romantic re-enactment, drawing back a stage curtain to

document the ‘great drama’ witnessed by old-timers on the Rosebud as the settlement frontier of the ‘last great West’ passed out of lived experience and into historical memory.<sup>11</sup> Presenting himself as the privileged representative of a more colourful frontier environment than most homesteaders could claim to have experienced in the Rosebud district, Martin’s dramatic perspective was not necessarily the sentimental product of advanced age. Indeed, the old timer also recalled performing a Wild Western tableau as a young man when greeting newly arrived settlers near Rosebud in 1910, claiming, ‘We cowboys gave...a wonderful western welcome by staging a mock...battle between three gunmen and a lone Indian riding a horse ...and armed to the teeth.’<sup>12</sup>

Presenting himself to the public as a ‘wild’ western cowboy, John Martin manifested a kind of occupational nostalgia commonly expressed by frontier ranchers in Alberta, who often struggled to adapt psychologically to changes in their distinctive lifestyle that accompanied the loss of open range. To this effect, Warren M. Elofson has contended many cattlemen persisted in identifying ‘...as ranchers in a society that loved the cowboy, and they instinctively feared a loss of status as they turned to farming’.<sup>13</sup> However, in *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* (1983), descendants of homesteaders who had generally hastened the advent of cereal agriculture on the Rosebud also occasionally glamourized the district’s relatively brief identity as a ranching frontier. While they did not often echo Martin’s generational nostalgia for open range, they romanticized local cowboys and rodeo performers as symbols of collective heritage, suggesting the old timer had translated firsthand experiences of frontier ranching into a legacy shared by the entire community in the modern era.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, the first photograph of a local resident to appear in *Akokiniskway* featured Martin jauntily

smoking a pipe on horseback, wearing the furred chaps and wide-brimmed hat of the archetypal western cowboy.<sup>15</sup>

Cowboys have long enjoyed a ‘...dominant place...in the public iconography’ of Alberta, enjoying particular prominence as symbols of collective heritage in former frontier ranching districts throughout the southern portion of the province.<sup>16</sup> Their iconic appeal is perhaps most evident in the pageantry of the Calgary Stampede, a rodeo and exhibition comprising a ‘...week-long tribute to the cowboy...’ as both triumphalist symbol of Western development and nostalgic icon of a bygone era.<sup>17</sup> Often representing the advance of civilization into the wilderness, the cowboy’s identity and livelihood were nevertheless tied to open range as a liminal, rather than settled space, and his way of life was often threatened by homesteaders who transformed rangeland into enclosed grain farms and settled communities. Thus, while cowboys were often cast in movies or dime novels across North America as protagonists of Western settlement, they could also be portrayed as antiheroic or even ‘subversive’ figures, embodying the temporary freedoms of the frontier while mourning or even resisting encroaching civilization through displays of wild or unconventional behaviour.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, their raw appeal as folk heroes occasionally subverted the moralistic triumphalism scholars have otherwise associated with popular pioneer history in Alberta.

In her broad provincial survey, Joanne Stiles observed cowboys tended to occupy marginal positions in most community histories written by rural Albertans, reflecting ‘...a settlement pattern in which early ranching areas were taken over by grain growers, the families of whom contribute to the local history books.’<sup>19</sup> However, as symbols of collective frontier heritage across the province more generally, Stiles asserted cowboys



**Figure 4.1** Author Unknown, Photograph of John Martin, 1918. In *Akokiniskway*, 5.

and frontier ranchers nevertheless enjoyed ‘... an unduly large share’ of popular historical interest.<sup>20</sup> Seeking to explain this discrepancy, Stiles suggested cowboys represented something exciting about the frontier era that agricultural settlers arriving concurrent with the federal government’s orderly homesteading initiatives could not similarly evoke. For this reason, even when early ranchers ‘failed on a grand scale’ they were often immortalized in biographies and published memoirs, attracting ‘...the sort of attention that wheat farmers, having come in droves to neatly surveyed plots, can not’.<sup>21</sup>

Offering a pragmatic assessment of the working cowboy's contribution to Alberta's early ranching industry, W.M. Elofson has suggested their folkloric appeal originated with firsthand appreciation for the highly specialized skills they often imported from south of the forty-ninth parallel, giving '...rise to a sort of second-level social elite, based on the romantic image of the cowboy...' as a rugged and capable frontiersman.<sup>22</sup> Admiration for their exceptional endurance, strength and versatility meant the flamboyant violence and disruptions of social order that often accompanied their recreational pursuits was frequently excused by contemporaries as well as grassroots historians documenting their exploits for posterity. To this effect, Elofson asserted 'Respect for cowboys was so deeply ingrained that people were prepared to forgive (indeed, to eulogize) almost any sort of behaviour by them.'<sup>23</sup>

Among contributors to local history projects in Rosebud, no single individual inspired the kind of reverent nostalgia evoked by Jack Morton, a 'legendary' local cowboy who branded the district with the kind of Wild Western drama that had been popularized by Buffalo Bill Cody. Characterized as a physically imposing rogue with a heart of gold, Morton first arrived on the Rosebud in 1901 as a youthful stockman in the employ of a wealthy would-be rancher, who rather hastily became his father-in-law following a scandalous elopement.<sup>24</sup> Over the next twenty years, he established his own ranching empire, stretching from foothills west of Cochrane to the Hussar district near Gleichen, amassing vast holdings of livestock and land and earning an entrepreneurial reputation as '... the greatest rancher in the Rosebud district...[who had] risen from a small ranch in 1901 to become a millionaire in 1919.'<sup>25</sup>

Adopted by Rosebud's historians as a potent symbol of their community's frontier heritage, Jack Morton was portrayed as a larger-than-life folk hero who could tame wild horses other men feared handling, wrestle ornery bulls to exhaustion, and indulge a fondness for whiskey matched only by his favourite saddle horse.<sup>26</sup> In part, the cowboy was famous for his physical size and imposing presence, as John Martin asserted "Big Jack," was six foot six inches of raw-bone man and had the strength of an ox.<sup>27</sup> However, according to popular historian Grant MacEwan, he also achieved notoriety on the Rosebud as 'Wildhorse Jack', a generous purveyor of barely broken range horses often provided to homesteaders as working stock for little more than a friendly handshake.<sup>28</sup> An alternate explanation for this nickname appears in *The Rosebud Trail*, where John Martin intimated the rancher's prodigious success initially required the theft of innumerable unbranded 'slicks' or maverick stock acquired illegally on the open range.<sup>29</sup>

While Jack Morton may well have indulged in outlaw behaviour at Rosebud, Grant MacEwan resolutely sentimentalized the cowboy as a kindhearted Robin Hood who shared his wealth with those in need and '...never lost the distinction of being his frontier's best source of interest and jollification'.<sup>30</sup> This assessment acutely reflected the opinions of local historians such as John Martin, whom MacEwan cited several times in his popular account of the Morton's life and times. Commemorating Jack Morton as a sympathetic folk hero, Rosebud's historians alternately affirmed and subverted the ennobling pioneer archetype typically celebrated by local historians across rural Alberta. When conforming to popular convention, they portrayed Morton as a mythic pioneer hero possessing an immutable reserve of optimism, resourcefulness, and a tremendous

capacity to endure hard times.<sup>31</sup> Adopting a tone of folkloric hyperbole, Martin asserted the cowboy possessed remarkable physical strength and a tirelessly self-sufficient work ethic, claiming that in his prime the man had been "... all lean flesh and muscle and full of energy; a human dynamo."<sup>32</sup> Morton was also fondly remembered for his remarkable resilience and unwavering good humour, as John Martin explained: 'He would laugh where most people would cry, in all circumstances he had a big smile under his sandy coloured mustache...'<sup>33</sup>

Praise for Jack Morton's cheerful fortitude in Rosebud was matched by admiration for his altruistic generosity towards those in need, as memories of the cowboy's compassionate benevolence compelled one narrator in *Akokiniskway* to assert many early settlers in the Rosebud district '...saw much kindness from this true pioneer.'<sup>34</sup> John Martin claimed the rancher had regularly aided new homesteaders '...by letting them have old machinery from his place and horses to break sod, or to use until they could pay for them.'<sup>35</sup> In *Akokiniskway*, Morton's daughter similarly asserted that the cowboy's kindhearted nature saved many homesteaders facing difficult times, and rarely came with expectation of repayment. To this effect, she recalled how one family facing ruin were provided with abundant stock and provisions, yet the cowboy '...did not ask for any money then, or later' only accepting a small payment when it could be managed, without interest or expectation of further remuneration.<sup>36</sup>

Current and former residents of the Rosebud district clearly held Jack Morton's generosity in high moral regard, affirming Joanne Stiles' assertion that 'neighbourliness and progress through group effort are key elements of the myth of pioneer society.'<sup>37</sup> Indeed, after his death in 1944 the *Gleichen Call* eulogized Morton as 'big hearted as he

was big and ...generous to a fault', a sentiment echoed by John Martin, who similarly asserted "Big Jack...was a big, rough Scotch Canadian...as good-hearted as he was big."<sup>38</sup> However, Morton's remarkable altruism was matched by an equally outsized proclivity for disruptive social behaviour that prevented Rosebud's historians from portraying him as an untarnished paragon of virtue. A number of tales told by John Martin indicated Morton often indulged in dangerously violent behaviour, often managing to 'get rowdy' at community events.<sup>39</sup> In the most extreme anecdote of this nature, Martin recalled the cowboy had been severely injured at a dance after fighting with a man who 'cut out his jugular vein and opened up his belly, letting his intestines out', saved only by a doctor who happened to be in attendance.<sup>40</sup> In another oft-repeated tale, Morton grew violent while staying at the Palliser Hotel in Calgary, when 'a small drinking party...turned out to be a rory-eyed...' affair, inspiring the rancher to hang his host out a window ten stories above the ground.<sup>41</sup>

Rosebud's historians generally portrayed Jack Morton's wild antics as an extension of the cowboy's naturally jovial and thrill-seeking character, as one contributor explained, 'You had to be about half-way tough to play with this man, because he played rough, but he had more fun than any man I ever met...'<sup>42</sup> Recounting Morton's misadventures with such transparent delight, they often contradicted academic assertions that the community-oriented nature of many amateur local history projects generally compelled contributors to '...suppress disgraceful incidents and...sentiments out of keeping with the collective desire to make heroes of the pioneers.'<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in Rosebud concerns about moral propriety generally remained the reserve of family historians seeking to lionize the virtues of their own ancestors. One representative contributor in

this regard suggested alcohol was not necessary at community dances attended by earlier generations, insisting that even when such events extended to the wee hours, ‘...the talent and enthusiasm which abounded was the lubricant which kept these hard-working pioneers going.’<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Jack Morton’s unpredictable temperament and livewire persona seemed to inspire as much affection in Rosebud as his conventional ‘pioneer’ virtues, and local historians chose to celebrate rather than obscure how the cowboy appeared to buck the norms of the more rigid society that emerged with the passing of open range.

Jack Morton was often praised for having made Rosebud a more distinctive and interesting place to live through spontaneous thrill-seeking. To this effect, one contributor affectionately reminisced about days when the cowboy and ‘...his riders rode into town and after a few drinks raced up and down the main street, and over the store platforms.’<sup>45</sup> Many others delighted in explaining how Morton had become infamous for good-humoured pranks that quickly became the stuff of local folklore. An endless source of amusement, the cowboy was immortalized as an irreverent trickster who had once arranged the less savoury anatomical parts of a chicken on a plate to tease a hungry cowboy, spontaneously tipped an automobile sideways by hand at a community dance, and pulled the boots off a man who was ‘dead drunk in a chair’ before selling them to buy a round of drinks in a saloon, even though the purloined footwear remained safely stashed behind the bar.<sup>46</sup>

Many people who had been personally acquainted with Jack Morton insisted his eccentricities were balanced by exceptional benevolence, as his daughter rather delicately explained, ‘At Rosebud Jack had many adventures, and after working very hard he

played equally hard’, yet without fail, she insisted the cowboy ‘...would be the first over to help a neighbour in trouble...’.<sup>47</sup> Morton’s friends also asserted his rough personality was softened by a good heart, explaining even though the cowboy possessed an impressive ‘range of high-voltage vocabulary,’ he was equally capable of respectability in sensitive social settings, conducting himself ‘without one swear word or saying a vulgar word in front of any woman....a gentleman from the ground up.’<sup>48</sup>

Despite assurances that Jack Morton had been an upstanding community member, Rosebud’s historians often portrayed him as a ‘cowboy bachelor’, a stock character whom Joanne Stiles identified as a foil for the moralistic pioneer husbands and fathers local historians conventionally lauded as folk heroes in rural Albertan communities. With the decline of free-range ranching, Morton adapted to the more developed social infrastructure that brought the frontier era to a close on the Rosebud by moving his wife and children into Gleichen to enjoy the amenities of town life.<sup>49</sup> However, he often absented himself while his family was safely moored in town, and was thereafter ‘...always on the move, riding here and there, at one ranch or the other...’ apparently able to indulge in cowboy antics without damaging his reputation as a husband and father.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps to underscore this point, while spending the greater portion of the year rambling around as a free-spirited cowboy, Morton’s daughter insisted he dutifully spent two months of every summer with his wife and five children on one of his ranches.<sup>51</sup>

While Joanne Stiles asserted rural Albertans typically portrayed ‘honesty, sobriety, and sexual continence...[as] attributes of family men’ when documenting the settlement era in local history projects, descriptions of Jack Morton in Rosebud blended attributes of the self-sufficient and independent frontiersman with the indulgent

eccentricities and ‘irresponsibility’ popularly associated with unmarried men as a broad social category in frontier communities.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps for this reason, while local historians often documented Jack Morton’s colourful language and excessive drinking, their work never hinted at any evidence of sexual immorality. If Morton did seek extra-marital satisfaction, readers of community history in Rosebud would never know it, as John Martin carefully asserted ‘although Jack was rough’ his family ‘fared well in his care.’<sup>53</sup>

Almost forty years after his passing Jack Morton conferred prestige upon former friends and neighbours who were ‘remembered as salt of the earth types’ simply by virtue of their association with the cowboy.<sup>54</sup> At times, local historians hailed the ability to reconcile his contradictory behaviour as a generational benchmark, asserting ‘...only the people who knew Jack Morton in the early days...could understand why his friends were so loyal to him and no matter what prank he pulled they were 100% for him.’<sup>55</sup>

Appreciation for the practical assistance provided by Morton’s kindhearted generosity and neighbourliness often transcended any reluctance to acknowledge receipt of his charity on the Rosebud, even if it cast aspersions on the self-sufficiency of people who proudly identified themselves or their ancestors as heroic settlement pioneers.<sup>56</sup> To this effect, one narrator in *Akokiniskway* explained the cowboy’s kindness had often staved off disaster in the early years of settlement when his family had been most vulnerable, and later fostered more mutually beneficial bonds of friendship as they acclimated, prospered, and secured their grip on the land.<sup>57</sup> Others similarly explained their friendship with Morton had been based upon a principle of *ad hoc* reciprocity, as the cowboy was constantly supplying horses to those in need, ‘but if he wanted one of yours he might take it in the middle of the night, you never [could] tell.’<sup>58</sup>

Despite being hailed as a folk hero in Rosebud, local historians plainly acknowledged that Jack Morton did not achieve lasting success or prosperity, contradicting the triumphalism that typically pervaded representations of settlement pioneers in rural Albertan communities. While Morton had endured the infamously disastrous winter of 1906-07, which had devastated many large-scale ranching endeavours in southern Alberta, in 1919 he fell victim to the return of hard weather, which drove up the price of hay and diminished the value of surviving cattle in the spring.<sup>59</sup> By 1922, John Martin explained the rancher found himself bankrupt and confronting foreclosure, suffering mental and physical deterioration while gradually losing vast holdings of land and livestock.<sup>60</sup> Describing a final personal encounter with the cowboy, John Martin recalled:

‘In 1944, while on my way to Calgary in my car, I saw Jack on his way in riding a horse... in the ditch on No. 1 Highway. Sometime later...I learned I had seen Jack for the last time. He had...gone to the Palace restaurant for something to eat. When the waitress came with his meal he was under the table trying to put a halter on a horse. The strain of years of hardship, the suffering of many injuries... drove him completely out of his mind and he died in [an] asylum.’<sup>61</sup>

In *Akokiniskway*, Jack Morton’s daughter similarly portrayed the cowboy in his final years as a man out of sync with changing times, explaining ‘In later years Jack had a series of strokes and lived in the past.’<sup>62</sup> In old age, Morton constantly found ways to escape his family’s care, visiting friends and travelling around the countryside by saddle horse ‘without telling a soul where he was bound.’<sup>63</sup> In this nomadic state he seemed to

dwell in a bygone era; abandoning bed rest to disappear without warning ‘...leaving all new clothes behind, explaining later that the old ones were more his style.’<sup>64</sup>

When addressing Jack Morton’s legacy, local historians did not obscure evidence of failure and loss, interpreting the cowboy’s fate with considerable pathos as a reflection of ‘the gambling spirit of many early ranchers’.<sup>65</sup> It is tempting to interpret the sympathy local historians expressed for Morton’s deteriorating state as antipathy towards modernization, which appeared more generally to drain Rosebud community of dynamism and colour, rendering formerly robust frontiersmen little more than doddering trickster fools yearning for a return to happier times. However, many contributors recognized Morton had personally embraced developments that hastened the mechanization of rural life and brought the era of frontier ranching to a close. One narrator in *Akokiniskway* explained ‘In 1914-1915 it was common to see Jack out on the range rounding up cattle in his first Model T’.<sup>66</sup> Others claimed Morton had personally destroyed native grasses when attempting to establish new farming operations, recalling ‘In 1917 we could go out on the prairie north of Beynon and cut hay anywhere...In 1918 Jack Morton moved in with his two big steam outfits...and broke 1,000 acres...That was the end of the prairie wool.’<sup>67</sup>

Rather than casting Jack Morton as an unwitting victim of modernization, the failed rancher’s apotheosis as a folk hero in Rosebud reflected the allure of a ‘maverick’ frontiersman whose unconventional life story and wild persona transformed local history into something more dramatic, momentous and appealing in the modern era. While Morton’s folklore also enlivened history books produced by neighbouring communities such as Hussar and Rockyford, Rosebud’s historians laid claim to the cowboy as a local

heritage icon who appeared to brand their community in particular with the distinction and colour of the bygone era he personified. Hailed as a community builder equal to the most virtuous pioneer, the wild frontiersman offered local historians a common point of reference that aided in the definition of collective heritage and civic identity in Rosebud. Thus, despite his social transgressions and personal failures, Rosebud's historians commemorated the cowboy as nothing less than a 'legend ...[whose] wild actions and character will probably not be forgotten.'<sup>68</sup> This persists at the present time, when a sign draped over a weather-beaten wagon wheel in the Rosebud Museum describes Jack Morton as 'our very own cowboy maverick', while the home page of the hamlet's website shares tall tales with virtual visitors under a caption claiming Morton as 'Rosebud's own maverick rancher'.<sup>69</sup>

In many ways, the image of Jack Morton that has persisted in Rosebud was fixed by local historians who adopted the cowboy as a symbol of the community's frontier heritage between the 1960's and 1980's. However, Morton's enduring appeal also drew upon popular conventions that more generally influenced public and popular historical consciousness in Alberta, where unusual characters have often been romanticized to lend colour and distinction to provincial identity. In recent years, this trend inspired a permanent exhibit at Calgary's Glenbow Museum, entitled 'Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta'. First mounted in 2007, the exhibit profiles individuals perceived to have impacted provincial development or inspired innovation through adventurous originality, inspired by a book of the same name published in 2001 by literary scholar Aritha van Herk.<sup>70</sup> Van Herk asserted the term 'maverick', more typically associated with unbranded livestock, perfectly captured a 'collective resistance to being caught, owned,

herded...or identified' that distinguished Albertans past and present.<sup>71</sup> Documenting the exploits of historical figures ranging from indigenous chiefs and fur traders to settlers, ranchers, oilmen and modern politicians characterized as rebels, eccentrics, tricksters or malcontents, she attempted to demonstrate Alberta's 'maverick' heritage identity by reimagining provincial history as an exciting and inspiring narrative of unconventional creativity and vision.

Perhaps setting a grassroots precedent for van Herk's book, the appeal of 'maverick' personalities in Rosebud inspired local historians to commemorate Jack Morton alongside other 'legendary' pranksters and eccentrics who had originated tall tales and local colour through unconventional behaviour. In documenting the distinct social environment of the early settlement era, John Martin seemed particularly fascinated with a folkloric figure known as 'Gopher John', who had gained notoriety for a variety of eccentric behaviours, including eating the prairie rodents that inspired his nickname.<sup>72</sup> Martin characterized Gopher John as 'the queerest man I had ever seen', explaining '...although he was quite harmless, he did not seem to be "right".'<sup>73</sup> Chief among his odd proclivities, Martin recalled the man possessed a strange conviction his body had been infested with vicious worms that were constantly gnawing on his insides.<sup>74</sup> Living off the goodwill of others in a soddie on the margins of Gleichen with a blind pig, Gopher John's homebrew as well as his penchant for trouble made him a legendary figure among old timers residing in the district during the 1890's.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps the most eccentric symbol of frontier colour appearing in John Martin's writing, Gopher John inspired a number of humorous stories that enlivened readers' perceptions of the early settlement era in Gleichen. In one amusing anecdote, Martin

recalled the eccentric once arrived at his family farm bearing a jug of ‘...knockout whiskey... to drink his blues away with my dad.’<sup>76</sup> This visit shortly became a raucous drinking party, as others showed up to goad Gopher John for crude amusement. At roughly midnight, Martin recalled ‘...the drinkers were shining like a full moon, and in the glowing light of the coaloil lamp, saw serpents with long teeth and saucer-like eyes.’<sup>77</sup> Gopher John quickly became terrified his parasitic worms had somehow been made manifest, and perhaps pretending false panic the drinkers knocked over the lamp, temporarily lighting the Martin family home on fire.<sup>78</sup> As time went on, Gopher John’s unpredictable behaviour grew increasingly violent, causing local authorities to relocate him to an institution in Medicine Hat ‘when it was thought he was not safe to be at large.’<sup>79</sup> Despite his sad end, Martin eulogized the strange man as a generational touchstone, asserting ‘Every one of the old timers knew him...’ and delighted in swapping sentimental stories about his unpredictable behaviour.<sup>80</sup>

Documenting community development from early settlement into the modern era, the Rosebud History Book Committee echoed John Martin’s emphasis on local colour, similarly encouraging contributors to describe ‘any unusual way of living not common today’ and prompting them to recall ‘any humorous events that occurred that will make an interesting story.’<sup>81</sup> Their promotional rhetoric inspired a jovial perspective on the past that is evident throughout *Akokiniskway*, exemplified by one contributor who proudly asserted ‘This book would not be big enough if I carried on about all the rascals in the Rosebud community between 1939 and 1951, of which I just may have been one.’<sup>82</sup> Seeking offbeat stories documenting how Rosebud had once been an amusing and unique place to live, many narrators waxed sentimental about a group of local grain-buyers who

had formed a volunteer fire brigade popularly known as the ‘Alley Gang’ in the 1930’s.<sup>83</sup> Fondly remembered for playing practical jokes and enlivening social events during the Great Depression, the Alley Gang did not inspire nostalgia as heroic fire fighters, but as cheerful rogues best known for cross-dressing at dances, riding Shetland ponies in jest at rodeos, and staging a hilarious ‘mock wedding’ at a party for local newlyweds, replete with burly men playing the part of bride and flower girl.<sup>84</sup>

While the Alley Gang and Gopher John further branded Rosebud with ‘maverick’ unconventionality, the cowboy Jack Morton earned more elevated praise from local historians, as a kind of heritage ambassador who commodified and promoted the district’s Wild Western identity to broader audiences by participating in rodeo events. For many years, Morton had supplied stock and participated in the Calgary Stampede, representing Rosebud in a highly visible and prestigious celebration of the ‘wild western’ ranching frontier in Alberta.<sup>85</sup> Having taken part in the pageantry inaugurating the first Stampede in 1912, Morton was credited with originating many stampede traditions that endure to the present time, participating in street parades, hosting pancake breakfasts and in subsequent years, ensuring through his own reckless participation that chuckwagon races would rank among the most celebrated sports associated with the event.<sup>86</sup> This inspired considerable local excitement, as one contributor recalled ‘...it was a thrill during the middle of June to watch Jack Morton drive his stampede bucking horses and chuck wagon by our house on his way to Calgary’ during the 1920’s.<sup>87</sup>

Expressing civic pride when documenting Jack Morton’s transformation from frontier rancher to Stampede cowboy, Rosebud’s historians illuminated how rodeo has historically promoted a romanticized Western heritage across the rural prairies.<sup>88</sup> Often

imbued with nostalgic ‘language of authenticity’, rodeos invited promoters, participants and spectators to identify with an admirable frontier spirit perceived otherwise lost to a bygone era.<sup>89</sup> Whether glamourized at the Calgary Stampede or staged in small-town arenas, rodeo in Western Canada empowered rural people to perform symbolic resistance to modernization, enacting a temporary, often highly nostalgic return to a glamourized vision of frontier ranching. Perhaps for this reason, even when facing financial ruin Jack Morton’s participation in local rodeos was celebrated for demonstrating the persistence of frontier colour in Rosebud. A promotional flyer created for *Akokiniskway* thus reproduced a 1923 advertisement for a local Stampede, which promised ‘Jack Morton will be there with all his best horses and riders’ before encouraging visitors to ‘Come Along and Whoop Er Up’.<sup>90</sup>

John Martin devoted an entire section of *The Prairie Hub* to the ‘Ripsnorter Stampedes’ held throughout the Rosebud-Gleichen district in his youth, asserting rodeos held in ‘the frontier days...in the rangeland times were of the best.’<sup>91</sup> Martin described Gleichen’s first rodeo, a ‘Rangeland Derby’ held in 1914, as having authentically captured the essence of cowboy culture before open range had disappeared from southern Alberta.<sup>92</sup> Describing these festive rodeos, he repeatedly hailed Jack Morton for contributing funds, stock and riders, and thrilling crowds with his own reckless performances.<sup>93</sup> In the modern era, Martin seemed pleased that rodeos mounted in former ranching communities between Gleichen and Hanna had acquired a conspicuously nostalgic dimension. To this effect, he explained that organizers of the Hand Hills Stampede had celebrated the event’s fiftieth anniversary in 1966 by ensuring ‘All old timers who had attended the stampedes, and had ranched in the vicinity were presented

with complimentary tickets'.<sup>94</sup> However, reflecting on the bygone authenticity of the original rangeland rodeos, Martin mournfully sighed '... it is hard to believe Gleichen's gala frontier days will never be repeated. The range is gone and so are most of the old timers.'<sup>95</sup>

Sentimentalizing the vitality of frontier rodeos, local historians in Rosebud often appeared to yearn for a return to a more vibrant social and economic environment, rooted in 'the sense of community created by commercial recreational activities'.<sup>96</sup> To this effect, John Martin wistfully explained that during a stampede held in 1916 'Gleichen...had all the appearance of a big frontier center. Hotel rooms and accommodation could not be had at any price.'<sup>97</sup> By contrast, the old timer mourned the absence of new attractions in former ranching districts. Reflecting on the commercial prospects of Hussar, situated south of a large body of alkaline water known as Dead Horse Lake, Martin gave in to hopeful supposition by asking readers 'why can't the lake bottom be washed of the alkali with irrigation water, and it be refilled with fresh water', reinventing the community as a romantic resort destination. However plausible such an effort might prove, Martin mused 'Perhaps it could, in some small way, take the place of the old...stampedes which Hussar was noted for back in the range days.'<sup>98</sup>

With varying degrees of authenticity, rodeos across rural Western Canada re-enacted a romanticized frontier era through pageantry, parades and athletic contests featuring cowboy skills, all in a festive atmosphere defined by a 'palpable sense of optimism, determination, and collective goodwill.'<sup>99</sup> Often imbued with a booster ethos, rodeos promoted local pride and enhanced the appeal of rural communities by contriving a sense of continuity with a dynamic and appealing past.<sup>100</sup> This was evident in modern

Rosebud, where the success of local ranchers participating in the Calgary Stampede continued to confer prestige upon the district, while offering residents reassuring displays of local colour and revitalizing opportunities for social activity. Contributors to *Akokiniskway* often shared nostalgic memories of visiting the Cosgrave ranch to witness a local, multi-generational dynasty of chuckwagon champions prepare for the Stampede.<sup>101</sup> Reflecting on their success, the editors of *Akokiniskway* also commanded readers ‘REMEMBER: Dick Cosgrave put Rosebud on the map by winning the Calgary Stampede Chuckwagon championship for the tenth time.’<sup>102</sup>

While celebrating Rosebud’s connections to the Calgary Stampede provided powerful external affirmation of the community’s Wild West heritage in the modern era, the editor of *Akokiniskway* also waxed sentimental about festive events that empowered residents to act as heritage ambassadors on a national stage. In this regard, Kay Hymas hailed the Cosgraves alongside other local residents who had represented Rosebud at the 36<sup>th</sup> Grey Cup football championship, played between the Calgary Stampeders and the Ottawa Rough Riders in Toronto in 1948.<sup>103</sup> Travelling via passenger train to support the Stampeders with ‘western hoop-la’, Hymas explained ‘...Rosebud and Calgary fellas riding tall in the saddle...won the hearts of Torontonians’ by playing the part of maverick Westerners.<sup>104</sup> Offering an unconventional contrast to Toronto’s metropolitan setting, Hymas contended the frontier hospitality embodied by Jack Morton at the Calgary Stampede was revived in a chuckwagon driven by a local rancher to Toronto’s City Hall, where ‘...bringing western war-whoops to the Canadian Football Finals’ they proceeded to serve a pancake breakfast to curious passers-by.<sup>105</sup> With evident pride, Hymas

concluded ‘Calgary, with the help of Rosebud, had staged the first Grey Cup Parade and introduced all of Canada to what is now a national celebration.’<sup>106</sup>

In many ways, Kay Hymas’ description of the ‘western hoop-la’ Rosebud contributed to Grey Cup celebrations in 1948 echoed the dramatic cowboy pageantry John Martin recalled performing for incoming settlers near Rosebud in 1910. While Martin’s Wild West posturing may have initially expressed his own nostalgic response to the impending displacement of free-range ranchers on the Rosebud, cowboys and rodeos clearly remained useful as symbols of collective heritage in the modern community. Interpreting their own experiences in an unsettling context of depopulation and decline, between the 1960’s and 1980’s Rosebud’s historians seemed determined ‘...to know the past as truth and as faith, as... reality and as amazed inspiration’.<sup>107</sup> However, the mythic aspect of their work was not restricted to celebrating the lofty, ennobling archetype of the pioneer hero alone, as they often sentimentalized with equal fervor cowboys, rodeos and other emblematic symbols of a romanticized frontier heritage that was unconventional, colourful and above all, memorable.

The trend to glamourize frontier ranching in modern commercial endeavours across the rural prairie West has often been myopic and artificial. As Paul Voisey has asserted ‘...if real cowboys could be defined as those who rode horses to work with cattle, then they had vanished with the closing of the open range and the end of the great roundups.’<sup>108</sup> However, concerns about historical authenticity were often surpassed by the appeal of a dramatic past that could bolster local pride and stimulate commercial opportunities in rural service centres confronting an uncertain future. The selective bias with which Rosebud’s historians contrived their community’s Wild Western tradition in

the modern era conflated history with heritage, exaggerating and omitting different aspects of the past with the intent ‘... to design a past that [would] fix the identity and enhance the well-being’ of people who continued to identify with the district as a place of personal or family origins.<sup>109</sup> Privileged to interpret their own experiences for posterity, they branded Rosebud a Wild Western town enlivened by the persistence of an invigorating and highly original frontier spirit. This heritage legacy continues to enhance Rosebud’s appeal as an arts-based tourist destination at the present time, when visitors can find repose at a Western bistro known as Wild Horse Jack’s before venturing across a wide street to the Rosebud Opera House, where popular musicals and theatrical performances have taken the place of round-ups and rodeos, keeping the otherwise sleepy hamlet on the map.

## Conclusion

However pervasive the tradition of ‘boosterism’ had proven as a civic ethos in rural prairie communities during the settlement era, the progressive optimism of early pioneers was often supplanted by a profound nostalgia for the past as the twentieth century progressed. To this effect, one historian has asserted ‘within two generations of settlement, towns across the Canadian West had begun the process of defining themselves by looking back’.<sup>1</sup> Following the Second World War, descendants of pioneers often struggled to articulate shared identities in the wake of a culture that was much more ‘future-oriented’.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the modern era as a kind of denouement to a more formative and impactful past, they began to urgently document grassroots historical knowledge of the settlement era, drawing upon memory and direct experience to produce detailed local history books that ‘... drew personal links between past and present, and bolstered local identity.’<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps responding to the surge of community histories proliferating across the rural prairie West after 1967, by the mid 1980s scholars admitted the need to better account for ‘distinctively rural thought’ when studying regional development.<sup>4</sup> Appearing to respond to this call, several academics from the 1980s onward successfully consulted vernacular local history books to explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of environmental disasters experienced by residents of certain rural prairie districts in the decades leading up to and including the Great Depression.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars undertook broad regional surveys to analyze the work of grassroots historians as expressions of cultural identity as well as source material about rural prairie life following the Second

World War. To this effect, Joanne Stiles argued that amateur rural historians across Alberta rather uniformly expressed a triumphal view of settlement pioneers, intending thereby ‘...to re-affirm and transmit values which they believe to be threatened by changes in their social environment...’ as they confronted demographic and technological change in the modern era.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Frances Swyripa has explored how vernacular history projects helped shape collective identities in the modern prairie West through ‘symbolic manipulation’ of rural heritage rooted in an often mythologized view of agricultural settlement.<sup>7</sup>

By focusing primarily upon ‘mythic’ representations of settlement pioneers, scholars have often considered nostalgic self-reflexivity to be a secondary or incidental feature of grassroots historical practice across the rural prairie West. In a provincial survey, Joanne Stiles acknowledged community historians across Alberta generally expressed an idyllic or sentimental view of the frontier era, indicating rural people found ‘... release from contemporary tensions through nostalgic reminiscence.’<sup>8</sup> However, Stiles did not explore in-depth how nostalgia actively defined the emotional and psychological dimensions of vernacular local history as a cultural activity intended to assign meaning to lived experiences defined by impermanence and liminality rather than enduring stability or success. Reducing the scale of analysis to consider the cultural significance of vernacular history in a single district, this study asserts nostalgic emotion reveals a much more complex and variable response to demographic change than previously indicated by academic surveys intent on proving the mythic uniformity of community histories across the rural prairie West.

Between 1960 and 1985, the preservation of local historical knowledge in the

district of Rosebud, Alberta was an intimately self-reflexive enterprise, grounded in everyday experience and personal emotion. Local history projects in Rosebud reflected complexity and variation at the grassroots level of rural experience as much as they conformed to popular convention, affirming one scholar's contention that 'the rural population of the Prairies has never been as monolithic' as many academic studies would suggest.<sup>9</sup> Succinctly defined for the purposes of this study as a sentimental fixation on past experiences, the expression of nostalgic emotion was a defining characteristic of their work, often reflecting a commemorative longing for rural experiences threatened with obsolescence in the modern era.

Rosebud had failed to fulfill the dreams of unlimited growth and prosperity promoted by early pioneer boosters, and diminished social vitality increasingly characterized everyday life throughout the district in the decades following the Second World War. Evidence of depopulation and decline within the community compelled current and former residents to undertake a number of nostalgic local history projects that documented their experiences for posterity, reinforcing a shared sense of tradition and identity among current and former residents. One of Rosebud's original 'old timers', John Martin pursued local history throughout the 1960's until his death in 1973 as a personal and self-reflexive leisure activity. Asserting his own authority and precedence as one of the community's earliest euro-Canadian settlers, Martin's work was written from the autobiographical perspective of an aging pioneer. Often assuming an elegiac, mournful tone sentimentalizing the early settlement era that had defined the author's youth, Martin's publications also drew upon the precedent set by the Gleichen Old Timer's

Association, a social organization that had begun to preserve and celebrate pioneer heritage during the Great Depression.

Promoting social cohesion and bolstering local pride by looking to the past as a source of collective identity, local history projects persisted in Rosebud after John Martin's passing, as a younger generation undertook a collaborative community history project to mitigate the impact of vanishing social institutions and a dwindling population in the late 1970s. Forming the Rosebud History Book Committee, they invited current and former residents to write personal accounts of local history, culminating in the publication of *Akokiniskway: By The River of Many Roses* in 1983. Imbued with a celebratory sentimentality, the *Akokiniskway* project was linked to a parallel florescence of nostalgic community reunions that celebrated enduring social bonds between current and former residents as well as emotional ties to Rosebud as a place of origin during the 1970s and 1980s.

As editors and authors, John Martin and members of the History Book Committee acted as gatekeepers of local historical memory in Rosebud, filtering representations of the past through their own commemorative agendas. While Martin's publications documented the experiential knowledge of Rosebud's early pioneers for posterity, *Akokiniskway* sought to bolster civic pride by demonstrating the enduring relevance of family roots and personal connections to Rosebud, framing local history as a heritage legacy that would transcend the community's uncertain prospects in the modern era. However, just as Martin's work had been filtered through his generational identity as an old timer, the *Akokiniskway* project reunited many long-term acquaintances who shared a privileged and socially prominent identity within the community. Members of the History

Book Committee retained considerable control over the content and tone of *Akokiniskway*, creating editorial procedures and promotional guidelines to imbue the stories submitted by contributors with a celebratory sentimentality that reflected their own pleasant memories of life in the Rosebud district.

While they often conformed to popular convention by hailing settlement pioneers as community builders who had originated a distinct and praiseworthy way of life, Rosebud's historians also lamented the rapidity with which their achievements had been eroded or transformed in the modern era. Often highlighting the transiency of the settlement experience and the impermanence of the world the pioneers had built, they expressed a sentimental yearning for disappearing landmarks and touchstones of collective identity threatened by change. Different generational perspectives coloured their work in this regard, as John Martin mourned the loss of the open range that had defined his youthful experiences as an early settler in Rosebud. The old timer also attempted to document for posterity the unique place-names and pioneer cemeteries that had gradually disappeared from the local landscape as his generation aged and passed on.

John Martin often criticized changes that had displaced or transformed the conditions that had defined old timers' formative frontier experiences in Rosebud. By contrast, the younger generations that produced *Akokiniskway* adopted a more progressive view of change that conformed to a celebratory narrative of community development. Nevertheless, their stories also revealed a pervasive nostalgia for a more vibrant era of community history, often contrasting fond memories of bustling commercial and social activity in the Rosebud district before the Second World War with contemporary evidence of its declining vitality. While the closure of local businesses

often inspired sentimental regret, contributors to *Akokiniskway* more closely echoed Martin's mournful nostalgia when eulogizing the disappearing rural schoolhouses they had attended as children. Increasingly inaccessible or confronted with obsolescence in the material landscape, open range and rural schoolhouses had come to symbolize ineffable traces of a distinctive rural world that seemed lost to the past. Thus, even as Rosebud's historians eulogized shared historical experiences to define membership in the community, their collective heritage seemed increasingly defined by liminality, impermanence and vulnerability in the modern era.

While local historians were clearly devoted to commemorating their own formative autobiographical experiences in Rosebud, they also expressed an appropriative nostalgia for the indigenous people who had originally resided in the district. Through a heavily romanticized and ethnocentric filter, indigenous people were often represented as mythic 'Indians' and incorporated into the history of the euro-Canadian community as ancestral origin figures. In part, sentimental fascination with Rosebud's Indian heritage may have revealed a latent euro-Canadian desire to assert an inherited intimacy with landscape that pre-dated agricultural settlement. To this effect, aging pioneers and their descendants often evoked an ancestral Indian presence and appropriated local indigenous landmarks as symbols of collective identity, characterizing pioneer encounters with Rosebud as a peaceful entry into welcoming garden already domesticated by human settlement, rather than a volatile struggle with a hostile wilderness. Similar sentiments appeared to have inspired the Rosebud History Book Committee's unconventional choice to adopt a Blackfoot word to title their community history book *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses* in the early 1980s.

Rosebud's historians made no dialogic attempts to include indigenous voices or perspectives in narratives documenting community origins. Additionally, John Martin and contributors to *Akokiniskway* generally relegated indigenous people to the margins of local history, portrayed either as organic features of pre-settlement landscape, or as romantic 'noble savages' necessarily and conveniently doomed by the advent of euro-Canadian settlement. Interestingly, local historians also represented Rosebud's first agricultural settlers, James and Eliza Wishart as culturally permeable and diplomatic adventurers rather than colonizers in their own right. While the Wisharts themselves possessed mixed European and aboriginal ancestry, Rosebud's historians also suggested the settlers had bestowed an indigenous heritage upon the community through their celebrated friendship with High Eagle, a Blackfoot hunter who was appropriated as a kind of honorary community founder by virtue of the neighborly assistance and indigenous knowledge he provided early euro-Canadian settlers on the Rosebud. Such unconventional attempts to contrive or appropriate an 'Indian' heritage for Rosebud may simply have reflected a history of more extended personal contact between agricultural settlers and indigenous people than was typical of most settlement communities in the prairie West. However the manner in which local historians romanticized indigenous people may also have reflected modern anxieties about depopulation and decline in the euro-Canadian community, suggesting agricultural settlement and the pioneer legacy lacked sufficient antiquity or durability to sustain a distinctive local heritage identity in the modern era.

While their selective and sentimental appropriation of indigenous people appeared to bolster euro-Canadian identification with the Rosebud district as a place of origin,

local historians also sought to fortify contemporary civic pride by branding their community with a distinctive and colourful ‘wild western’ heritage. To this effect, they often supplanted the conventionally heroic and moralistic image of settlement pioneers typically promoted by vernacular historians in rural prairie communities with an outpouring of nostalgic affection for ‘maverick’ cowboys, pranksters and eccentrics perceived to better represent Rosebud’s historical identity. This was evident in the outpouring of nostalgia inspired by Jack Morton, a local cowboy whose propensity for frontier violence, unconventional social behaviour, and personal failure were commemorated with as much fervor as his pioneer resilience and altruistic generosity to neighbours in need. The kind of sentimentality Morton inspired in Rosebud also extended to a pantheon of antiheroic characters who had similarly originated local folklore transforming the past into something more appealing and exciting as the community declined in the modern era.

Soothing contemporary anxieties about Rosebud’s decline by promoting a local heritage identity tied to the liminality of the frontier era rather than a progressive and future-oriented pioneer spirit, local historians often presented their past experiences as something akin to a colourful Wild West show. Additionally, they repeatedly valorized local rodeo athletes and performers who were perceived to have perpetuated and promoted Rosebud’s maverick heritage to broader regional and national audiences. Destabilizing popular convention, cowboys, rodeo celebrities and other symbols of frontier colour inspired a veritable outpouring of local pride and affection in Rosebud. This suggested that ennobling settlement pioneers alone with mythic stature could not always provide an emotionally satisfying historical identity for modern residents whose

everyday lives were being transformed by depopulation and decline.

However lovingly memories of the past were consigned to print in Rosebud, contributors to local history projects often expressed sentimental wonder and regret at the rate of change they had witnessed in their lifetimes. Indeed, while Rosebud's historians often hailed the formative significance of the settlement era, they also mournfully acknowledged where the legacy of settlement pioneers had proven ephemeral as the rustle and spice of wind through a caragana hedgerow. This clearly informed the immediate meaning and perceived value of their work, as John Martin mourned the obsolescence of everyday experiences that had become 'only history of the past now'.<sup>10</sup> In the final analysis, this case study suggests it may be oversimplification to characterize grassroots local history across the rural prairie West as an unambiguously triumphal exercise intended to valorize settlement pioneers and the region's 'agrarian origins'.<sup>11</sup> With further comparative study, the nostalgic self-reflexivity expressed by many vernacular historians may illuminate with considerably more nuance and variability how rural identities were challenged by demographic change in the modern prairie West, commemorating the liminal instability of agricultural settlement as an autobiographical experience as much as an originary heritage.

## Endotes

### Notes to Introduction:

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- <sup>3</sup> Swyripa, 214.
- <sup>4</sup> Corb Lund, "Counterfeiter's Blues." From *Hair in My Eyes Like a Highland Steer* (Edmonton: Stony Plain Records, 2005.)
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Swierenga, "Theoretical Perspectives on the New Rural History: From Environmentalism to Modernization," *Agricultural History* 56, no.3 (1982): 496.
- <sup>6</sup> Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 8.
- <sup>7</sup> Ian MacPherson, "Conclusion." In *Building Beyond the Homestead: Rural History on The Prairies* ed. David C. Jones and Ian MacPherson. (Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1985), 229.
- <sup>8</sup> Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 429.
- <sup>9</sup> Loewen and Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities*, 60. See also Macpherson "Introduction", 2.
- <sup>10</sup> Jean Burnet, *Next-Year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), ix-x.
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- <sup>12</sup> P. James Giffen, *Rural Life: Portraits of the Prairie Town, 1946*, ed. Gerald Friesen (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2004), 5.
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- <sup>15</sup> Lyle Dick, "Vernacular Currents in Western Canadian Historiography: The Passion and Prose of Katherine Hughes, F.G. Roe, and Roy Ito." In *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region* ed. Sarah Carter, Alvin Finkel, and Peter Fortna. (Edmonton: AU Press, 2010), 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Swierenga, 496.
- <sup>17</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press), x.
- <sup>18</sup> Peter Seixas, "Introduction." In *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Katherine Ball et al. *Rosebud: A Strategy for Small Town Self-Reliance* (Calgary: University of Calgary, Faculty of Environmental Design, 1979), 2.
- <sup>20</sup> John Julius Martin, *The Rosebud Trail* (Rosebud, 1963) 144.

- <sup>21</sup> Rosebud History Book Committee, "The Railroad." In *Akokiniskway: By the River of Many Roses*, ed. Kay Hymas. (Rosebud: Rosebud History Book Committee, 1983), 185. See also Martin, *The Rosebud Trail*, 142.
- <sup>22</sup> Martin, *The Rosebud Trail*, 145.
- <sup>23</sup> John Julius Martin, *The Prairie Hub*, (Strathmore: The Strathmore Standard, 1967) 143.
- <sup>24</sup> Alberta Business Directory. (Saskatoon: Monarch Publishing Company, 1955), 242.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Martin, *The Prairie Hub*, 148.
- <sup>27</sup> Rosebud History Book Committee, "The Rosebud Centre." In *Akokiniskway*, 645.
- <sup>28</sup> Ball et al., 24.
- <sup>29</sup> Author Unknown, "Rosebud-Come Join Us," retrieved from <http://www.rosebud.ca>, April 24, 2014.
- <sup>30</sup> Statistics Canada, "Population and Dwelling Counts, for Canada, Provinces and Territories, and Designated Places, 2011 and 2006 Censuses," Ottawa: Statistics Canada [database online], accessed March 13, 2015. Available from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/hlt-fst/pd-pl/Table-Tableau.cfm?LANG=Eng&T=1302&SR=201&S=51&O=A&RPP=25&PR=48&CMA=0>
- <sup>31</sup> Sonia Mycak. "Simple Sentimentality or Specific Narrative Strategy? The Functions and Use of Nostalgia in the Ukrainian-Canadian Text" *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 30, no.1 (1998): 54.
- <sup>32</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983; revised edition 2006), 11, 35.
- <sup>33</sup> Anderson, 4.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 248.
- <sup>35</sup> Paul Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West." In *The Prairie West* ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer. (Edmonton: Pica Pica Press, 1995), 503.
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- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 108.
- <sup>41</sup> Edythe Gottenburg, "Pioneer Life." In *Wheat Country: A History of Vulcan and District*. (Vulcan: Vulcan and District Historical Society, 1973), 233.
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- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 15
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- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>47</sup> Martin, 'Dedication' in *The Rosebud Trail*, unnumbered prefatory page.
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<sup>3</sup> Rosebud History Book Committee, Captions for Maps of the Rosebud District. In *Akokiniskway*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rosebud History Book Committee, “Our Municipal Government.” In *Akokiniskway*, 227.

<sup>5</sup> Dominion Bureau of Statistics, “Table 7: Rural Population by Townships and Other Rural Areas, 1906-1946,” *Census of Alberta, 1946*, p 447. Microfilm, CA1 BST 98 F1, University of Calgary Library.

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- <sup>25</sup> John Julius Martin, "Section on the Livery Stables in the Day of the Open Range." In Section Six, *Scorched Hides and Branding Irons (A history of early ranching in Alberta)*, 1. Unpublished Manuscript, n.d. Box M9135, Martin Family Fonds, Glenbow Archives.
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- <sup>36</sup> John Julius Martin, "Billie Caldwell." In Section 17, *Scorched Hides and Branding Irons (A history of early ranching in Alberta)*, 1. Unpublished Manuscript, n.d. Box M9135, Martin Family Fonds, Glenbow Archives.
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- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>51</sup> G. Gooderham to John Martin, Nov 27, 1967. Folder M820, Martin Family Fonds, Glenbow Archives.
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- <sup>53</sup> Martin, "I Remember Life's Trail." In Section One, *Scorched Hides and Branding Irons (A history of early ranching in Alberta)*, 2. Unpublished Manuscript, n.d. Box M9135, Martin Family Fonds, Glenbow Archives.
- <sup>54</sup> Meeting minutes, Nov 13, 1979. Rosebud Historical Society/History Book Committee records, Rosebud Centennial Museum.
- <sup>55</sup> Organizational Meeting Minutes, Oct 22, 1979, Rosebud Historical Society/History Book Committee records, Rosebud Centennial Museum. Please note- while the Rosebud History Book Committee appears to have been organized before the Historical Society, these designations were often used interchangeably to indicate whomever was overseeing the *Akokiniskway* project. The formation of the latter was mentioned at the first meeting of the Book Committee and originally meant to refer to a larger entity that would also include a local Museum society and other heritage-related activities in Rosebud.
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- <sup>57</sup> Philip Comstock, "C.H. Comstock." In *Akokiniskway*, 288.
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- <sup>59</sup> Open meeting minutes, Jan 31 1980, Rosebud Historical Society/History Book Committee records, Rosebud Centennial Museum.
- <sup>60</sup> Organizational Meeting Minutes, Oct 22, 1979, Rosebud Historical Society/History Book Committee records, Rosebud Centennial Museum. Per New Horizons requirements, at least ten people in a heritage organization or service group had to be over 65 years of age to qualify for program funding. See also Stiles, *Gilded Memories*, 11.
- <sup>61</sup> Louise Roppel. "Foreword." In *Rockyford: Where We Crossed the Creek and Settled* by the Rockyford and District History Book Society (Rockyford, c. 1980), ii.
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- <sup>76</sup> Kay Hymas, "A Tribute to John Julius Martin and Millicent Vigar Martin." In *Akokiniskway*, 5.
- <sup>77</sup> Stiles, 118
- <sup>78</sup> Swyripa, 9.
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- <sup>81</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>83</sup> *Akokiniskway*, 323.

- <sup>84</sup> “From the Heart of Wild Rose Country.” Promotional Pamphlet, c. 1980. Rosebud Historical Society/History Book Committee records, Rosebud Centennial Museum
- <sup>85</sup> P.A. Comstock, “Foreword.” In *Akokiniskway*, 4.
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- <sup>88</sup> Kay Hymas. “Ed Carlson’s later life.” *Akokiniskway*, 230.
- <sup>89</sup> Stiles, 79.
- <sup>90</sup> Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet, *Town Life: Main Street and the Evolution of Small Town Alberta 1880-1947* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1995), 25.
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- <sup>94</sup> Paul Voisey, *High River and ‘The Times:’ An Alberta Community and Its Weekly Newspaper 1905-1966* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2004), 113.
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- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 164.
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- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 661.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 660.
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## **Notes to Chapter 2:**

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- <sup>24</sup> Martin, *The Rosebud Trail*, 126.
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- <sup>27</sup> Martin, John J. *The Prairie Hub*, 101
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- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.
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- <sup>46</sup> Martin, *The Rosebud Trail*, 81-82,
- <sup>47</sup> Martin, *The Prairie Hub*, 111.
- <sup>48</sup> Stiles, 22-3.
- <sup>49</sup> R.D. Francis, "Turner Versus Innis: Two Mythic Wests." In *One West, Two Myths II: Essays on Comparison* ed. C.L. Higham and Robert Thacker. (Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 2006), 23.
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- <sup>3</sup> Voisey, "Rural Local History", 505.
- <sup>4</sup> MacPherson, 230; Stiles, 10.
- <sup>5</sup> Curtis MacManus, *Happyland: A History of the Dirty Thirties in Saskatchewan, 1914-1937* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011) 300-01. See also, David C. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry-Belt* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987).
- <sup>6</sup> Stiles, 108.
- <sup>7</sup> Swyripa, 192.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> MacPherson, 230.
- <sup>10</sup> Martin, *The Rosebud Trail*, 185.
- <sup>11</sup> Stiles, 114.

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