

Chinook Arch

June 2025
Volume 7 Issue 6



ALBERTA FAMILY
HISTORIES SOCIETY
Supporting worldwide family history research

NEXT SOCIETY MEETING

Monday, June 9, 2025

Topic: Discoveries with DNA & Volunteer Appreciation
Speaker: Michele Buhler & Wayne Taylor
Location: In-person and Zoom (register on website calendar)
Time: 7 – 9 pm

FUTURE MEETINGS

Monday, June 16, 2025

Topic: Chit Chat Session
Hosts: Linda Murray and Kelly Southworth
Location: Zoom (link on website calendar)
Time: 7 – 8:30 pm

Monday, September 8, 2025

Topic: The Value of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives for Genealogists
Speaker: Tara Shymanski
Location: In-person and Zoom (register on website calendar)

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NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS

Watch for our newsletter, *Chinook Arch*, distributed monthly by email from September to June.

We are looking for short articles with copyright-free pictures. Favourite relatives, fond family memories, research tips and tricks, new genealogy technology you love, book reviews or any related topics are accepted.

Editor: Amber Godfrey

Email: chinookarch@afhs.ab.ca

President's Message

Gordon Lane

We are coming to the end of a very successful 2024/2025 season for AFHS, thanks to our many wonderful and hard-working volunteers!

A few of the highlights:

- The interview that CTV News did in June 2024 with some of our Cemetery Project volunteers led to partnerships with other groups and also the addition of cemeteries from outside Calgary to our Alberta Ancestors website. You can still view the video CTV made about the interview on our website under Resources > Cemeteries. Our tally right now is 334 cemeteries and over 250,000 people added to the Albert Ancestors site!
- We participated in Historic Calgary Week over the summer, hosting a public tour of our newly rebranded AFHS Resource Centre and having Jim Benedict do a presentation at the Central Library on Inspector Brisebois of the North-West Mounted Police.
- Two new Special Interest Groups started in September 2025: the Writing SIG and the Basics SIG. These joined our seven other active SIGs.
- The AFHS Family Roots 2024 Genealogy Conference: Roots Are Long & Deep in October was sold-out and had two very informative speakers. Attendees were pleased with the location, the speakers and the facility.
- AFHS continued our partnership with Calgary Public Library and provided volunteer coaches for the popular Family History Coaching program once a month.
- Volunteers from the Society did a presentation about genealogy and our organization to the First Canadian Collectors Club. We are looking for other groups that would like to have us come speak. We are also participating in several public events like the Unison Seniors' Expo, the Lilac Festival and the Confederation Park Seniors Fair. These help promote our Society's resources and may also attract new members.
- This spring the Resource Centre found a new home at Heritage Square and our Moving Committee worked extremely hard to prepare our new space, coordinate the move of all our resources and clean up our old location. There was a ribbon cutting after the move in May, our annual AGM was held there during our May meeting and our Volunteer Appreciation event will be held there during our June meeting. Society and SIG meetings will continue to be a combination of hybrid (in-person and Zoom) and virtual (Zoom only) depending on the time of year and weather. The new Resource Centre location has plenty of room for in-person meetings and the technology in place for hybrid ones. It will also make it easier to host educational events, like our popular Genealogy 101 course that we ran in March 2025.

I hope to see you at our last meeting of the year where Michele Buhler and Wayne Taylor will do a presentation on Discoveries with DNA. Then we will have our Volunteer Appreciation event to celebrate everyone who has contributed to AFHS's success.

Use your summer off to connect with family members both from the past and in the present. We would love to hear some "brags" at our September Society meeting!



Kelly is one of our amazing cemetery volunteers. She has been working on the Garth Cemetery near Rocky Mountain House and came across an interesting story about one of the pioneers. The photo was taken by Shelley Lunney.

The Mystery of the Missing Man: The Story of Tom Gray

Kelly Mitchell

Thomas Mariner Gray, a hard-working and adventurous soul, was born in Berlin, Ontario, in 1861. Better known as Tom, he was the second child of 15 children born to John Doyle and Julia Ann (Innis) Gray. John was born in New Brunswick, but his family moved to Ontario in 1857. John married Julia Ann Innes in 1858. They decided to move their family to Sanborn, North Dakota, and travelled through the Port of Huron in March of that year on their way. They applied to become naturalized U.S. citizens that same month.

Tom married Elma Minnie Crandell, who was also from Ontario, in North Dakota in May of 1881. On the 1900 United States Census, Thomas, Minnie and eight of their children were living in Burr Oaks, North Dakota, and his occupation was listed as Ranchman. Also living with them was Tom's brother Arthur P. Gray.

Times were tough, during their years in North Dakota. Dry prairies and crop failures meant they had to find other means of supporting themselves. Tom dug wells by hand and spent time in Duluth selling eggs and butter door-to-door. He also learned to build buildings using measured stone and sand, and was a very good trader.

By 1906, Tom decided it was time to move back to Canada. He made his first trip to Alberta that year, and Minnie and the children arrived in the fall. The family brought their herd of 45 horses and had \$10,000 dollars in cash. They settled in the Medicine Lodge Hills, west of Lacombe, where one of Tom's brothers was already living. Tom built his family a two-story house on a peaceful spring and named it Sunset Hills.

They moved again in 1908 to a section of land near Rocky Mountain House. Tom and Minnie ran a small general store, and most of their customers were First Nations people. One Christmas, they hosted 150 of them for dinner! Tom applied for the homestead rights in 1911 at age 49.

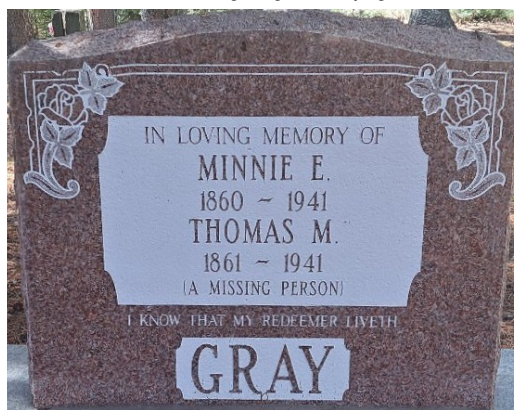
The Gray family were the first white family to settle west of the Saskatchewan River near the Old Fort and Rocky Mountain House. The family appears

there on the 1911, 1921 and 1931 Canada Censuses. They also owned a home in Westminster, Orange County, California, where they lived for about six months of the year. Tom and Minnie appear on the 1920 California Census at their second home. Perhaps they were the first Canadian Snow Birds? They continued to move back and forth between their properties until Minnie's health deteriorated in the 1930s.

By that time, Tom and Minnie's family had all moved on to their own lives. Over the years, Tom amassed over 2500 acres of land. He grew tired of managing it so put the numbers of the quarters he owned into a hat and had his family members draw them. That taken care of, he and Minnie settled into a small house on the farm of their son Thomas, near their original homestead in Alberta. The couple celebrated 60 years of marriage only two weeks before Tom went missing.

On May 14, 1941, Tom went out for a walk. He was heading for Ferrier Hamlet, probably to visit one of his two sons that lived out in that direction. Mr. Albert Parsons saw him on the road and gave him a ride as far as the Ferrier Post Office. Tom stayed at the post office for a while to rest and chat with Mrs. Bulmer, the postmistress. He told her that he was heading west but not to his son Ira's place. At the time, there were no rural telephones, and it wasn't uncommon for Tom to go visit one of his sons, so his family didn't realize he was missing for six days.

Once everyone realized the situation, a search party was formed, late on Tuesday, May 20. The only trace of him found were footprints leading up to the edge of the North Saskatchewan River, near a ford in the river that Tom had used many times in the previous 35 years. Tom walked with two canes, leaving very distinct marks, and the search party found these marks on only one side of the river. The consensus was that he had tried to ford the river, fallen and drowned. His body has never been found, and to this day, the grave in Garth Cemetery lays empty.



Special Interest Groups

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS (SIGs) are a major benefit of being an AFHS member. The small-group setting is the ideal place to expand your knowledge and share your own family history challenges. SIGs provide the opportunity to ask questions, obtain help from more experienced researchers and get to know other AFHS members.

If you are an AFHS member and would like to be added to a SIG distribution list or if you would like to attend a SIG meeting as a guest before joining AFHS, please contact communications@afhs.ab.ca

SIGs are now being held in three formats: in-person only, Zoom only or a hybrid version of both. Check the calendar on our website for up-to-date information or email the SIG leader. The SIGs do not meet during July and August.

SIG GROUP	NEXT MEETING	TIME	CONTACT
BASICS	Saturday, November 29	10 am – Noon	basics@afhs.ab.ca
CELTIC (Irish/Scots)	Saturday, September 27	10 am – Noon	celticsig@afhs.ab.ca
DIGITAL GENEALOGY	Saturday, September 13	10 am – Noon	familygenes@afhs.ab.ca
DNA	Sunday, September 14	12:30 – 2:30 pm	dnasig@afhs.ab.ca
ENGLISH/WELSH	Saturday, September 20	10 am – Noon	englishwelshsig@afhs.ab.ca
FAMILY TREE MAKER	Saturday, June 7	10 am – Noon	ftmsig@afhs.ab.ca
LEGACY	Tuesday, September 23	7:00 – 9:00 pm	legacysig@afhs.ab.ca
ONTARIO	Monday, June 23	1:30 – 3:30 pm	ontariosig@afhs.ab.ca
WRITING	Friday, June 13	9:30 – 11:30 am	writing@afhs.ab.ca

The AFHS Resource Centre is located at **Suite 251S, 8500 Macleod Trail SE** and all in-person SIG meetings are held there. Members are encouraged to stay after meetings, when possible, to browse the collection!

Our collection has over twelve thousand print items and many are available to be borrowed for a one-month loan. Electronic resources include computers, a multi-function printer, scanners (flatbed and overhead) and a microfiche reader. Journals from around the world are available to view in either print or digital formats. As a **FamilySearch Affiliate Library**, visitors can now view additional FamilySearch digital records at the AFHS Resource Centre that they can't see at home. We also have a subscription to the Canadian newspapers on Newspaper Archive.

SIG NEWS

Our members can watch recorded sessions of past Society and SIG meetings and view handouts at the AFHS website. You must be **signed in to the website** to access them. Go to Resources, then click on Meeting Videos & Handouts.

Check back often as new content is being added regularly!

- The Basics SIG, Celtic SIG, Digital Genealogy & Family Genes SIG, DNA SIG, Legacy SIG and FTM SIG will not be meeting in June.
- While the SIGs take a break over the summer, use the opportunity to view some of the content that has been posted in the Meeting Videos & Handouts section.

What Happened to Aunt Bell? How Chat GPT Helped Embellish Her Story

Jim Benedict

A True Family Mystery from 1923

The telegram was brief. Stark.

"AUNT BELL BURIED AT REDLANDS BESIDE UNCLE WIER FRIDAY LAST... THINK DOCTOR USED INFLUENCE AND WAS MADE EXECUTOR BUT FORCED HIM TO RESIGN..."

That was how the family found out. Arabella "Bell" Acheson was dead, buried in the warm California soil, and none of them had been told until it was too late. She died alone, far from her roots in Canada, under the care—or the control—of a doctor she had only known for four months.

Her nephew, Sandie, arrived too late. The doctor claimed she had no visitors, no letters, no one who cared. But Sandie knew better. Letters had been sent—three in six weeks, none answered. Something didn't add up.

Just a week before she died, this doctor had helped Bell draft a new will. He named himself executor. He had tried to transfer her accounts and safe deposit box to his bank. If Sandie hadn't acted quickly, he might have gotten away with everything.

But this is only the beginning...

In September of 1923, Sandie Acheson boarded a train to California on the most somber of errands: to bury his aunt, Arabella Acheson McKennitt. But what began as a dutiful family task quickly turned into a mystery that would haunt the Achesons for decades.

Bell had died alone in a sanitarium in Glendale. The message came late—two days after her death—and Sandie, returning from a holiday, found it waiting like a cold whisper on his desk. By the time he reached Redlands, she was already in the ground.

And yet, something was off. Bell had always been close with her nieces and nephews. She had stayed with them in Winnipeg. She had written affectionate letters. Why had she died thinking no one cared? Why hadn't she responded to Lottie's wire about Uncle Weir's death—or to the three letters Sandie had sent?

And why, only a week before her death, had she suddenly rewritten her will?

The new document, drawn up by a doctor she had only known for four months, named him executor and divided the estate equally—strangely disregarding an earlier 1921 will that allegedly left the bulk of her estate to her favorite niece, Sadie. Bell had also ordered her bank accounts and safe deposit contents transferred to the doctor's bank in Glendale. Fortunately, she died before those orders could take effect.

Suspicion turned quickly to outrage.

"I feel confident he was nothing more than a crook," Sandie wrote to the family. "He had Aunt Bell under his influence." He and a local lawyer, Mr. H. Allen of Redlands, acted swiftly—confronting the doctor and forcing him to resign as executor. They feared the worst: that Bell had been manipulated, isolated, perhaps even swindled.

Back in Canada, emotions were running just as hot.

Family letters and legal communications flew between Winnipeg, Brandon, and Redlands. One lawyer, writing on behalf of Bell's nieces—the Acheson sisters—described the doctor's appointment as "scandalous," warning that "undue influence must have been used." He questioned whether a physician, especially a stranger, had any ethical right to orchestrate a will in which he stood to gain—even just administrative control.

Behind closed doors, there were darker whispers: exhumation, postmortem, investigation. Uncle Sandie considered it. The idea was never pursued, but the very fact that it was discussed speaks volumes about the family's suspicions.

In the end, the doctor walked away. The will stood—but the estate was redistributed evenly among Bell's nieces and nephews. The suspected original will, favoring Sadie, was set aside, perhaps out of practicality or exhaustion. Payments came slowly, over years, ending only in 1947.

By then, Bell was a name fading into family lore. But the bitterness remained.

She had died with a "nice little bundle" of real estate and bank assets. She had trusted the wrong person. And while the family ultimately salvaged

much of her estate, the question lingers like an echo down the generations:

What really happened to Aunt Bell?



Arabella Acheson McKennitt

Epilogue

A real humdinger of a family twisted tale, of death, money, usurped legal will, last-hour rescue by a nephew from a crooked doctor, and more. The basics are factual but the telling is a bit over-the-top. Let me explain.

This has been a sad story well known by my aunts and uncles on my mother's side, the Acheson family from Rosenfeld, Manitoba. Joseph Acheson, my great-great-grandfather, brought his wife and four surviving children from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, to Perth County, Ontario, around 1860. The youngest, Arabella Acheson, my great-great-aunt Bell, married John McKennitt in 1883 in Manitoba. They prospered in farming and other enterprises, but she outlived him and eventually moved to California, finally ending up in a sanitorium in her elderly days. The story of the bad doctor is true and supported by a telegram sent from Alexander "Sandie" Acheson to his sister Gertie Acheson, along with other family correspondence. It was also well described in the family storybook *Who's That Sitting in our Family Tree?* by my Aunt Gert Lawrie, published in 1988.

But I thought the story deserved more than just a dusty, research paper style of narration. This is a story sprung from tragedy, greed, family forces and a final satisfying conclusion. This is a story ripe for a rag-cover raunchy detective mystery booklet. This calls for outside help for me to script the storyline and to grab the attention of our audience, namely you.

So, I called in the assistance of A.I. on the writing, namely the chatbot called Chat GPT. Now to some, this is tantamount to sacrilege in doing family stories. But the story is factual, only the narrative is a bit embellished. The content, grammar and punctuation have been retained. Hopefully you enjoyed it!

If you want to try out Chat GPT as a writer's assistant, the service is free for the basic version. You just need to go to the website and sign up.

<https://chatgpt.com>

Chat GPT was able to read the text from typewriting documents that I uploaded, including Aunt Gert's book. I also gave it links to key persons in my Family Genes family tree which gave Chat GPT key names and dates.

<https://acheson.familygenes.ca>

I asked Chat GPT "For the end result, I would like a story that reads like a detective novel, but remains factual. Can you do that?" The answer was "Absolutely" and the narrative appeared in about five seconds.

If you try this, you do have control on the process. I was able to specify the length and the tone. I could have asked for output in the format of a formal research paper, with citations and so on, or as a romance novel, or from the mind of the distraught nephew Sandie. There are many options. An enjoyable new way to look at your research!

The story and information on Chat GPT was presented at the Digital Genealogy and Family Genes SIG meeting in May of 2025 and received with great interest. Hopefully, some of you will try this out and finally get to finish that voluminous family story book that you have been promising everyone.

Here are some more tips on using A.I.:

Writing a Family History Using AI Chat by James Tanner (YouTube video)

<https://youtu.be/Q9eOqoLyHSs?si=J8A2eKZMVCopoe3b>

Capturing and curating family histories with the help of AI and some common sense

<https://aiforlifelonglearners.substack.com/p/capturing-and-curating-family-histories>

Upcoming Events

CALGARY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Family History Coaching

In-person at Central Library

Calgary Public Library

June 28, 2025 1:00 – 3:00 pm

<https://calgarylibrary.ca/events-and-programs/programs/family-history-coaching>

UPCOMING EVENTS

*all times listed are in MDT

The One Place Study as a Research Tool

Virtual

Legacy Family Tree Webinars

June 17, 2025 6:00 pm

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/the-one-place-study-as-a-research-tool>

Caribbean Research for Your British Ancestors

Virtual

International Society for British Genealogy and Family History

June 23, 2025 9:00 am – 4:00 pm

<https://isbgfh.com/event/caribbean-research-for-your-british-ancestors>

The Six-Folder Genealogy Organizing System

Virtual

Legacy Family Tree Webinars

July 2, 2025 Noon

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/the-six-folder-genealogy-organizing-system>

Tracing Scots Ancestors Before 1855

Virtual

Legacy Family Tree Webinars

July 16, 2025 Noon

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/tracing-scots-ancestors-before-1855>

Tracing Your Belfast Ancestors with Chris Paton

Virtual

Ontario Ancestors

August 7, 2025 3:00 pm

<https://ogs.on.ca/august-webinar-tracing-your-belfast-ancestors-chris-paton>

Using Google Earth Web to Tell Your Family History Migration Stories

Virtual

Legacy Family Tree Webinars

August 29, 2025 Noon

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar/using-google-earth-web-to-tell-your-family-history-migration-stories>

An Ever Growing Tree: Descendancy Research and DNA Matches

Virtual

Ontario Ancestors

September 4, 2025 5:00 pm

<https://ogs.on.ca/september-webinar-an-ever-growing-tree-descendancy-research-and-dna-matches-kate-penney-howard>

Want to grow your family history skills this summer?

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Classes_in_the_Learning_Center

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/library>

<https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar-library>

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About Our Society

Alberta Family Histories Society is a registered non-profit organization that welcomes anyone interested in genealogy and family history! For over 40 years, we've helped people grow their family trees and discover the stories of their roots. We have substantial resources about Calgary and southern Alberta but can help you research your roots worldwide. Our website is <https://afhs.ab.ca>.

We learn from each other in a variety of settings – Society meetings, **Special Interest Group** meetings, workshops and biannual conferences. For up-to-date meeting information, see our website calendar at <https://afhs.ab.ca/calendar>.

Visit one of our most valuable resources - the **AFHS Resource Centre**! While our collection has an emphasis on materials pertaining to Alberta and Canada, we also have basic genealogy books and information from around the world. AFHS is a **FamilySearch Affiliate Library**, which gives you access to FamilySearch records you can't view at home. Our volunteers look forward to showing you what we have to offer for your genealogy research! You can view a catalogue of our holdings at <https://afhs.ab.ca/library>.

Documenting local historical records is part of our mission. **Alberta Ancestors** is a special project to showcase cemetery records at <https://albertaancestors.ca>. Our site features 330 cemeteries and over 250,000 names.

Members have a wealth of opportunities to share strategies, struggles, successes and stories with others who appreciate the challenges of this hobby. One option is for members to share family tree projects and to post stories online as part of our **Family Genes** website at <https://www.familygenes.ca>.

We welcome visitors, so please drop in at a meeting and introduce yourself. Come see how our services and programs can fit your needs. We hope you will join us either in-person or virtually! To receive a guest Zoom invitation to one of the **AFHS Society Meetings**, contact Marion at communications@afhs.ab.ca.

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AFHS RESOURCE CENTRE

**Suite 251S, 8500 Macleod Trail SE
Calgary, AB T2M 0J8**

Summer Hours

Thursday, 10 am – 2 pm

Friday, 10 am – 2 pm

Saturday, Noon – 4 pm

Check our website calendar for any time changes or closures.



ALBERTA FAMILY
HISTORIES SOCIETY

CONTACT US

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Phone: 403-214-1447

Facebook: Alberta Family Histories Society

Instagram: abfamilyhistoriessociety



Land Acknowledgement

In the spirit of reconciliation, we would like to acknowledge that the land on which we gather and where we work to preserve the records and family history of those who came before us are on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising of the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani First Nations), the Tsúut'ínà, the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw and Goodstoney First Nations), the Métis Nation (Districts 5 & 6) and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.