

# Where the Black Rocks Lie in the Old Man's River

**Rudy Wiebe Remembers Lethbridge  
Photographs by Geoffrey James**



“It’s really not fair,” says the woman from South Africa—or is it Kosovo, or Afghanistan or Sierra Leone or Cambodia or North Korea or Colombia or Bosnia or Iraq or Somalia or Palestine or a country we have not yet heard of in Canada?—this gentle woman says, “It’s not fair.”

“What?”

“You just drive us around for days over this incredible land anywhere you please, and no one stops you with machine guns hanging on their shoulders and you never have to show papers to anyone or explain a word about where you’re going or with whom, and you come down a track to this isolated, empty house and there’s no seven-foot steel fence with electrified barbed wire along the top or guard dogs or bars at the windows or bullet-proof glass—just birds singing while the river runs and all the grass and the trees grow.”

“There’s a thunderstorm coming, over there, with the wind.”

She laughs aloud. Her companion leans out over the balcony rail above us.

“No, it certainly is not fair,” he says, into that sudden hush before the wind bends the trees along the river below us with a roar. “To be able to live in one of the rarest places on earth.”

And momentarily, all around us in this delicate spring, there seems to be nothing at all in the world but weather.

The first time I saw Lethbridge must have been a late spring Friday in 1947. I read in my sister Elizabeth’s Five Year Diary (five narrow lines for each day) that my mother, father, she and I arrived in “our new home” in Coaldale “about 7 o’clock” on Thursday, May 15, 1947, and that next day the same businessman, Mr. Voth, who had come in his car to Saskatchewan to bring us to southern Alberta, “took us to Lethbridge” and we “got some nice furniture.”

Lethbridge, the Irrigation Capital of Canada, 1947 population 17,807; it seems I cannot find it in my memory, not that first time. We must have driven from Coaldale on the new gravel of Number Three Highway then being built to parallel the CPR tracks, past the two red Broxburn elevators, because the old highway route led two miles south from Coaldale before turning west and that would have taken us between the Experimental Station and the 1911 fortress of the Lethbridge Provincial Gaol, where, as Mr. Voth would certainly have told us, fourteen men had already been hanged over the years and no doubt more were inside waiting. Such facts would certainly have remained hooked into me; I was twelve.

As it is, I do remember that I sat in the back seat, tight against the right window, and just north of the intersec-

tion where the highway bent into the city there appeared for a moment seemingly endless rows of ugly rectangular two-storey buildings. Lethbridge Internment Camp 133, as I did not then know to name it, flat roofs level as the horizon over what looked like double rows of grey posts and close strands of barbed wire, which I had known all my life, of course, but until then had only seen used to control the movement of animals. Prisoner of war camp, Mr. Voth told us, lots more prisoners in there than people in Lethbridge, maybe twenty thousand of them inside that wire for the whole war, they’d never say exactly how many, men only and fed as good as any Canadian soldier; fed a lot better than anybody else in the whole country, and five of them had been hanged now just before Christmas in the Lethbridge Gaol back there behind the trees for strangling a fellow prisoner who had, it was said, yelled something against Hitler.

Barely five months before, December 18, 1946. Three of the five attempted suicide with smuggled razorblades, but they were patched up and then hanged. One of them, while climbing the gallows, had said in German, “My Fuehrer, I follow thee.” Everybody inside that barbed wire spoke German as exact as printed books, Mr. Voth told us in Mennonite Low German.

The flat camp on the flat prairie at 5th Avenue North—maximum capacity 12,500 men—was empty and the barracks being torn down when I first saw it, the watchtowers and main gates already gone; the last war prisoners had been shipped back to Halifax and Europe on the CPR and the camp closed, by strange coincidence, also on December 18, 1946. Six thousand POWs, as they were called, from all over the land, had requested to remain in Canada, but not a single permission was granted. Four decades later a professor of English in Graz, Austria, would tell me stories about Camp No. 133; he was a short, stocky man who in 1940 at age eighteen was perfect for submarine duty, the “sexiest,” as we would say now, of all possible services in the German military. “When we walked down the quay in Kiel, every girl smiled greetings at us,” he told me. Sexier and safer than the Luftwaffe, he thought then too (wrongly), leaving the beauty of Austrian mountains for what he discovered was the silent explosive violence of the depths of the sea. On his very first tour of duty their sub was blown out of the water; from a crew of sixty-five, he and five others survived to be picked out of the North Atlantic by the British-Canadian convoy they had been attacking. He told me that beyond the Government Elevator and the low houses of Lethbridge, where he arrived in December, 1942, he could see the crest of Chief Mountain under snow on the southwestern horizon, a mountain like his memory of his homeland, but



all around him the circle of open land such as he had never seen or could truly imagine before. “My war was very quiet, absolutely safe on your immense, beautiful Canadian prairie. I never got closer to your mountains, I worked in fields and learned English.” When we compared locations, we discovered he and I probably had thinned and hoed the same beet fields, he no more than five years before I, and certainly under the same windy sun.

As I said, I remember nothing about my first glimpse of Lethbridge itself. I read in my sister’s diary that while we were buying furniture for our small new house in a store on Third Avenue “we met a nice man,” but I do not remember him either.

Lethbridge is not named for its bridge, though it might well be, since the High Level Bridge of the Canadian Pacific Railway is, with the brilliant exception of the University of Lethbridge, which architecturally echoes it, the most memorable structure in the city. The Blackfoot, Nakoda and Cree peoples had already, in their various languages, named the river valley at that place Black Rocks, and the first English name reflected that: the American traders named it the Coal Banks because Nicholas Sheran dug the first drift coal mines there as early as 1874. So why “Lethbridge”?

In 1882 Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt (1817-1893), a Montreal politician and land developer who was also Canada’s High Commissioner in London, organized the North Western Coal and Navigation Company, which contracted to supply coal to drive the transcontinental CPR then being built across the prairie. One of his London backers was the wealthy bookseller W. H. Smith—bookstores named after him still exist, even in Canada—who interested his friend the publisher William Lethbridge (1825-1901) to help him finance the distant Canadian coal scheme; shortly after, Lethbridge was named president of the development company. That long-faced English gentleman with his narrow nose, curly hair and full round beard was never near the prairie, nor did he ever make the slow sea voyage to Canada; so why was the city not named Galt after Sir Alexander? Or for his son Elliot Torrance Galt, who travelled the prairie far and wide on horseback and first recommended that the coal on the Belly River be developed; who with his family lived in the splendid house they called Coaldale among the cottonwoods and mines on the river valley flats for some twenty years, expanding those mines and building river boats and railroads and irrigation systems and farming settlements? Indeed, if some London financier who held shares in the company



(there were soon more than thirty English investors) was to have the honour of his name attached to a spot on the unknown and limitless Canadian prairie, why not choose banker Edward Crabb, who in 1891 was the largest single backer with one thousand five hundred shares, two hundred more than Smith and Lethbridge combined?

Galt: since 1827 there had already been a Galt in Ontario. And if Victorian ladies blushed to say they lived on the Belly River, as they evidently did, then what could possibly be said for living in a town named Crabb?

Naming a place in what, to a European, seems to be a “new and empty” land can be a complicated affair. So the dour Scot Alex Galt, who doubtless knew the value of memorializing his shareholders, gave the banker his small due by naming a street on the 1885 town plan as Crabb (the present 6th Street South), but labeled the town he foresaw with a Devon publisher’s name, Lethbridge. The largest city in Alberta not begun as a fort: that is, as a walled or palisaded settlement of a few apprehensive Europeans trying to keep the wilderness they feared, wildness in its myriad natural and possibly savage—especially savagely human—forms, somehow at bay. No, in 1885 the wide shortgrass plain where the Alberta Coal Company Railway ended on the cliffs high above the thick black seams of coal eroded bare far below them was

laid out as a wholly owned company town with a geometric grid of streets from Baroness Road (today 1st Avenue) to London Road (7th Avenue), and Galt Street (Scenic Drive) to Westminster Road (13th Street). In this staggering bare world of light, perpetual wind, horizonless land and gaunt dryness, where the most cheerful flowers were briefly blooming cactus, and water at best a distant line of muddy river buried in a wide valley, the names of home helped anchor the newcomers.

The only city in Canada named after a publisher. As a writer, I like that.

“Lethbridge was happiness,” novelist Joy Kogawa tells a conference audience on ‘Dilemmas of Reconciliation’ in 1999. “A city with restaurants, stores, Woolworth’s....”

She is talking about how a Canadian child of Japanese ancestry experienced World War II, particularly the memory of her family—her father was an ordained Anglican minister—being forced out of their home in Vancouver where she was born, and how at the age of six the mountain forests of Slocan, B.C., surrounded her, and, a few years later, the seemingly horizonless sugar beets under a staggering Alberta sun. “To come into Lethbridge for a day,” she says, “from the shack on the

farm where we lived, to walk on a sidewalk again, that was happiness.”

The not-really-so-innocent sidewalks of Lethbridge, which was once so strongly British that by 1916 twenty percent of its population had enlisted for World War I military service, the highest percentage of any city in Canada. But in 1943 little Joy Nakayama (as she was then) had no idea that her fellow Canadians of Asian ancestry, the Chinese, had once been forced by city bylaw to live and allowed to have businesses only west of 4th Street in what was called the Segregated Area, a space so limited “the Celestials” as the Lethbridge Daily News wrote slyly on December 23, 1910, might “want to set up business in the coulees.” That particularly offensive bylaw was rescinded in 1916, but the area remained predominantly Chinese, and the same part of the old town core quickly became the home for prostitution when, after 1918, the bordellos on the Point which had originally moved up the coulees from the Bottoms of the river valley, sidled ever closer to the “nice, clean, English” business district along 5th Street. The amazing range of prostitution in Lethbridge is vividly described in a chapter of James Gray’s *Red Lights on the Prairies* (1971), though the subject seems large enough to deserve a book of its own. The Lethbridge Lodge Hotel now blocks the site of the Point, but if you walk around the building and across its parking lot and west over the bulldozed flat between widening coulees to the viewpoint overlooking Fort Whoop-up and Indian Battle Park, you are essentially walking down the centre of the old bordello street. By the early fifties, when I first drove south along 2nd Street, the magnificent panorama of the Point and its tangled vivid history was buried under official forgetfulness and the rusting wrecks of an automobile graveyard.

This intersection of restricted Chinese people and officially tolerated vice, which was so beneficial for all the “proper” local businesses that it received strong and continuous support from all the “Christian” businessmen around Galt Gardens, was most active along 3rd Avenue and 3rd Street South, the block now occupied by the Provincial Courthouse. The growth of the Segregated Area “ushered in,” as Johnson and Peat wrote in *Lethbridge Place Names* (1987), “Lethbridge’s golden age of prostitution, as the district operated in wide-open fashion until 1944.” The services the area provided, not only for solitary coalminers and cowboys and laundry workers and settlers but also, as numerous reports declared, “for the married men of the city,” were regulated by city council and enforced by city police as discreetly as they could, but for obvious economic and taxpayer reasons they would not, as at various times the local churches tried to insist, be bylawed out of existence.

Nevertheless, in March 1942, Lethbridge City Council could, and did, pass a racially discriminatory, paranoid bylaw about Japanese Canadians evacuated from the West Coast, a law even children had to know about. It stated “that any Japanese moved [into the district must]

remain domiciled on the farms to which they are allocated, and that they will not move and reside in the City of Lethbridge.” This really meant that certain Canadians could neither go to school in the city nor find employment there between the beet-working seasons.

But through the fortunate accident of our late births, when Joy Nakayama and I were growing up and attending the same school in nearby Coaldale, this Lethbridge history of racial prejudice was, at least officially, over; by 1947 the Segregated Area was no more and the bylaw against Canadians of Japanese ancestry had been rescinded. For me, as for Joy, the city spreading east across the prairie from the lip of the Oldman River cliffs and coulees seemed merely wonderful. A lake park for swimming surrounded by huge trees—its cowboy name, Slaughter House Slough, long forgotten; entire blocks of great early-century houses with tall pillared entrances and wide verandas that swept around two entire walls, their fretwork gables and round turret windows fit for Sleeping Beauties and, most amazing of all, roof shingles laid in wavy lines bending and curving around each

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As he jolly well deserved.

other over rounded dormers; a steel bridge from beneath which you could see crossing, as through clouds, the steam trains of the almighty Canadian Pacific Railway (which had carried my penniless Wiebe family of refugees halfway round the world from Communism to Canada on a simple Mennonite promise to “pay our debt”), enormous engines shifting and bumping freight cars in the railroad yard under blasts of steam and then disappearing to sleep in their roundhouse dialed by rails turning like clock hands; the corrugated-steel tiple and water tower of Number Eight Coal Mine rising above the distant cliffs of the Oldman River where the thin bridge closed into its vanishing point, and where our high school class once dropped two thousand feet, they told us, into the earth to discover blind horses walking down long black tunnels there and black-faced miners with lamps in their foreheads who knelt on rock and, as it seemed in the darkness, prayed with shovels and picks all day before the gleaming broken face of a coal seam; and the towered, clocked Canada Post Office mirrored by the Marquis Hotel whose magnificent lobby no child could dare enter, and the Trianon Ballroom where a dutiful little Mennonite kid did not even want to imagine what went on; McGuire’s Mens Wear full of clothing probably designed for English lords and Leo Singer’s Mens and Boys Wear on 5th Street where my mother once bought me a high-necked knitted shirt (T-shirts did not yet exist by



name), and—beyond everything else—the Lethbridge Public Library.

Surrounded by the shorn grass and splendid trees of Galt Gardens, a large brick building devoted totally to books.

The yellow schoolbus that brought shoppers from the town of Coaldale every Saturday parked at the corner of the gardens, 3rd Avenue and 7th Street. My mother and sister would go shopping and I, after studying again—Don't Touch!—the astounding display of magazines and newspapers at the Club Cigar Store (I did not know it had once been part of the Hotel Coaldale) while devouring a five-cent ice-cream cone, I would cross 3rd Avenue, pass the smiling man in the corner kiosk with all his golden popcorn, and walk up the granite and limestone steps into the library. If the disorder which in 1933 caused the Carnegie Foundation to name the Lethbridge Library the most poorly planned facility it had ever helped sponsor—truly a “librarian’s nightmare”—that handicap, if it remained in 1948, was completely unnoticed by me. Thousands of books on open stacks, to reach up for, to take in your hands, to hold, to open, anywhere in their hundreds of pages. And read. When the Senator Buchanan addition was built, I sat in the alcove in the tall narrow window facing east and read on.

So many, many available books; with time I began to

understand that I needed one completely to myself. To keep. There was no bookstore in Lethbridge then, but Southern Stationers offered a short shelf of the Modern Library, and on December 1, 1951 (name and date recorded inside the front cover) I bought W. Somerset Maugham’s 1915 novel *Of Human Bondage*. What a title for me, and how utterly typical a novel to find in Canada then: Philip Carey with his club foot and servants and a living of 500 pounds a year and having tea in an absolutely nineteenth-century English world, and his oh-so-sensitive and endless search for himself; his self! A character I eventually found so effete the sheerest drift of wind off the Oldman River would surely have disappeared him like dust. As he jolly well deserved.

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Excerpted from *Place: A City on the Prairie* (Photos of Lethbridge by Geoffrey James. Text by Rudy Wiebe) Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, April 2002.

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