

## Where Paths May Lead, Part 1

by Marilyn Crow, PHS photo archivist

Sometimes when answering a query from afar, in this case from the United States, the researcher discovers a piece of Canadian history that had been buried deep in the archival collection. In 2025 the Puslinch Historical Society had received an e-mail from a descendant of the McCormick family of the Killean area in Puslinch who was researching his family history. While looking through the detailed collection of Anna Jackson, herself a McCormick by birth, I discovered a 4-page letter written to Anna's grandmother (Ann, nee Gilchrist, McCormick) from her brother in Saskatchewan in 1931.

William Alexander Gilchrist 1877-1956, youngest son of Puslinch pioneers Peter Gilchrist and his wife Margaret (nee Wilkinson), like many young township farmers had moved west in search of land. With three older brothers, the family's 100 acre Puslinch farm could not sustain all.

After purchasing a farm near Weyburn in Saskatchewan, William married Mary Scott from Puslinch and brought her west. They had two children: son William born in 1909 and son Alexander born in 1912. In 1914 he contracted with the federal government's Ministry of the Interior to be resident farmer on the Nut Lake Indian Reserve (today part of the Yellow Quill First Nation) in Saskatchewan. While letters from William's supervisor were racist in attitude regarding the lack of interest in the colonial type of farming on the reserve, William's letter shows that he and Mary had a more understanding viewpoint. Their sons William and Alexander, in their late teens, both took jobs at the newly-opened Flin Flon mine and William's letter also describes details about the creation of the mine.

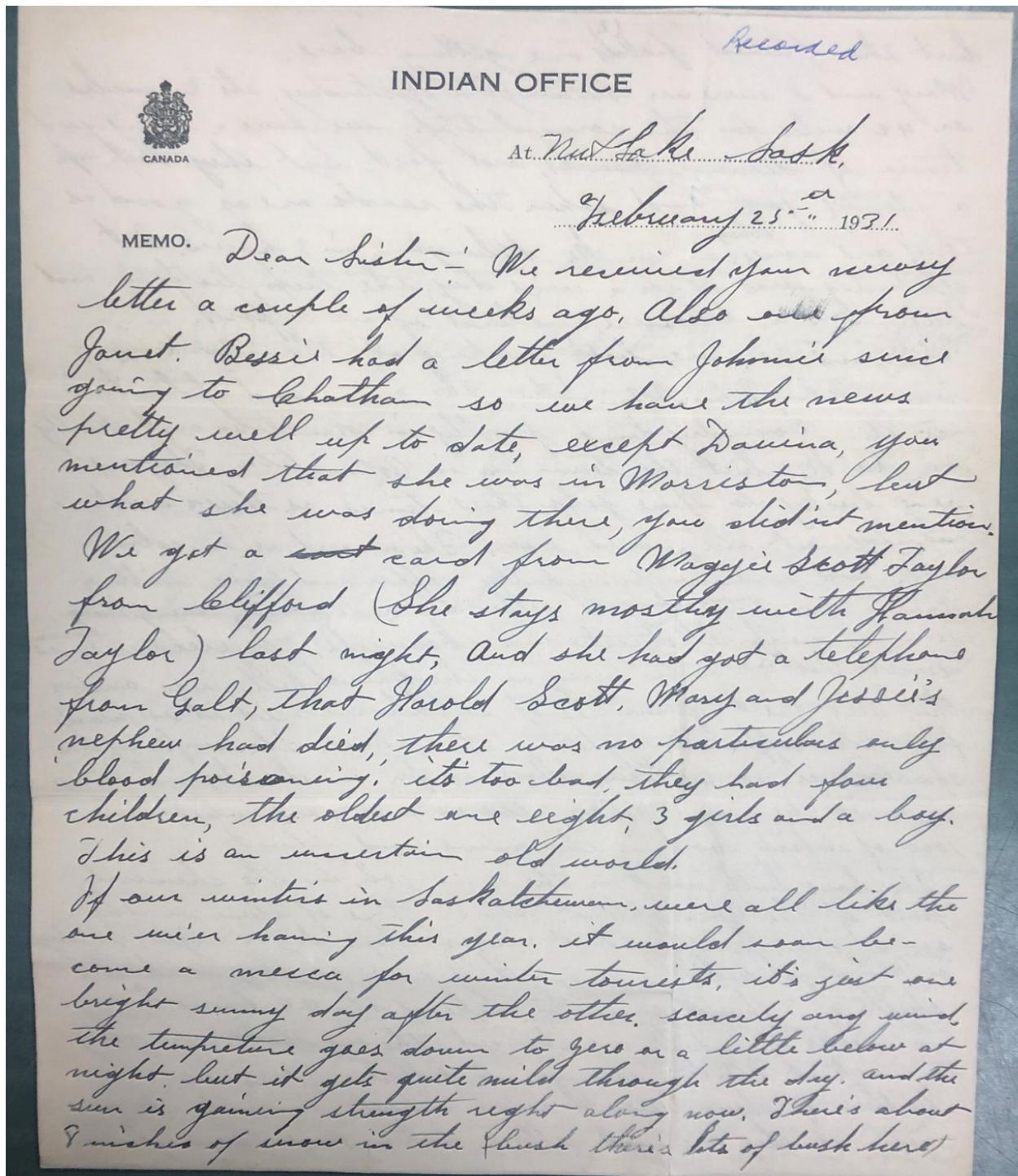
In this time of reconciliation, I felt that this original letter should not be buried in our collection, so I offered it to a museum in Saskatchewan. On reaching out to the curator of indigenous affairs at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, he said that they were not interested as they already have many documents about both the Nut Lake reserve and the mine opening. They did suggest I contact the provincial Saskatchewan archives where I received this response: "we typically do not collect discrete items where we already have a good representation within our collection". I then offered it to the National Archives of Canada, but again it was turned down. The response was "while the letter you offered holds historical value, its focus is primarily regional and personal in scope rather than national, which is the core of our mandate. As a best practice, we recommend maintaining the original order and provenance of the record by retaining it within your institution's holdings." These responses led me to post the letter and supporting information on our website [puslinchhistorical.ca](http://puslinchhistorical.ca) for broader distribution.



**Left to right: Bill, mother Mary, Alex and father William on their farm near Weyburn SK.**

The Letter: Scanned from the original in the McPhatter family file.

The letter was written by William to his older sister Ann, nee Gilchrist, McCormick. In his letter, William mentions their siblings Janet, Johnnie and Davina and his sister-in-law Jessie on the final page.



but the plowed fields <sup>(2)</sup> are getting bare.  
Mary and I were in Kelvington yesterday, it's 21 miles,  
or 42 miles for the round trip, we have a very good  
team of driving ponies, not fast, but they keep up  
a steady jog, and when the roads are as good as  
they are now <sup>they</sup> can make Kelvington in 3 hours. But  
yesterday was such a mist day, the trip both in and  
out was a pleasure, instead of an effort.  
Willie and Alex are both working at the new mining  
town, Flin Flon Manitoba, the mine and plant is  
on the boundary line, partly in Manitoba and partly  
in Sask., but the town is in Manitoba. They are  
very lucky to have jobs these times, as there's such  
unemployment the world over. The mineral is in solid  
rock, and contains principally copper and zinc, with a  
small quantity of gold, silver and cadmium, everything  
is done with electricity and chemicals, the electricity is  
generated 80 miles away on the Churchill river, and as  
they use great quantities of sulphuric acid, it is made  
from the copper etc, right in the plant. The company has  
spent over 30 million dollars so far on developments, so  
it must be some place, there's over 4,000 inhabitants,  
1,000 of which, work in the mine and plant.  
The boys both work on the same job, in the chemical  
part of the zinc plant, there's three of them on the  
same job, for the plant never stops, day or night, Sundays  
or Mondays, holidays or anything else, so they work in  
shifts of 8 hours each to make up the 24 hours. Every  
two weeks the shifts are changed, the one that was going  
to work at 8, A.M., changes to 4, P.M. and so on.  
Neither of them would teach school, probably it's as  
well, as they are ~~not~~ getting better pay, than if

project intended to provide jobs when unemployment numbers were high. Today, when facing high unemployment in the steel, lumber, auto and aluminum sectors of Canada due to high tariffs imposed by the United States, the Canadian government is again looking to diversify by creating jobs in other sectors to increase trade.

Pages three and four contain William's observations concerning the Nut Lake people.

(3)

INDIAN OFFICE



At.....

.....19.....

MEMO.

they were teaching, and the hours are not much longer.

It's likely Willie will go back to the University next September, he has one year in now, in civil engineering, and has three more to put in, Alex claims he won't go to University, but may change his mind.

We're still ministering to the Indians, which means 'morally,' 'physically,' and 'financially.' 'Morally,' they are the equal, if not the superiors of their white brothers, they have their own code of morals, handed down from their pagan ancestors, which seems to work out as well, if not better, than that of our enlightened civilization. 'Physically,' well, they are far from our equals there. Whether they had consumption when the white man discovered America I've never been able to find out, but they are simply saturated with it now, in all its forms. From April to November, when they are living in tents, they are all right. but then they move into their little log huts, about 12 x 14 feet and hardly high enough for me to stand up in, plastered both inside and out with mud, with a sod and mud roof, one small window that can't be opened

On this final page William describes consumption (tuberculosis) as rampant on the reserve and he feels that housing is a contributing factor. Here, on the final page, he describes government support available for new housing and

perhaps no floor, a <sup>(4)</sup> tin heating stove in the centre, no other furniture whatever, all their blankets and bedding on the floor along with their supply of food, which makes an ideal breeding ground for all the germs, bugs, and creeping creatures that ever <sup>or will be</sup> was created. The Government is doing their best to get them to put up better buildings. If the Indian will get out the logs, hew them and do all of the work in building, the Government will supply all the lumber, shingles, flooring, tarpaper, lime, cement, windows and doors, nails and spikes in fact everything that is required, but the Indian must do the work. It will be seven years this coming summer since we came on the reserve, so far we've been able to get up five houses. It's not that they are lazy, it's the breaking away from customs that are centuries old. The Kelington Doctor comes out every two weeks, oftener if we call him, but they still have more faith in their medicine doctors than they have in him, except perhaps surgical work. We requisition to Ottawa, twice yearly, for drugs, and get anything within reason we ask for, so we have quite a drug store in the office, and can Diagnose, and prescribe, for most of their maladies.

Financially - The Hudson Bay Company always kept them in debt so that they would trade with them, until they are not satisfied unless they are in debt. We have to see that the farming Indians pay for their seed, twine, repairs and threshing, the Government supplies the implements, also that the farmers don't trade off their work horses and that no grain, cattle, wood hay, etc are sold without the supervision and consent of the Government. We are all well. Mary weighs 140 and son 200. Jesse is in good condition. Also, White again Willie.