

# VALLEY HISTORY

## AND THE WINDERMERE VALLEY MUSEUM

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### **Anna and Rudi Hecher**

When Anna Stein left Rumania in 1929, aged 19, her father told her “ if times were not so bad I would not let you go, but go you must.” And so Anna came to Canada with a girlfriend, and the two of them arrived in Saskatchewan in June of 1929 with hopes for a brighter future than what faced them in their own country. But Yorkton Saskatchewan, did not satisfy young Anna and she moved to Calgary where another friend had arranged for the girls to stay. Anna was able to start work at \$25.00 a month.

Anna met Rudi Hecher shortly after her arrival in Calgary. “ He was the life of the parties,” remembered Anna, “ and he could really sing.” He must have sung the right song because 5 months later, in November 1930 they were married. Rudi was a native Austrian and in 1927 he had

left his homeland also trying to escape the Depression that was sweeping Europe. By 1934, with little or no work in Alberta, Rudi was investigating opportunities in the Windermere Valley and in March 1935 his wife Anna and their son Walter joined him. It was to be Anna’s permanent home and very different from the one she had left behind in Rumania.

Although the effects of the Depression were not as severe in the Windermere Valley as they were in other parts of Canada, repercussions were felt here. Money just wasn’t available and you needed ingenuity and a willingness to work. You also needed plain good luck sometimes just to make a dollar.

“ You couldn’t even buy a job then, ” said Anna, recalling how Rudi would do anything possible, from harvesting crops and gardening, to building roads and cutting trees. Both Anna and Rudi had no choice, they had to work.

The Hechers rented a home in Windermere and Anna well remembers that first winter for being particularly wrought with heavy snow. By 1936 they had purchased their first home, also in Windermere, and they lived there for 10 years. The house and 3 acres of land cost them \$975.00, to pay over 5 years, with \$75.00 interest. Rudi was picking up work wherever he could but the

first money he was able to put away as savings was a \$500.00 bonus he received from Chris Wenger while working at his sawmill. To supplement their income, they also took in boarders and Anna handled laundry for 8 to 10 boys at Ronacher's mill. "We both worked together" said Anna. "We had to but we liked it. That's just the way it was."

But the Hecher's had their share of sorrow while living in Windermere; they lost their son Walter in 1935 in a tragic drowning accident Anna was 4 months pregnant with Katherine at the time.

By the end of the war, they had sold their Windermere home and moved to Athalmer. In 1946 they purchased "Wing Lee's" grocery store in Invermere, ( the site of the Saan store-2008 ) " We paid \$5000.00, and put \$ 4500.00 down," said Anna, " And after the war, prices were soaring here. Inflation was high just like today." It was an investment that would prove well worthwhile.

It was the leading store from Cranbrook to Golden. Rudi was well liked in the community. He was a hard working, dedicated man, and few people realized the hardships he had experienced in his younger years. He was born in 1898 in Austria, and when he was 14 he left home to apprentice as a blacksmith. For 3 years he was away from his family. In 1916 he left home again, only this time he enlisted in the Austrian army and fought in the Great War from 1916-1918. There was little he could do in his own country when the war was over. Jobs were scarce, people were poor and the

economy wasn't picking up. He married in the 20's but by 1927 he knew they would have to leave if they wanted to prosper in life. And so Rudi came to Canada in the hope of making a home for his family here, but it was not to be. He found the Canadian economic climate stifled, the job market equally dormant and little opportunity for an Austrian blacksmith. He worked on farms, in mines, on dams or he was gardening or harvesting but he could not make enough money to send for his wife and 3 children. Sadly his wife contracted T.B. and died in Austria and it wasn't until many years later that his son Rudi and daughter Mitzi were able to join him here in the Windermere Valley. His third child died in 1949.

In 1960 Rudi's health was inhibiting his operation of their business, and they sold the store to Murray Fisher, Alvin Cameron and Mr. Burke, who in turn developed the large Super Value franchise. The Hecher's then opened the Motel Narelle in 1962 ( present site of the Station Pub—2008 ) but Rudi's health did not improve and he passed away in 1965. Mrs. Hecher sold the motel in 1970. Their daughter Katherine lives in Idaho with her husband and 3 children. Looking back at the lighter side of those years, Anna recalls turkey dinners and card playing nights with some of the early families, the Dapper Ede's, Mr. and Mrs. Ball, Roesch's and Craigs. " And you know, I think it was fun. It's a lot easier now of course, and look at how much we have, but I wonder is it all as much fun ?"

## A History of Athalmer

A settler's pamphlet published in 1923 had the following to say of Athalmer, the little hamlet 1 mile north of Invermere.

Athalmer was founded on the great expectations of Fredrick Whitworth Aylmer and James L. McKay in 1900. It was called Salmon Beds for the spawning grounds which were located near the site. Aylmer named Athalmer, which means "most noble lake".

For many years, it was the most prosperous populated town in the area. In 1923 a permanent population of 750 supported a large downtown core that consisted of three hotels, five churches, a drug store, two general stores, two barber shops, a Chinese restaurant, a bank and a school.

The school was a hub of social activity in those early years. Wedding receptions, dances and parties were well attended in the one room building. Even the first fall fair was held on the school grounds in 1911.

An experimental farm was built in the valley in 1910 by the government, but Athalmer had little potential due to the acidic quality of the soil. The village therefore thrived on the impulsive spending practices of the miners and loggers who lived in camps up the river. They would arrive by steamer for a week and leave broke and hung over.

Of course this artificial economy fluctuated as the mines prospered or failed, and the town was consequently unstable. This is one rea-

son why the town has declined over the years. Furthermore, seasonal floods make the town a virtual lake. Old timers like to remember the flood of 1916, when Mrs. Lake milked her stranded cow while sitting in a canoe.

Athalmer still floods in the spring, but much has changed since the mines closed in the 1940's and 1950's. The steamers quit running in 1915, after the Kootenay Central railway came through. Only one Inn remains, The Lakeside, which was built by Jim McKay in 1900. Most of the businesses are now located in Invermere. Only the homes of the old-timers remain, and will stand for the next generation to pass by and wonder about.

( Museum Files )

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### Golden Star-December 27,1929

" A large number gathered to hear a most excellent concert given on Friday the 20th by the pupils of Miss Beale's and Miss McQueen's classes of the Athalmer-Invermere consolidated school. The program was as follows:

Song- " In the Fashion" by grade 1 and 2 girls. Recitation by **Eileen Docking**.

"Santa's Boys" - grade 4

" Irish Lilt" - **Mary Frater**

Recitation by **Lucy Pennington**

" How the Donkey Engine Helped"

Star Drill -grade 5 and 6 girls

Recitation by **Betty Mitchell**

A Play- "Santa's Key "

Dr. Coy acted as chairman throughout. Some of the mothers very kindly helped with tea.

# The Experimental Farm

By Mollie Laird 1994

“ I think it interesting that I now find myself living on land where as a small child I played, namely the Dominion Government Experimental Farm. The Superintendent’s house is now the Catholic Rectory and was built about 1912. The first superintendent was Mr. Edward Parham. He and Mrs. Parham were married in Penticton in 1913 and this must have been their first home. They were always very hospitable and a lot of fun and enjoyed entertaining. I was invited to stay with them on several occasions, presumably when my parents wished to do something which did not include a small child.

Mrs. Parham was a Botanist, born in Wales and held a Bsc in Botany, Zoology and Mathematics and had traveled extensively, visiting the Malay States, Ceylon and India. I am sure she must have had some say in the planning of the landscaping and gardens that surrounded the house. To the south of the house and about where the ( Invermere ) Catholic Church now stands was a sunken circular lawn where the Parhams and their guests played Bowls and tennis.

The whole area now bounded by 10th and 13th Avenues on the east and west and 5th and 10th streets on the north and south made up the Experimental Farm except the Chicken Plant which was built on the Toby Flats down a steep hill west of the main farm, as if it were an afterthought. It was run by a young man, Mr. Denny, who had been invalided home from W.W.1 with a wounded leg. I remember a collection of sheds and chicken houses and a small shack where Mr. Denny lived. What a place for a returned soldier !

The entrance to the Farm was about where the Ambulance Building is now ( 2008 ) and was a metal gate between two upright posts painted white and the driveway curved gracefully up to the front door of the Superintendent’s house and wound out the west gate on it’s way down the hill to the chicken plant.

Several Fall Fairs were held at the Farm and I well remember seeing local ladies including Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Walker, taking part in the butter making competition. And Walter Stoddart, Bernice Hatheway’s father, at that time a young and

handsome man, performed marvelous tricks in the Western Riding Competition which he always won.

The rest of the land was developed in small experimental plots, all neatly pegged out with little white posts. I don’t remember much hay being grown or seeing any cows though I am sure there must have been some. I do remember the beautiful big work horses and the neat and large barn they occupied.

My Father, Norman Marples, worked as secretary to Mr. Parham for several years during World War 1. He drove down from our home on Lake Lillian either in a buggy or a cutter, sometimes changing from one type of vehicle to another in the spring when the snow left the valley sooner than the Benches. I think he only worked three or four days a week. Mr. Bruce did not think that mother should be up on the farm alone with a small child and arranged for a telephone to be hooked to the line that ran from Jack-pine to the Paradise Mine Office in Invermere. In an emergency, Mother was to ring the mine office and they in turn would contact Dad at the Experimental Farm and relay the message and the answer.

About 1919, after the war ended, the man whose job Dad had held, returned and so Dad had to leave and at the same time, Mr. and Mrs. Parham left and went to farm at Vassau Lake near Penticton. The new Superintendent was Mr. Gladwyn Newton who also brought his wife here as a bride. They stayed on in the main house until the Farm was moved to Windermere and later to Prince George.

The old house has seen many families come and go, among them Rev. and Mrs. Clerihue, a United Church Minister, also Joe and Barbara Pietrosky and no doubt others including Dr. and Mrs. Stick who added the north wing to the original house. But the gardens have never been the same.....”

( Museum Files )

( Compiled by Sandy McKay )