

The Fabric of the Creek



Life-long Bragg Creek residents Jack and Joan Merryfield sit down with our publisher, Dwayne Zaba, and share some fascinating personal memories and touching life experiences.

This past spring I was granted the privilege of seeing Bragg Creek through the eyes of two extraordinary people, Jack and Joan Merryfield, who kindly took time to relate nearly a century's worth of personal memories and experiences about their life in this picturesque little hamlet.

The daughter of Bragg Creek homesteaders, Leo and Mary Burby, 83-year-old Joan has been married to Jack – who first came to Bragg Creek in the 1930s – for 64 incredible years.



An artist's rendition of the Circle-Five Hall – where Jack and Joan had their wedding reception in 1946. Art compliments of Barb Teghtmeyer.

Before Joan was born, her family formed part of the crew that surveyed the breathtaking forestry reserve now known as Kananaskis. She relates: “They went with pack horses from Bragg Creek to the Kananaskis Lakes to do the surveying.”

Joan’s parents and their neighbour, Syd Connop, built Two Pine School so that their children had a place nearby to go to school – hand-cutting the trees and erecting the log structure right on the Connop property, at no cost to the taxpayers. Because the new school didn’t have enough kids enrolled at the outset to obtain a government grant to hire a full-time teacher, little Joan started Grade One a full year earlier than most children did at that time. The school opened on May 2nd, 1932, with a grand total of seven students, with Joan being the youngest pupil. At the tender age of five, Joan rode her own horse to school, often wearing outfits hand-sewn by the local Stoney Indians.

“I used to wear buckskin coats to school throughout the winter,” recounts Joan. “My mother used to get the native Stoney to come in to measure us up for winter moccasins and coats and they’d come back a few days later with them all made. They were so glad of the money, because they were so poor. Gee, they were good friends, really good friends, just great people.”

One of Joan’s fondest childhood memories recalls her father Leo buying the big old Percheron workhorses from McGavin’s Bakery in Calgary to use on the family farm in Bragg Creek. “They used to sell the horses to my father when they couldn’t work anymore in the city,” she says, “but they were fine once they were on softer ground in the country. They were dandy horses, but when the barn boss at McGavin’s gave them medication, he always put it in a 26-ounce liquor bottle, and he trained them to take the bottle very gently in their teeth, tip their heads back, and drink the medicine. When

we’d take them haying, my mother would send us bottles of tea in the 26-ounce bottles, and they’d spot the bottles and drink our tea. It was so funny! They were beautiful old horses; just like lambs, they were so quiet and nice.”

With Canada entering World War II, Joan’s days at Two Pine School came to an abrupt end in Grade Nine, as the teacher was conscripted to help out the country’s war effort. Like many other young Canadians of her generation, Joan turned to correspondence courses to enable her to continue her education in the Bragg Creek area, where a few years later she met her life partner, Jack.

“I first heard about Bragg Creek from people in Calgary, who used to refer to Bragg Creekers as ‘Jack Pine Savages’,” recalls Jack. “A friend of mine, Jerry Cook, who owned Cook Motors in Calgary and ran pack trips into the mountains, had a cabin in Bragg Creek. I was intrigued, so I rode one of Jerry’s saddle horses out to Bragg Creek, where Jerry introduced me to Joan’s family.”



Joan and her son George on horseback in Bragg Creek in 1947.

Like a lot of other people in the area, Jack joined the Canadian military during the Great Depression to escape the poverty and hunger plaguing the country. Jack relates: “Back in the ‘30s, I had a 22 rifle because we needed to shoot rabbits to put food on the table – it was that desperate. I still own it to this day.” After first becoming a flying instructor at the Currie Field in Calgary, Jack eventually graduated to the Royal Canadian Air Force, but in spite of the hectic schedule, he still made time to romance the girl of his dreams. “Being stationed in Calgary, I would often fly over Joan’s family farm in Bragg Creek and drop notes, which I had written on pieces of paper, out of the airplane – asking her to come out to a dance, and all this romantic stuff.”

Following in Joan’s family’s footsteps from a generation before, Jack and Joan began to hike extensively in Kananaskis. Joan recalls:

“One time in the early days, Jack and I hiked up Moose Mountain and the forestry look-out man there hadn’t seen any women for about six months, and we couldn’t get away from him – he kept making pots of coffee to keep us there.” They continued to be avid hikers in Kananaskis for over 50 years and, as Jack says, “We pretty much know it backwards now.”

Being shipped off to fight in the war overseas with the Royal Air Force was a profoundly defining life experience for Jack, shaping many of his life-long principles and beliefs. “To me, every single person is a human being who is worth getting to know. To this day, I don’t care what colour people are, or how they’re different from me – to think otherwise is a terrible mistake! What on earth gives us the right to force our ways on others?”

“As soon as I came back from the war,” Jack continues, “I said hi to my parents and then drove out to Bragg Creek – it just seemed like such a beautiful place to be after all the noise of the war. At first, I came out just to try to relax a bit, but once I got used to the quiet surroundings, I realized that I just couldn’t go back to the city, so I bought Jerry Cook’s cabin and decided to stay here. I wasn’t married then ... but, to make a long story short, Joan and I got hitched in



Above from left: Jack as camp cook on a pack trip; and canoeing in Banff.

1946,” he chuckles. “She was ten years younger than me, and I still call her ‘my young bride’ to this day.”

Having come to think of Bragg Creek as the ideal place to live, Jack decided to buy some extra property from Jake Fullerton – the son of one of the most prominent homestead families in Bragg Creek – and began to encourage other people to live in Bragg Creek full-time. ▶▶

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“Most of the old cabins in Bragg Creek were built for people to stay the weekend, so I started up Merryfield Construction to make them livable on a year-round basis.”

With the popularity of Bragg Creek as a permanent home continuing to grow, so did the need for basic amenities in the hamlet, prompting Jack and Joan to champion Bragg Creek to Calgarians, encouraging them to start up new businesses to serve the growing community.

“Joan and I promoted Bragg Creek by transforming my old three-ton truck into a float, which we would then drive into Calgary on Stampede Day and enter into the parade,” recounts Jack. “Over the years, we got first-, second- and third-prize ribbons. We wanted a grocery store and a drug-store and eventually it happened,” Jack states. “The whole area where the shopping centre sits now used to be mine – I sold the land I bought from Jake Fullerton to businessmen from Calgary so that they could build the shopping centre.”

At left: Jack holding son Jimmy, shortly after starting Merryfield Construction in 1950.

An integral part of the local social fabric from way back then, Joan and Jack have always been the sort of quiet community leaders everyone wishes they had. When the neighbouring McLuskey family lost their house and pretty much everything they owned to a fire, Joan and Jack helped organize a local fundraiser that pooled over \$20,000 for the family. “It was a lot of money – and it’s a really fitting tribute to the generosity of the people of Bragg Creek,” reflects Joan.

Over the years, the Merryfields began to dedicate more and more of their time to the local children. Jack started up the Bragg Creek Boy Scouts chapter and worked at every camp in the area, including Camp Cadicasu, Camp Kiwanis, Camp Horizon and Camp Gardner.

“I really liked working with kids,” Jack states. “I enjoyed looking after all those camps, and running the local Junior Forest Rangers. I ended up spending about 18 hours a day with kids, until the doctor told me I better quit that, so I cut it down a bit – working only until it got dark,” he winks.

“I guess that’s how I got the school buses,” he continues. “Joan and I were away on holidays once and, unknown to us, the guys in Bragg Creek elected me as the local bus-driver. “When we came back and found out, I said, ‘What? I never agreed to that!’ And when I asked Gene Fullerton why they elected me, he said it was because of the fact that I drank a lot less than any of the other guys. I said, ‘Well, what a recommendation!’ That’s a fact – that’s just how it happened!”

“I bought three school buses and started running the first long-distance school-bus routes over to Springbank,” Jack continues, shaking his head. “There wasn’t anything but a couple of ranches between Bragg Creek and Springbank back then. The roads were basically trails, and there was hardly ever any traffic, so during the winters I carried a load of wood and a hundred-foot rope with big knots tied into it, so that whenever we got caught in severe snowstorms, I’d light a fire in the bush, each kid would grab a hold of a knot, and I would then lead them to safety.”

At 94 years of age, Jack feels lucky to have spent most of his life in Bragg Creek and, in his boyishly charming way, sums it up: “At one time we were young and foolish – we’re not so young anymore.” ■

Above, clockwise from top left: Jack’s brother Charles feeds a bear they met while hiking in 1939; Jack walking into the cabin he bought from Jerry Cook; Jack (left) with Don White building his first cabin in Bragg Creek in 1943 before he went to war. At right: Jack takes a well-earned rest at Elbow Falls.



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