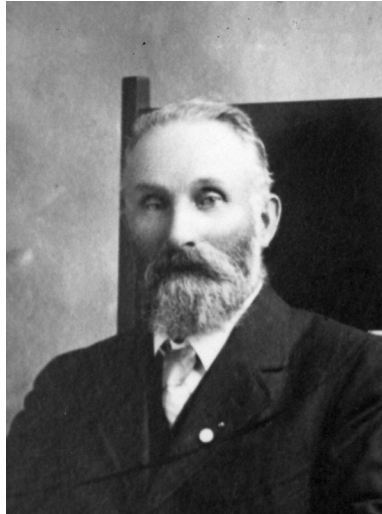


The following is a copy of a May, 1918 newspaper article that circulated in Wapella, Saskatchewan about my great, great grandfather, John Rowell (April 20, 1855 to August 7, 1932). I have left the spelling and punctuation “as is”. The image of the SS Peruvian was not in the original and neither were the endnotes.



*Familiar Faces*

Mr. John Rowell

A REAL OLD-TIMER

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WAPELLA'S PIONEER BUILDER

---

INTERESTING REMINSCENCES

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BY THE “CHIEL”

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If there's a hole in a' your coats,  
I rede ye tent it;  
A chiel's amang ye takin' notes-  
And, faith, he'll prent it.

BURNS.

— o —

Truly, it can be said that John Rowell is a “familiar face” in Wapella. He has lived here since 1882, and there is no more familiar figure on the streets than his. John was born nearly 64 years ago at Corbridge, England, which is a few miles from Newcastle-on-Tyne, a town famous for “Geordies” and, believe me, our John looks a

typical “Geordie!” Tall and well built, his hearty and rugged appearance makes him look good for another score of years yet.

I have never enjoyed an interview more than the one with John, which took place in his workshop last weekend. Puffing away at his pipe, Mr. Rowell related quite a bunch of experiences which would be well worth reproducing in book form.

I can easily understand why John Rowell is so popular with the leading citizens of the district. He has an inimitable manner of telling stories and jests, many of them being full of the wit and character of the free, outspoken, primitive people from whom he springs. Wise minds have often recognized that since the world began the teller of a merry tale has never wanted for a jolly audience. This is the result of John Rowell’s popularity throughout life, for with all sorts and conditions of men lies his gift of raconteur.

It was very interesting when John went back over to the period of his first trip crossing the “Herring Pond” and his landing in Canada and subsequent experiences, and comparing them with present day conditions.

He dealt in a graphic fashion of the long wheat hauls, the use of the lumber waggon for all purposes of transportation, and the various other inconveniences which prevailed at that time, comparing rather unfavourably with modern conditions in Wapella—such as C.P.R Railway, surrounding towns, telephones, automobiles, plowing tractors, electric lighting, steam and hot air heating, first class stores, hotels, etc.

John Rowell was the son of George Rowell, one of the principal master painters and paperhangers in Newcastle, the firm having been established over 70 years ago. He was educated at the Erskine Academy and the Orphans House Academy, after which he served a seven year apprenticeship with the well-known firm of George Douglas and Co. carpenters, builders, cabinet makers, and undertakers. In his spare time, he assisted his father in the painting and paperhanging business, and consequently he became an all round tradesman which was to prove useful in his subsequent travels in the New World.

At the age of 22, he married Sarah Humphrey, of Street Gate, Durham, and although bordering on her 70<sup>th</sup> year, she is still his partner in life. And she has proved a good one too! In all John’s troubles, trials and successes, she has been an ideal and capable “helpmeet” in the fullest meaning of the good old fashioned English word.

There were five children of the union, two living, and three dead. Of the survivors, one is Mr. Norman Rowell, one of the town’s most respected tradesmen, and senior partner in the firm of Rowell and Creary; and the other is Mrs. Vernon Flook, of Esterhazy.

Soon after his marriage, Mr. Rowell heard the call of the Great North West, full of unlimited possibilities to those courageous ones who were willing to face what was at that time nothing more than a vast region of disconnected and fiercely conflicting aims

and interests, and who had to be ready alike to turn an unpromising prairie tract into a fertile farm.

He embarked at Liverpool on the old “Peruvian”<sup>1</sup> which was due to land at Quebec in from 10 to 14 days. Full of the spirit of adventure, the subject of my sketch certainly got what he wanted even before landing on the shores of the New World.



R.M.S. *Peruvian* – after 1891

When nearing Newfoundland, the captain endeavoured to steer clear of the ice floes, but he was out in his calculations, with the result that the ship struck a submerged ice floe, smashing every blade off the propeller. The vessel immediately began drifting in the ice-fields, and as there was no Marconi wireless in those days, help was a long time coming.

For 17 days the “Peruvian” drifted hither and thither, and it was only the expert handling of the vessel by the Captain and crew which prevented a pre-Titanic disaster for there were 1400 passengers on board in addition to the crew. Within three days of the mishap, the passengers were put on short rations, and before help arrived, the only food available was ship biscuits. However, when off Cape Breton, the Captain was able to get in touch with a fishing schooner which managed to get alongside, and after some parleying, they took off the “Peruvian” purser and put him on shore, where, it was learned afterwards, he had cabled the owners of the vessel, which had been given up for lost and posted missing at Lloyds. The purser came on board the next day and informed the passengers that they need have no further fears, as three vessels were searching for them, and would soon be on the scene, although they were 300 miles out of their course.

Three days after this announcement H.M.S. “Griffin” hove in sight, and also the “Hanoverian.” My readers can well imagine the joy of the “Peruvian” passengers at seeing the relief ships, who at once supplied the provisions so badly needed. The next day the relief ship chartered by the owners arrived. First class passengers and mails were transferred to one of the other ships and the “Peruvian” was towed to within 600 miles of Quebec by the relief ship, then taken in hand by a Government tug to Point Levis near Quebec.

From here, Mr. Rowell continued his journey to Winnipeg, via Grand Trunk Railroad to Montreal and Toronto, thence to Sarnia, where he took ship through the Great Lakes to Duluth, entraining for Winnipeg.

At first John was only able to secure a job as section hand on the C.P.R., but after four weeks work, he again found himself at the familiar bench doing carpenter work in erecting stations and depots on the Manitoba and South Western Railroad, which has since been merged with the C.P.R. Afterwards he worked building freight sheds at Headingley. It was at the latter place that Mr. Rowell recalls his first meeting with some fair specimens of the "flotsam and jetsam" which had drifted into the North West at the time of the first real estate "boom" in 1882. He encountered "real estate" sharks, horse thieves, and "confidence men," one in particular being Joe Morgan, the blacksmith, whom he describes with a chuckle, as being "a regular nocturnal bird."

It was in October, 1882, that John Rowell, Billy Goldsmith, young Goldsmith, and Billy Green, decided to go homesteading, and take up farm life generally. They each took a half section, ten miles South West of Wapella, Mr. Goldsmith still being on his original half section of Section 20 14 1. Mr. Rowell had half of Section 16-14 1, and he remained there until he was burned out in the fall of 1886.

When the four landed in Wapella the following March, they found it only to consist of a station house and a house for the section hands. They brought their own provisions, not forgetting stock, including cattle and oxen, and even a 12 x 20' shack which had to be removed in sections. They dumped their belongings in the snow by the railroad, whilst they undertook the terrible journey to their sections.

And what a journey! With snow 3ft. deep, and having to dig a trail every 100 yards. The first night they camped on the prairie and it was so cold that they could not start a fire until they reached the shelter of the bluffs on the old Moose Mountain trail.

On arrival at their destination, they located with two farmers named Burgess and Thompson, staying here for three weeks, until their own shacks were erected. Food was plentiful, wild ducks and prairie chickens were in abundance, and as one of John's old friends (Billy Shaw) used to say: "Every slew was a butcher shop," for shooting restrictions were then unknown.

Some idea of the fertility of the virgin soil may be gathered from the fact that Jim Girvin, a neighbor of John's, sowed 3 bushels of wheat seed from which he threshed 96 bushels.

About this time in 1883, Wapella's first store was opened by Messrs. Arthur Roberts and Somerset, in a tent located on the site now occupied by Thompson's drug store, after which a permanent store was erected. This was afterwards removed to the west of the town, and it is now called the Orange Hall. This building was originally Wapella's first store. Then a French-Canadian named Arsenault erected a frame store on

the corner now occupied by Mr. James Franks. This property was bought by Mr. Alex Knowles, who had it removed across the tracks, and “Conny” Schmidt now occupies it. Alex Knowles then erected a stone block on the same site, after which Mr. James Franks added to it. In those days it was at these stores where the early settlers traded.

For the next three years he remained on his farm putting in many, many hours of hard toil until he had a large portion of the land broken and tilled, with good buildings and stock. Then, suddenly, come one of those overwhelming calamities which seem too terrible to imagine—fire—wiping out in a few short hours the fruits of years of toil, anxiety and patient endurance. How Mr. Rowell emerged from this fearful experience is no small tribute to the cheery optimism, dogged perseverance and resolute ambitions which have dominated his whole life. In speaking of this awful day Mr. Rowell unconsciously revealed to me that in fighting a neighbouring fire in the absence of the farmer he so delayed himself that he was too late to be of any use in subduing the one which later broke out in his own home, an act of self sacrifice which is characteristic of our friend. He told me how he mounted his pony to ride into Wapella when upon approaching Dave Millen’s farm, he saw a fire making for Millen’s building. He immediately let the pony loose and fought the fire.

Single-handed for 3 hours, as Millen was at the creek, threshing. After getting the fire well under control he went to the house, where he found Miss Millen and one of Mr. Goldsmith’s daughters asleep, they having been fighting the fire the whole of the night before. Having assured himself that all danger was over and placing plenty of wet bags as a precaution, Mr. Rowell resumed his journey, meeting his pony only when nearing Wapella. After doing his business he returned, reaching his farm about 10 p.m. Imagine his horror and consternation at finding everything gone—house, buildings, stock, implements, even tools, and to add to his anguish no trace of wife or children. He immediately set off at a mad gallop for Garvin’s farm where he found them safe, to his unspeakable relief. He then learned that the fire started about 5 p.m. and Mrs. Rowell, helpless and heart broken, with her little ones, watched and waited until kindly hands led her away as it was growing too cold for them to stay longer.

With this appalling prospect, Mr. Rowell was at his wit’s end to know how to make another start as there was no insurance in those days so that he had lost about \$4000 in addition to his valuable set of tools with which he could always earn good money building homes, etc. in Wapella. Utterly destitute yet still undaunted, he was casting about for something to do, when one lucky day he met “old George Robinson” of Tingle’s Mill, who made an appointment to see him at noon the next day, and to his (Mr. Rowell’s) amazement and pleasurable surprise Mr. Robinson made him a present of a complete set of tools which had belonged to his son, who had died. Back again came hope, ambition and happiness in the knowledge that he had again the means of making a fresh start, and it was not long before Mr. Rowell commenced business in Wapella where he has remained to this day.

At that time he built the Queen’s Hotel, T. J. Smith’s Drug Store and Logan’s house, afterwards going to Calgary (which had been totally burnt out some 3 months

before<sup>ii</sup>) and doing some good work there. After this, things went so well, that in 1887 (Jubilee year) Mr. and Mrs. Rowell and their family took a holiday, and went home to the Old Country, where Mr. Rowell remained from Nov. to Jan. 1888, returning before his wife as he “got so tired of Newcastle’s sleet, mud and rain and longed for his freedom in Canada” where, as he expresses it “he could go where he pleased and do what he pleased.” Mrs. Rowell returned after 9 months more.

From that time Mr. Rowell has remained here, respected and beloved, building and re building and seeing many changes. Some of the houses he has erected are those of Messrs. Frank and James Knowles, also the store of Mr. R. D. McNaughton of Moosomin, also the Jubilee hall. He drew the plans for the English Church and assisted in building it, recalling the incident of how work was about to be stopped owing to lack of Diocesan funds, when Mrs. Ashton came to the rescue with \$100, a notable example which was immediately followed by other donations thus making it possible to finish the work.

Out of business hours, I learnt that Mr. Rowell is a great lover of music, and good organist. There is no greater proof of his broad mindedness on men, matters and religion, when it was stated that it was a regular job for him every Sunday years ago, to play the organ for the Presbyterians in the morning, the Church of England in the afternoon, and the Methodists in the evening.

John is a worthy and deserving citizen and one to whom the town of Wapella owes a great deal. May he live many years to enjoy the evening days of his life in peace and serenity untrammelled by cares and sorrows and respected by all.

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<sup>i</sup> Departed Liverpool April 27, 1882 and arrived at Quebec on May 23, 1882.

The “Peruvian” was built by R. Steele & Co, Greenock in 1863 for the Allan Line. She was a 2,549 gross ton ship, length 312.1ft x beam 38.6ft, clipper stem, one funnel, three masts, iron construction, single screw and had a speed of 11 knots. There was accommodation for 100-1st class and 600-3rd class passengers. An attempted launch was made on August 21, 1863 but she stuck on the slipway and the launch was completed ten days later. She sailed from Liverpool on her maiden voyage to Portland on March 31, 1864 and commenced her first run from Liverpool to Quebec and Montreal on May 12, 1864. First voyage from Liverpool to Halifax, Norfolk and Baltimore commenced August 11, 1871. In 1874 she was lengthened to 373.1 feet, 3,038 tons and her engines compounded. On July 14, 1874 she resumed the Liverpool - Quebec - Montreal service. On April 26, 1887 she resumed the Liverpool - Baltimore service and in 1890-1891 was fitted with new compound engines and given a second funnel. Commenced a Glasgow - Boston service on June 2, 1891 and a Glasgow - New York service on September 6, 1893. She commenced her last voyage from Glasgow - New York on July 12, 1894 and resumed Glasgow - Boston run on January 18, 1895. On June 5, 1902 she started a Liverpool - St. John’s, Newfoundland - Halifax run, starting her last voyage on July 11, 1903 and was finally scrapped in Italy in 1905. [*North Atlantic Seaway* by N.R.P.Bonsor.vol.1, p.310].

<sup>ii</sup> On November 7, 1886, a devastating fire destroyed many wooden buildings on the main street of Calgary. To avoid another catastrophe, Calgarians decided to rebuild the town with Paskapoo Sandstone, a more fireproof material.