

2013 Centennial Articles: # 1

Few Called Him “Bill”



Major W. R. Bell - ca. 1882 and ca. 1911.

In 1845 he was christened “William Robert”, and in adolescence he was likely called “William”, “Will”, or “Bill”, we don’t know which. After working as a station agent at Pakenham, Upper Canada (now Ontario), he joined the Militia, and earned his first official title: Captain Bell. An excellent marksman with a rifle, he also earned a number of trophies during his lifetime, and was part of the Canadian team that participated in the National Rifle Association meet at Wimbledon, England in 1871. After receiving medals for defending his country during the American-based Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870, he left military service with the rank of Brevet Major. From then on, he was most commonly known as Major W.R. Bell, and has thus entered the annals of Canadian history.

But to some, he was simply “Bill”. His second wife Katherine (whom he called “Kitty”), called him this in her letters, and he signed his letters to her as “Bill”. To his descendants, he is generally referred to as “Major Billy”.

Although the number of surviving documents relating to Major Bell is not nearly as extensive as it once was, no other contemporary records refer to him as “Bill”. He is mentioned in countless government correspondence and reports; newspapers reported on his exploits for several decades; his name appears on numerous court cases; he appears regularly in local and family histories; and his name occurs in any significant publication relating to the history of Saskatchewan.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of visitors from around the world and from the common man to royalty and people of great political and business influence made a point of stopping at Indian Head to meet this remarkable man and to see his equally remarkable farm. No less than four Fathers of Confederation and the leading Generals of the North-West Conflict of 1885 dined at his table. By any standard, Major Bell was a legend in his own time, and beyond.

His sudden death in Winnipeg on Feb. 17, 1913 came as a shock not only to his family, but to all who knew him. Canada had lost a man who was not only familiar with success and with the hardships of personal and financial setbacks, but a man determined to take and give all that life had to offer him. There are many exceptional people in the history of Canada – Major W.R. Bell stands among the best of those.

This year, 2013, marks the passing of 100 years since Major Bell died in Winnipeg, where he and Katherine raised the family that eluded him and his first wife Catherine at Indian Head. The Bell Barn Society of Indian Head, having preserved this legacy by interpreting the Bell Farm story, is proud to dedicate this year to a celebration of the life of Major W.R. Bell. Admired by many, scorned by a few, envied by others, decorated, honoured and sued, Major Bell was both good spirited and controversial. We invite you to visit the round stone barn, reconstructed to its historic 1882 exterior appearance, and to learn more about this incredible Canadian. Then, decide for yourself how he should best be remembered.

Frank Korvemaker
Archivist / Construction Historian
fkorvemaker@accesscomm.ca