

BEZANSON BLACKSMITH SHOP

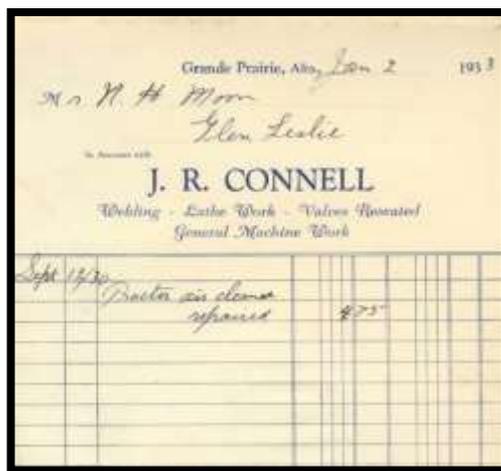


JOHN "JACK" ROBERT CONNELL



Jack Connell, born in Peterborough, Ontario in 1884, was raised in Bobcaygeon where he learned the blacksmith trade from his father, Alexander. His older twin brothers, Tom and David, had moved to southern Alberta to farm and Jack eventually decided to join them. The brothers farmed for several years, however grew tired of the dry windy conditions and decided to move to the Peace River District. Jack filed a homestead application north of Bezanson on NE 2-73-3-W6 in 1921 and was on the land in 1922. He later purchased NE 36-72-3-W6; land that was the original homestead of William Raison. The November 16, 1925 issue of the Grande Prairie Herald reported that Jack had moved his store from near the Lindsay School to Nels McLaughlin's (NE 15-72-3-W6) place. The May 17, 1926 issue of the Grande Prairie Herald reported that Jack closed his store and went back to work for the Telephone Company. It would have been at this time that Jack decided to move to Grande Prairie where he found employment as a brick layer for Bob Barley. In the fall of 1927, Jack decided to go into business for himself and purchased a lot from Mr. Barley. He also purchased a lathe and acetylene welding machine from Bob and opened a welding and machine shop. Jack had an electric welder fabricated for him which was the first electric welder in Grande Prairie.

Jack was an exceptional welder and probably could even be classified as an "inventor". He fabricated an



unusual wheelchair for Joe Roth, a billiard-hall proprietor in Clairmont. Mr. Roth was often seen propelling his way around the streets of Clairmont in his unique wheelchair. The chair maneuvered by moving the handle back and forth. During the winter months, a dog team was harnessed to the wheelchair so that Mr. Roth could still make his way around town. The "wheelchair" is currently on display at Reverend Forbes Homestead House in Grande Prairie.



In 1937, Jack married Grace (Lindsay) Moody.

By 1938, with the depression in full swing, Jack's business had declined to the point where he decided to close the machine shop and move back to the farm at Bezanson. At that time, Jack owned NE 18-72-2-W6 and SE 18-72-2-W6. The old highway down the river-hill to the Smoky River ran directly through his property; part of which is now Rio Bend Estates. Once on the farm; however, Jack decided to open a blacksmith, welding and machine shop in what would become known as the Hamlet of Bezanson. He moved a building from his farm to be used as a shop and they lived in a little





house on the property. The business prospered and provided service to a large area.

Jack eventually sold his business to Tom McEwen in 1948 and moved to the farm where he lived until he passed away in 1960; Grace passed away in 1961. Both are buried at the Glen Leslie Cemetery.

Left - Jack's "Blacksmith's Shop" - still standing in 2020.

Written by Wanda Zenner September 2020

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References

South Peace Regional Archives
Smoky to Grande Prairie History Book
Grande Prairie Museum (Reverend Forbes Homestead House)
Larry Fells
Photos – Wanda Zenner Collection