



OPPOSITE: The stone farmhouse occupied by the Motherwell family is noted for its symmetrical design, including the selection and placement of certain stones of comparable colour and size.

Lanark Place

THE MOTHERWELL FARM, NEAR ABERNETHY

William Richard Motherwell was the co-founder of the Territorial Grain Growers' Association in 1901, Saskatchewan's Minister of Agriculture from 1905 to 1918, and federal Minister of Agriculture from 1922 to 1930. It was primarily for these reasons that his farmstead near Abernethy was declared a national historic site, meticulously restored to its 1912 state, and opened to the public in 1983. 🌿 But W. R. Motherwell was more than just a textbook figure with a stern visage. As letters to his children reveal, he was a loving father who openly expressed his affection. During a 1906 Moose Jaw convention, for example, he wrote, "I see a great many sights, meet a great many people, & have a pretty-good time on trips like this, but none of them fills the place of my two pets at home whom I often



Like all homesteads, the Motherwell farm was built on the open prairie. Today, the subsequent landscape improvements stand in stark contrast to the original farmyard. (Parks Canada: *Lanark Place: Memories of an Ontarian West*, p. 12)

long for.” In the margin of another 1906 letter is “42 kisses. . . . Is that enough? Well, here is more. . . .”

According to research conducted by Parks Canada, “W. R. Motherwell often stated that he wanted to build a home of which his children would not be ashamed.” But the same report suggests, “W. R. Motherwell planned a home that he thought would be fitting of a man in a position of authority and dignity, a home to display an air of refinement and culture as he perceived these on the basis of his rural Ontario background. By standards of the day and the district, the Motherwells’ stone home was something more than an average comfortable farm home.”

The motives behind the

construction of W.R.’s fieldstone home were no doubt mixed, and it is due to the exhaustive Parks Canada research that so much is known about them. For example, files include W.R.’s rudimentary sketch of a house similar to the one he built, drawn while he was a student at the Ontario Agricultural College at Guelph in 1881. There are also photographs of the log home he first built, and the information that he wanted to build his stone house overlooking Pheasant Creek but, thwarted by bureaucracy, had to create his own oasis on the plain.

He began life as the fourth son on a small farm in Lanark County, near Perth, Ontario, and was twenty-two when he filed for his homestead in 1882. Two years later, he married Adeline Rogers, the daughter of a Manitoba homesteader, and they had four children, two of whom survived infancy.

In addition to the demanding work of homesteading, W.R. gathered stones from fields and ravines and, by 1896, was able to have a fieldstone stable built by Adam Cantelon of Lorlie. In 1907, a frame superstructure replaced the roof

to create the barn that still dominates the property.

By April 1897, *The Grenfell Sun* was reporting that “the plans and specifications for a neat residence has [sic] just been completed by Mr. A. M. Fraser, architect. It is the proposed property of Mr. Wm. Motherwell, north of Indian Head, and when completed will cost in the neighbourhood of \$4000.”

Work on Lanark Place progressed quickly, and by that summer, the fieldstone walls were almost finished. Unfortunately, reported the August 11 edition of *The Vidette*, “Mr. Adam Cantelon, while engaged in building Mr. Motherwell’s new house at Abernethy, fell from the second storey on Monday morning and sustained a very bad fracture of the leg which it is feared may lead to the loss of the limb.”

Whether Cantelon did lose his leg was not recorded, but the home he built still speaks of his skill and, as illustrated by the stones placed according to colour as well as size and shape, artistry.

The beauty of the coursed stonework is further enhanced by the home’s predominately

Italianate style – square main section, hip roof and ornamental brackets – popular in Ontario in the 1860s, especially in Lanark County. But few prairie homes are pure in style, and the Motherwell house was no exception: the highly decorative bargeboard and finial of the Gothic-style dormer on the rear kitchen suggests High Victorian excess, while the balcony/porch projection at the front is Eastlake in its embellishment.

The highly eclectic home was finished enough for W.R. and Adeline to hold a dinner for twenty-five couples on New Year’s Day 1898. Shortly thereafter, the Jan 26, 1898 edition of the *Vidette* listing the “business done by P. Kerr, contractor during 1897 . . .,” included “WR Motherwell, stone residence \$3,000 . . .”

Adeline succumbed to asthma in 1905 and, after a secret three-year courtship, W.R. married Catherine (Kate) Gillespie, an Ontario-trained teacher who had followed her parents to western Canada and first taught at the Orkney stone school. Her various teaching positions culminated with her role as principal of the File



Hills Residential School, a rare appointment for a woman at the end of the nineteenth century.

After her marriage to W.R., Kate not only presided over the Motherwell household, she was active in various women’s associations. Her speeches to them suggest what today would be termed a “feminist” bent.

Kate accompanied W.R. to Ottawa and returned to Lanark Place with him in 1939. When he died four years later, she moved into Abernethy and completed the sale of the farm to W.R.’s grandson, who moved into the house in 1953 and died the same year. Parks

Canada acquired the farm in 1966, the same year the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommended that Motherwell be designated a person of national historic significance. The W. R. Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site of Canada, open every day from the May long weekend until Labour Day, commemorates that significance with the restoration of the buildings and, to illustrate Motherwell’s practise and promotion of scientific farming methods, the farmstead.

His children would not be ashamed. 🌻

Today the restored barn provides a glimpse into the variety of activities that occurred on a prairie farmstead.



OPPOSITE: Smithfield – the home of James and Betsy Smith – has a rich and varied history, and somber but impressive architectural design. The front entry sidelights and twin triangular dormer windows on the roof are possibly the only truly decorative exterior features.

Smithfield

THE SMITH FARMHOUSE, NEAR ARCOLA

*T*he history of Smithfield is one of love, lust, land, and loss. In the best fairytale tradition, however, it ends happily. 🌿 It begins with the illegitimate birth of James Mitchell Smith in Scotland in 1862. He lived with his mother, Christine Smith, an illiterate linen weaver, until she died three years later. He then lived with his aunt and uncle, Jane and Robert Mitchell, wealthy farmers. 🌿 He arrived in the Arcola area in 1891. Living with John McLaren on John's homestead, he staked his own homestead but, after discovering its poor quality, bought land in 1895. 🌿 This land had witnessed its own sorrows. In 1882, Alexander McNabb had arrived from Scotland with his wife, Mary Ann, and had filed for a



The wedding photo of James Smith and Betsy Anderson, 1898. Betsy died in 1906, after living at Smithfield for only a few years. (Rick Krehbiel)

homestead and pre-emption in the broad, flat valley at the foot of the Moose Mountains. The following year, Alex and a daughter died, the seventh McNabb child to do so. Mary Ann buried her husband and child on the homestead, the northwest quarter of the half-section claimed by Alex, and, with her two remaining children, continued improving the land.

She was granted the home quarter in 1886 and, by 1890, was ready to start improving the pre-emption, the southwest quarter. By that time, however, Philander Finn had buildings on it, and claimed it as his homestead. Like another, similarly covetous neighbour, he said it had been abandoned.

A Presbyterian minister supported Mary Ann's claim, describing her as a "poor widow of indomitable courage" who "can solder tin-plate when necessary." She had also learned to speak the Assiniboine language "without stuttering." Considering her many talents and the number of times she had "stood on the brink of the grave," he wrote, the government should follow

the Bible's instructions to "Plead for the widow."

Although the Department of the Interior initially listened to the Presbyterian minister, Philander was granted the southwest quarter in 1893. He sold it to James Smith in 1895.

Three years later, James returned to Scotland to marry Betsy Anderson. Four children were subsequently born at Smithfield but, with the birth of the fourth in 1906, Betsy died. James was devastated.

A year before she died, however, the whole family visited Scotland and came back with an extra child: Bruce Anderson Smith, born to Betsy Anderson in 1895 and raised by her parents. The Smiths also returned to Canada with Betsy's niece, seventeen-year-old Betsy Ramsay, who became their domestic help.

Betsy Ramsay married widower James in 1920.

"Old Jimmy Smith ran the farm with the help of his kids until Bruce returned from World War I and took over," explains Rick Krehbiel, the grandson of Bruce, who had moved to the Nipawin area

in 1934. "Jimmy had contracted the Spanish Flu in 1919, and was never strong after that. But, to stop the succession of land out of his blood line, Jimmy married Betsy Ramsay."

When James died in 1928, the family unravelled completely. Betsy maintained the farm with the help of a hired man who had arrived in the district with a questionable history and little respect for anyone else's. He is credited with ploughing over the McNabb graves on the land acquired by James in 1908. When Betsy died in 1971, she left the farm to the hired man, who sold it. Subsequent owners accelerated the decline of Smithfield.

The house at the heart of Smithfield, however, endured.

The exact date of its construction and the name of the man who built it are unknown. Local history has narrowed its completion to around 1903, and Robert McIlvenna of Oxbow is said to have been the stonemason. Given that the stonework is the same as that of neighbouring Restalrig, McIlvenna would seem likely.

The understated Scottish style of Restalrig is even more evident at Smithfield. Simple in its symmetry, the only attempts at artistry are the arches over the windows flanking the front door. It's as if the stonemason, cautioned against any fripperies, surreptitiously slipped in keystones in a barely discernable darker grey. The main entrance was left barefaced, with sidelights and a transom of red and green glass the only deviations from the owners' Calvinistic heritage.

The Smithfield crown jewel was the 1906 barn. Twenty-five metres square, it had three alleys, 5.5-metre-high fieldstone walls, and an elaborate feed system from the loft. It was, as described by Arcola writer Leigh Robinson in a 2006 *Façade* article, "a cathedral of stone with soaring interlocking posts and beams supporting a vast cottage-style roof punctuated by wire-meshed glass skylights."

This monument to both agriculture and the craftsmanship of its unknown builder is now gone, burned and bulldozed by a 1981 owner. The house, abandoned, began to



lose its one-storey stone addition on the north side and fell prey to vandals and the elements.

In 2005, however, something "cosmic" happened, says Rick Krehbiel. A resident of British Columbia, he was attending a family wedding when, during a discussion with his mother's aging cousin, he suddenly became "obsessed" with Smithfield. A month later, he had a lease-

ing arrangement with the owner and had started renovations. He hopes to have it habitable for his retirement.

"My goal is to preserve the house and spend time there. It's a beautiful piece of work. Stunning. And it's part of the family history so it will be a focus for that history. But it wasn't built as a museum. It was built for James and Betsy Smith's descendants. I intend to honour that." ❁

Although the main house is in good repair, the low back addition has started to crumble at the corner.