

The Saga of Lieut-Col. C.F. Houghton

by Win Shilcock

The weirdest federal constituency election ever held in Canada was conducted in the Yale-Kootenay riding in British Columbia in December, 1871, five months after the province entered Confederation.

The new riding was geographically huge. It covered all of southern B.C. from the Cascade Mountains to the Rockies but encompassed a population of only about 400. It boggled the mind as to how an efficient election could be conducted in so vast an area, so in the interest of expediency the action was confined to Yale on the Fraser River where potential voters were close at hand.

The key figure in the election was Captain Charles Frederick Houghton. He was born in Ireland in 1838 and spent several years in the British army. In September, 1863, he arrived in Priest Valley (Vernon) along with his friends, the brothers Forbes George and Charles A. Vernon and for a time the trio mined for gold at Cherry Creek. In 1865 Houghton explored and opened up a pass from Cherry Creek to the Columbia River.

In 1866 the three men pre-empted land in Priest Valley in the area that later became known as The Coldstream, but in May 1869, Houghton sold out to the Vernons and the partnership was dissolved. Extensive holdings held by Houghton on Okanagan Lake were later sold to Cornelius O'Keefe.

By 1871 Captain Houghton was unencumbered in the Okanagan Valley and free to go where he wished. It's not clear exactly how he became mixed up in politics and whether or not he sought the nomination for the Yale-Kootenay riding. However, the late journalist, B.R. Atkins, ferreted out a story that he claimed was true concerning events that happened on election day in Yale.

The December day was very cold and the returning officer, Arthur T. Busby, whose claim to fame was that he was married to a daughter of Sir James

Douglas, found that the population was loath to venture out, preferring to stay at home or remain in one of the numerous bars.

It was necessary to have someone to whom he could read the election writ so Busby sent a constable to round up some bodies. The officer finally brought in two men and after the writ was read a discussion ensued as to who might be nominated to run in the election. Several names were considered, but when one of the men said, "I nominate Captain Houghton. I think he's a rancher in the Okanagan," the second man, anxious to get the matter settled, happily seconded the motion. There were no further nominations and Captain Houghton won the election by the decision of two electors.

Back in 1868, in the the Priest Valley, Houghton had married an Indian princess, the granddaughter of the Great Chief N'Kwala. She gave birth to a daughter in December, 1870, but when a son was born in 1872, she died soon after. Houghton, who adored her, was devastated and soon after gave up his seat in Parliament and returned to his first love, the army.

A promotion to Lieutenant-Colonel in 1873 saw him take over command of the British Columbia Military District No. 2 in Victoria. Here, in 1879, he married Marion Dunsmuir of the famous Vancouver Island coal-mining family. Unfortunately, she too died at an early age in 1882.

An appointment as Deputy Adjutant-General of Manitoba took him to Winnipeg in 1884 and the following year he participated in the Northwest Rebellion and won a decoration for bravery in action.

His final posting was to Montreal in 1886 where he became Officer Commanding Military District No. 5, the largest military post in Canada. Ill health caught up to him in 1897 and he was obliged to resign from the army.

Retiring to Victoria, he lived only a short time after and died August 13, 1898, age 60.

Lieut-Col Charles Frederick Houghton contributed much to the early development of Canada and British Columbia, but for some reason history has treated his efforts in a most casual manner. Nowhere is his name honored or remembered in a permanent way.

One thing is certain, however. He set an election record in 1871 when he won a seat in Canada's new parliament for the constituency of Yale-Kootenay with the votes of only two electors.

The Kelowna author of this story has discovered many tidbits of history in our province. We are most grateful that he has written this and other stories to share with our readers.



Lieut-Col. C. F. Houghton