The Mitchell Clan
Part Three: Sybil & Frank Gregory

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In the summer of 1891, Frederick and Lizzie Mitchell, their three sons, and daughters Sybil and Jesse, emigrated to Canada. In England, where the family had owned a prosperous paper mill, they lived the comfortable life of a prominent industrial family, but the loss of a lawsuit, taken against the family for polluting a famous Lancashire fishing stream, brought down the family fortune. They were forced to exchange life in a Victorian mansion, with servants and the trappings of wealth, for a tiny sod dwelling, far out on the Alberta prairie. (See Part I in The Highlander, Volume 12, Number 2, Summer, 1998). In Part II (Volume 12, Number 3, Fall 1998), Jesse and Sybil, now married women, have come to live on homesteads here in the Highlands. Within a few years, their parents, Fred and Lizzie joined them. The man responsible for their coming to the Highlands was Frank Gregory. This is the story of how it all happened.....

Finding himself briefly in Edmonton one Sunday morning in 1892, twenty-three year old Frank Gregory went to church. It happened to be Sybil Mitchell's confirmation day, and she was receiving her first communion. She was fourteen years old, fair haired and beautiful. According to family lore, Frank fell in love with her then and there. Thus began a love affair that lasted for the rest of their lives.

Frank's family ancestry could be traced back to 1292. There were many clerics in both his maternal and paternal line. His father and a brother were members of a prominent British railway engineering firm. So you might have expected young Francis Thomas Gregory to settle comfortably into one of the established family traditions. But in 1889, when not yet twenty, this gently bred young Englishman left home, parents, and his six siblings for the lure of adventure in the Canadian wilderness. Disembarking from the train in Winnipeg, he purchased two horses, and headed west. Before reaching Edmonton, he had spent three winters trapping for the Hudson's Bay Company, while working in the fields on prairie homesteads during the summers. After leaving Edmonton following that fateful Sunday morning, he continued westward. It would be almost a decade before he saw the Mitchell family again but he never forgot the lovely young woman in the long, white dress.

For a time he and a partner lived in a cabin near where the Pine River flows into the Peace. They set their trap lines and sold their furs to the Company post at nearby Fort St. John. During his travels, Frank had been searching for a homestead. But his ambition was thwarted by Hudson's Bay policy. The Company exchanged food, gear, blankets, etc. for furs, but never paid the trappers in cash. Without cash he was unable to purchase the land he longed for.

Rumours of gold in the Yukon began to filter into the area, but the news was not confirmed until mid-July of 1897, when two ships, the *Portland* and the *Excelsior*, arrived in Seattle and San Francisco respectively, each laden with a fortune in the precious metal. Immediately, telegraphers began tapping out their messages to inform the world. The rush was on. From all over North America, eager gold seekers headed north, with gold dust in their eyes and scarcely a shred of understanding of what lay ahead. One hundred thousand set out for the Klondike. Thirty thousand made it to Dawson City. Most took a steamer to Alaska, then tackled the agonizing journey over one of the perilous mountain passes, the Chilkoot or the White. Uncounted men, women, and horses died along the way—600 miles from saltwater to the goldfields.

Other routes led north from Edmonton, but they too were fraught with difficulty. When news of gold in the north reached this farming centre of twelve hundred persons, the city's wily politicians and businessmen saw a bonanza for themselves—not from the goldfields, but from selling provisions to the unwary gold seekers. They advertised Edmonton as "the Backdoor to the Yukon...gateway to the fastest routes to Dawson City", with good trails leading to the Klondike. This advice was wildly misleading. It could take up to three gruelling years to get there, and only one in five actually made it by these routes to the Yukon. Many bogged down in bottomless swamps, drowned in the raging rivers, succumbed to madness or disease, or froze to death in the Arctic winters.

One group of Californians, known as the "Schumacher Party", arrived in Fort St. John looking for someone to guide them to the Klondike. Seizing the opportunity to put some cash in his pockets at last, Frank agreed to lead them.

It was quite a journey. Frank was as well prepared for the task before him as anyone could be. After seven years in Canada, much of it spent trapping in the wilderness, he was bush-wise. He had travelled with native people, knew how to live from the land and knew the importance of eating fresh food—anything which would supply Vitamin C—to stave off the dreaded scurvy. He also knew that chewing willow

bark at the end of a hard day on the trail could relax and soothe aching muscles. (We now know that willow bark contains salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin.) He was a fine woodsman, gregarious and personable. He could put men with frazzled nerves at their ease after a harrowing day. With thirty men in the party, the expedition was sizable, since everything they might need must be carried along with them. At the start there were sixty pack animals: oxen, horses, and dogs. But as the food supply dwindled, many had to be slaughtered along the way.

They took a route later chosen by the Northwest Mounted Police as the best way to reach the Yukon: along one river system, over a mountain pass into the next drainage, over another pass, always edging towards the northwest. Finally they reached Teslin Lake, just south of the Yukon. Near the foot of the lake, the Northwest Mounted Police maintained a post. In addition to trying to keep the lid on lawlessness over a vast area, this force played a role as protector of the many who ventured into the wilderness unaware of the challenges ahead. So they checked the condition of rafts built by Klondikers to navigate the lake. Frank and his party wintered at the post, and as soon as they could get through in spring, they paddled down the lake and into the Yukon watershed at last.

These are the bare bones of the story and all that remain in the record. But considering the hardships and horrors that others have recounted—the daily struggle, the heartrending disappointments, the agonizing diseases and mishaps, the suicides and abandoned dreams—it is nothing short of a miracle that Frank managed to lead the Schumacher party all the way to the gold fields.

photo courtesy Frank Gregory

He spent three winters trapping for the Hudson's Bay Company

Another way led north from Edmonton, passing through Fort Nelson on the way to the Klondike. At the same time that Frank and the Schumacher party were running Teslin Lake, another group—ten young ranchers from the Calgary area—was heading for the goldfields by this second route. Among them, by a strange twist of fate, was George Bernard, unknown to Frank at the time, but later to become his brother-in-law and to settle near the Gregory homestead in the Highlands. George set out with high hopes, a spirit of adventure, and forty dollars in his pocket. But his party ran into serious trouble. The country was rough and in places almost impassible. After nine months of struggle, George and his companions finally reached Fort Nelson, and spent a miserable, endless winter in a sod cabin nearby. All of them developed the terrible symptoms of scurvy. George nearly died but survived, he believed, only because he regularly chewed the poplar bark, the only fresh source of Vitamin C he could find. Every one of his friends perished. All of their horses died and their cattle were slaughtered and sold to others who were pushing on to the gold fields. Finally, George turned back alone, sick and saddened, eventually arriving home, barefoot, and wearing some of his dead companions' clothes.

For some time after their arrival in the Klondike, Frank remained with the Schumacher party. Finally the group broke up into two's and three's, going their separate ways. After three years in the north, Frank was ready to head out. The narrow gauge Yukon and White Pass railroad was not yet completed, so he joined the road gang, worked his way to the railhead, and took the train to Skagway where he caught a steamer to Victoria.

When he left England over ten years before, he was simply looking for adventure, and probably never intended to stay. But as he travelled across the continent, watching the homesteaders build new lives in a new land, the lure of this beautiful country with its infinite possibilities began to attract him. He was ready to settle down.

Now, returning from the Klondike with $1200 dollars in his pocket, he began to search in earnest for the homestead of his dreams. Soon he had narrowed the search to two properties: a quarter section (160 acres) in the Highlands, containing Fizzle and much of Fork Lake, and the property beside Tod Inlet, now the world-famous Butchart Gardens!

Early in November, 1900, Frank made his decision. From the owner, Annie Calder, he purchased the Highlands property for $500 and came to live at Fizzle Lake. He called his homestead "Lakelands". The original owner, William Rountree, had bought the land from the crown in 1892 for $160, based on the going rate of one dollar per acre. He had put up seven courses of a log cabin, which faced the north end of the lake. Frank busied himself completing his new home. When the roof was on, he and his horse moved in—the horse on the ground floor and Frank upstairs.

Meanwhile, the Mitchell sons and daughters were growing up on their homestead in Alberta. Jesse went to work for the Bernard family at Bonnlebrook, their ranch just outside Calgary. There she met young

George on his return from the ill-fated expedition to the north. But within a year, he had headed west to work in Vancouver. Though the record is unclear, it appears that the Mitchells left their St. Albert homestead at around this time, and came to live in Vancouver as well. George and Jesse became engaged, and were married in Vancouver in January, 1902.

After meeting Sybil on her confirmation day, Frank must have kept in touch with the Mitchell family. Now settled, with a homestead of his own, he boarded the steamer from Victoria to Vancouver one spring day, in 1902. Shortly thereafter, on April 23, he married Sybil in St. Michael's Anglican Church with George and Jesse as their witnesses. Then he brought her to their home on the Island.

photo courtesy Frank Gregory

For the whole family it was a happy time. l. to r.: Robin Gregory, Eric, Dorothy & Jesse Bernard, Lizzie Mitchell with Cyril Bernard, Frank & Sybil Gregory (& Molly), Fred Mitchell with Robin Gregory.

Many years later, the author recalls Highland pioneer Frank Bellamy, whose weathered green log cabin still stands near the corner of Millstream and Finlayson Arm Roads, describing the scene. On a fine day in a long ago spring, he said, he watched from the corner of his garden as Frank and Sybil, returning from Vancouver, drove by with horse and buggy, Sybil's long, flaxen hair blowing in the wind.

The newlyweds drove on up Millstream Road, past the one-roomed schoolhouse on the hill, past the huge hollow tree with the box inside, that served as an unmanned wayside post office, up the switchbacks to the height of land between the Craigflower and Millstream watersheds, and along the narrow track to their small log cabin by Fizzie Lake.

They soon settled into the life of Highland settlers. Spring was advancing rapidly. Wild currant, salmonberry, thimbleberry; alder, maple, and dogwood were all in leaf. The tender buds at the tips of fir branches were bursting. Up on the hills, the wild flowers were in full array. Growth was in the air. It was time to plant a garden: carrots, potatoes, beets, cabbage, and peas to feed themselves during the summer, with enough to put by for the winter larder. From more established homesteads there would be neighbourly gifts of raspberry shoots and rhubarb roots; perhaps a broody hen with a mixed clutch of eggs —game birds, guinea fowl and even ducks. Eventually they would acquire livestock but first they needed a suitable place to grow hay and grain. The swampy ground between the house and lake would make a good, arable field. Before planting, however, they needed to clear the impenetrable tangle of willow, red osier dogwood, ninebark, and hardhack that grew in the wet, black soil. Then ditches and cross ditches must be dug and the field fenced—all by hand.

With the exception of the swamps, the rocky Highland land was not arable. So it was a challenge to produce enough to eat for themselves and their livestock. The wild land, however was rich in game and berries. These, free for the taking, became an important part of their diet. Deer were plentiful, while pheasant and grouse, both willow and blue, were far more abundant than today. Frank was a determined hunter, though with varying success. Once when he took visiting friends out after deer, he returned, sheepishly bearing one small grouse. Sybil greeted him singing "Hail the conquering hero comes!"

The lakes and streams teemed with fish. They were small, but it was not unusual to catch twenty or thirty in an evening. Black cap raspberries, Oregon grapes and the small, sweet, creeping, wild blackberries known to the settlers as vineberries grew along roadsides and in woods or clearings. Competent housewives kept a careful tally of the exact quantities of each foodstuff gleaned from the wild or produced at home. It was important to keep track in order to judge whether the time gathering these wild foods was worthwhile.

About the time of Sybil and Frank's marriage, Fred Mitchell, Sybil's father, had purchased the property around First Lake. He and his wife remained in Vancouver, while the following spring, their elder daughter, Jesse, her husband and infant son, came to live at the partly developed homestead, not far from Lakelands. Soon babies' cries and the sounds of children playing echoed through both houses. A few years later, Fred and Lizzie joined them. For the whole family, it was a happy time. It was no more than half an hour's walk from door to door, less by horse and buggy, so they saw one another almost daily. As in other pioneer communities, though often widely separated, neighbours were constantly helping one another. But they were especially fortunate when they were part of an extended family that could be relied on for support whenever it was needed.

The work of feeding, clothing and keeping themselves and their families safe, warm, and dry, was laborious and demanding. Yet they led an active social life and were often more in touch with their far-flung

neighbours than we are today. Sometimes they rode or drove a horse and buggy, but most often they walked the long distances between homesteads, to share a cup of tea or bring a small gift—a plant, some apples or plums, or a piece of venison. They walked to tell one another of news that affected them, or to ask for or offer help when someone was in trouble. Often they swam or paddled in the lakes..(See cover photo of Frank's visiting aunt with Robin and Cecil). Once a week they would travel to town, rain or shine, often in an open buggy or wagon, to sell their surplus produce—eggs, cream, butter, cream cheese, meat, or poultry, and to buy what they couldn't produce themselves or find in the wild. But they seldom passed up an opportunity to turn these trips into social occasions as well. They would lunch with friends in town or catch the "car" (electric street car) to Oak Bay to pay a visit, and still be home in time to do the chores while supper was cooking. Nevertheless, it made a long day. For Frank and Sybil it was at least eleven hours there and back by way of Munn Road and Burnside, or down Millstream to Atkins Road and along the Old Island Highway.

photo courtesy Frank Gregory

Sybil was an elegant woman who made her own fashionable clothes

If it was a long way on these occasions it must have seemed endless to Frank the night that Sybil was in labour with their first child. It was a difficult birth and they needed a doctor. In the middle of the night Frank rode to First Lake, roused Jesse and George to sit with his wife during his absence, then rode at full gallop to Victoria for the doctor. His anxiety must have melted the miles, for he was back,accompanied by Dr. Hart, in less than five hours!

Sybil and Frank brought up three children at Lakelands. Their house was small, barely a fraction of an average home today. They had no electricity or telephone, and they carried their water from a well some distance away. But they never thought of themselves as poor.

Highland pioneers came from a wide variety of backgrounds—from landed gentry to labouring families. But "class" was seldom a factor in their relationships with one another. Most had very little money and all were faced with the same rugged landscape, the same difficulties in coaxing a living from the land. They had the same huge trees to fell, brush to clear, ditches to dig, firewood to cut, hay to mow, and animals to feed, to doctor, to slaughter. Nevertheless, incongruous though it now seems, those with "genteel" roots kept up certain standards. Calling cards were sometimes left if a friend was not at home. Frank himself, regularly donned a velvet smoking jacket to relax for the evening after a wearying day at the usual tasks of a Highland settler.

Sybil, an elegant woman and a fine seamstress, made her own fashionable clothes, as well as those for her family. She was also a talented photographer, who, despite the limitations of lighting and water supply, developed and printed her own photos. Many of these are beautiful pieces of art. With their soft sepia tones they have the air of impressionist paintings.

Because the rough landscape did not easily yield a living, the settlers had to find other ways of supplementing their incomes. Frank and Sybil took in teachers as boarders until the small dwelling known as "the teacherage" was built beside the schoolhouse. For a time, Frank ran an informal fishing club. Anglers would take the interurban tram which ran up the peninsula from Victoria, and get off at the Goward Road station near Prospect Lake. Then they would walk across-country under the broad canopies of huge old-growth Douglas fir and cedar. Since only a few shade-loving plants could grow in the gloom of the cool, quiet forest, one could walk in any direction without encountering underbrush as we do today. Keen fishermen, hunters and holiday-makers were sometimes put up in a cabin for a fee. Like other settlers, Frank worked from time to time on the local roads to help pay off his taxes. Applying skills he had learned in his early days in the north, he established a trapline in the Nitinat valley, working it during some winter seasons with his sons, Bob and Cecil. To cross the river, he built a dugout canoe, just as his native friends had instructed him. He hollowed out a big cedar tree, steamed it with water and hot rocks, and set stretchers to shape it. It was a beautiful craft, but one so finely balanced that "you had to part your hair in the middle or you'd be in the water"!

When Frank and Sybil grew old and frail, and it was time to leave the farm, they moved to Kamloops to be with their daughter, Molly. They had lived almost half a century in the Highlands—longer than most. They were always well respected in the District and a strong presence in the early Highland community. They died in Kamloops within a few years of one another. Although none of their children remained in the Highlands their name lives on in the "Gregory House", the small caretakers' dwelling on the grounds of the Caleb Pike Homestead. It is a replica of part of their home at Fizzle Lake, a visible reminder of an earlier time, a quality of character and a way of life that gave rise to the Highland community we know today.

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