

## **William and Priscilla Grier, Early Pioneers of the MD of Bighorn**

**By Karen J .Clark**

William Grier was born in Ireland in 1828. He emigrated to Upper Canada near Meaford, with his father and uncle and there established a village, still known today as “Griersville”. Together, the Griers planned and constructed the roads and streets, built several homes, a school and a village library. They also built an interesting octagon stone church which was completed in 1856.

An enterprising young man, William, (in addition to becoming a skilled carpenter and stone mason), also served as the first librarian. He gained fame as the man who killed “a huge snake of the water variety in the swampy ground at Cook and Trowbridge Streets.” He “skinned and tanned this skin then made his mother a pair of lovely slippers from it”. William built a shoe shop and continued working as a shoemaker for several years.

William Grier married Priscilla Chantler, daughter of Quakers, Moses Chantler and Sarah Hoad Chantler. The Chantlers had emigrated from England to the same area as the Griers. At least two of their daughters accompanied them. One of the daughters (Elizabeth) married George McDougall. Another daughter married William Grier. Elizabeth and Priscilla had a close sisterly relationship. Elizabeth and her husband, George, set out for the West to establish Wesleyan Missions. Several years passed before the McDougalls decided to build a Methodist Mission for the Stoney First Nation people at the site they named Morleyville. It was undoubtedly the affection and respect between the Griers and the McDougalls, but particularly the bond between Elizabeth and Priscilla, that influenced the Griers to travel far west, beyond roads and conveniences to begin a new chapter in their lives. Perhaps William Grier relished the idea of a new challenge.

The exact date of William and Priscilla’s arrival at the Morleyville site is not known. It was a busy time for everyone. The Mission house was built or was just being completed, but the church and houses for the First Nations People were being planned also. There was also the excitement of the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway which was just underway. The Reverend John McDougall,( George and Elizabeth’s oldest son) made a contract with the CPR for the Stoneys to cut alpine fir to make ties for the track. John McDougall asked Andrew Sibbald and William Grier to supervise this work. The Canadian Pacific Railway through Alberta was completed in 1883.

During the summer of 1884, William Grier was approached by A.P. Coleman, an explorer, scholar, geologist and mountain climber extraordinaire, who was visiting his brother Lucias Coleman and his aunt Augusta Adams in Morleyville. A. P. Coleman inquired into the possibility of William accompanying him on one of his expeditions. In his book “The Canadian Rockies – New and Old Trails”, Coleman refers to Grier as “The Old Prospector”. It is not recorded if Grier liked this name or not, but he must have looked forward to the new challenge of seeing uncharted land. He agreed to oversee the “selection of saddle horses and pack horses and the purchase of all the supplies necessary for an exploratory trip into the Rockies”. He fitted out the horses with gear and supplies and met Coleman at Lake Louise (then unnamed). Together with another “hardy woodsman” named Severin, they made the final arrangements

to cross the pass in to the Kicking Horse Valley. They explored the Beaver front range and proceeded to unknown peaks of the Selkirks. These were mostly unnamed, unmapped areas not unknown to the Stoneys and Kooteneys perhaps, but unidentified with elevations and specific locations. A.P. Coleman, who was a professor at Victoria College, was noting the mineralization in the mountains. William Grier may have found a kindred soul in the keen interest in rocks.

In 1885, William Grier became the Indian Agent at Morleyville. One of his duties was to serve as an "Instructor" to the Stoneys with the goal being crop production. From the Sessional Papers of The Dominion of Canada, the Fifth Parliament, we read that the Government wanted fields of "Grain and Roots Sown and Harvested" on each Reserve. It was hoped that agriculture would eventually provide a substantial source of food for the Stoneys.

William Grier worked with the three Stoney Chiefs on three reserves: Chief Bears Paw on Reserve 142, Chief Chinniquy on Reserve 141 and Chief Jacob on Reserve No. 143. All three reserves were within the area reported as "Morleyville". The emphasis in these reports is on agriculture and indicates William Grier and the Stoney chiefs were moderately more successful with this endeavor than many on Reserves elsewhere in the Northwest. For example, in 1885-1886, Grier was able to report a harvest of 110 bushel baskets of carrots. That year, there were no carrots harvested on any other reserve in the Northwest. The report also states, however, that the Reserves at Morleyville harvested no peas and their crop of barley was "destroyed by cattle". On a more positive note, William could report the successful completion of 94 houses for the Stoneys.

In William's last years, he continued lending a hand where he could. He and Priscilla applied for a lot in Morleyville on which they could build a house for themselves. They constructed a well built, two storey home, and several out buildings including a barn. Priscilla had her beloved sister Elizabeth nearby for conversation and prayers. Priscilla was kept busy parenting two daughters: Rita (Rettie), who in 1887 married Howard Sibbald and Alma, who married Hugh McClelland. Both couples were married in Morleyville by Priscilla's nephew – the son of her sister Elizabeth Chantler McDougall – the Reverend John McDougall.

In retrospect, we see the Grier's part in helping the McDougalls establish a Methodist Missionary settlement although it appears that neither William nor Priscilla were Methodists themselves. They both worked to create a peaceful community where Stoneys and non-Stoneys could live in harmony. William Grier and Andrew Sibbald and the Stoney First Nation helped build the CPR through this part of the Northwest. William Grier had a role as Indian Agent and Instructor, helping the Stoneys through these difficult adjustments on the Reserve in the absence of the buffalo, when food was scarce. We also see William eager to explore and always to help A.P. Coleman lead the way into uncharted land.

William Grier died in 1895. He is buried in the Millward Cemetery on the north side of 1A Highway that was once known as the Old Cart Road. Priscilla Chantler Grier continued to live in the home she and William built. About seven years after his death Priscilla received title to the north half on Lot 6, Plan 89 B, Morleyville. She eventually sold the north portion of Lot 6 to Walter Le Suer, who transferred the title to Edward Le Suer, who then bought to south portion of Lot 6.

Sometime between 1933 and 1937, The Grier residence was sold again, this time to the Canadian Youth Hostel Association. It was one of the first Youth Hostels in Canada. It was named ``The Ghost Lodge Hostel. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire in the 1950`s.

When the sale was complete, Priscilla moved to Calgary where she lived with her married daughter, Alma McClelland. Priscilla died in 1927. We have not yet located a photograph of her, nor have we been able to locate her final resting place.

Little remains of the Grier ``well built`` home. We have listed the William Grier and Priscilla Chantler Grier site as one of Historical Significance. There is evidence of the stone fireplace-much of it remains standing. We see the front steps and the stone foundation that held the well –built home.

The signage is small but important reminder of a man and woman, nearly forgotten now, who, when invited, made the long and arduous journey to the far west to help build a settlement. They were good steadfast, hardworking people. –true pioneers of the area we now call the MD of Bighorn.