



Jasper-Yellowhead
Museum & Archives

Part II: You can call me Major

Before I knew it, it was four o'clock, but I couldn't leave. I looked around.

Photographs and pieces of paper, with scribbles made with a Fred's familiar blue fountain pen, surrounded me. I continued to dig into the past and into Fred's life.

I caught another whiff of sweet tobacco and shivered slightly. Was the Major here? I opened an envelope containing photographs and there, on top, was a professional studio portrait of a young, handsome man in an army uniform.

Fred returned to Jasper a war hero. He had earned the title of Major and the military cross and bar. Aside from his preference in being addressed by his rank, Fred returned pretty much the same. He still had his insatiable wonder lust for the trail, and under Jack's supervision, the business was doing well. In fact, the tourist business was booming and each year more tourists were arriving at Jasper station. Fred and Jack purchased a plot of land along the shores of Horseshoe Lake, or what is now known as Lac Beauvert, from an Edmonton businessman. Tent City, as the Brewster Camp was known, became a base type camp, where guests could stay and enjoy minor luxuries like, a log kitchen cabin and dining room, before they headed out on the rugged trail.

Fred and Jack eventually sold Tent City to the newly established Canadian National Railway, but retained the concession rights for guiding and outfitting guests. Fred's most famous camps were at legendary Maligne and Medicine Lake and another amidst the majestic peaks of the Tonquin Valley.

I continued to sift through the paper around me and happened across a photograph of four people. Scribbled on the back were the following names: "Sir Henry Thornton, Mrs. Fred Brewster, Mrs. C -? Blair". There was another name, which I could not read, a date, 1925 and location, Jasper. Mrs. Fred Brewster? I had never heard of the Major having a wife. I continued to root through the rest of the photographs in the envelope, searching for something about this Mrs. Fred Brewster. Then I found it, folded into the tiniest possible square of paper was an article from an issue of the Canadian National Railway Magazine dated 1926. The paper was brittle and I carefully unfolded it: *From New York to a Jasper Cabin: Social Whirl of New York Palled and Now Mrs. Fred Brewster Has Picturesque Mountain Home*, by Dorothy G. Bell. The article wasn't any different from a lot of the

tourist propaganda published by railroad companies during that era. The Canadian wild was painted as a land of mythical wild beasts and dashing young men in red serge uniforms, ready to whisk young damsels off their feet and to the nearest cozy log cabin, with a fireplace and bear skin rug, of course. The article portrayed Mrs. Brewster as a young woman who had become disenfranchised with New York 'high' Society and was swept off her feet, to the nearest log cabin with a fireplace and bear skin rug, by the handsome Canadian soldier and entrepreneur. Bell made sure to note that the marriage had not met the approval of her family. In fact, the author made sure to mention that the young Fred Brewster's religion, Roman Catholic, was a particular point of contention and most likely, the adventurous bride was disowned.

The article went on to describe Mrs. Brewster's background as privileged and that she had no traditional domestic skills, let alone wilderness survival skills; but according to the magazine, she eagerly became an eager student of her husband, who taught her to cook on the trail and helped her master the tricky art of packing a horse. Up until this point, Fred's had had his barns and cabin across the back end of town (about where the new Roman Catholic Church stands). The congregation of stables and log shacks, however, were a little too rustic for his bride. So, Fred eventually built her a magnificent log cabin, which still stands today.

I continued to search for information about Fred's elusive wife. What was her name? I shuddered at the thought of the generations of women's names that have been lost, due to the social tendency of referring to women by the name of their husbands. It made me think about how lucky I was to be a woman now, and not confined by such seemingly archaic practices. Just when I thought her trail had grown cold, I found a scrap of paper with the following: *Azalia Brewster, beloved wife of Frederick A. Brewster, 1894 - 1961*, written in unfamiliar handwriting. "Azalia," I said it out loud to myself, enjoying the way it rolled off of my tongue. What a perfect name for poetry and love letters, but I was beginning to doubt that I would find any of those hidden in the box.

I wondered if Azalia had really transplanted so easily from one of the world's greatest cities, to the middle of nowhere. I continued to search and discovered that in 1928, Azalia had, had a nervous breakdown. She was sent to a hospital in New Westminster, British Columbia and was later transferred to a mental hospital in Verdun, Quebec. Fred, being the valiant gentleman he was, transferred ownership of the

house to his wife's name, creating an estate, perhaps hoping that when she got well, she could return to Jasper and the security of a little nest egg, but her health continued to be an issue. The house continued to stand empty; a veritable haunted house and was eventually sold to Charles Vernon Jeffery and was saved from abandonment.

Tucked in with some of the real estate documents was a little snap shot album. I opened it up and was delighted to find photographs of Azalia. There had been no mention of a honeymoon; I imagined Azalia assuring the young Major that coming to Jasper would be honeymoon enough. Or maybe, Fred promised his bride a romantic trip into the backcountry. Just the two of them, alone under the stars, naming mountains and lakes, like before the war, except Azalia was a much better tent mate than Fred's old buddy Prescott Fay.

Suddenly, there was a cold draft and I could feel goosebumps rise on my skin, I smelled that now familiar scent of sweet tobacco, this time mixed with a hint of horse manure. I was certain I had stirred some old souls. I looked at the clock. It was 6:00pm. I was ready to call it a day. I quickly gathered up all the papers and photographs and placed the box back on the shelf. "Good night Major," I whispered as I turned out the light and headed up the stairs. I locked the door and headed home. [1129]