



**Jasper-Yellowhead
Museum & Archives**

Part III: Mr. Maligne

As I approached the museum, I imagined the surrounding buildings away and in their place I began to construct rudimentary log cabins, in my mind and then horses with their heads hanging over fences, snorting as I walked by and

then, there he was, Fred, himself, in a rawhide jacket and tall hat standing by the barn. It looked like he was looking toward me, so I raised my hand and waved and imagined him waving back. I quickly hurried downstairs, to continue from where I had left off.

Tourist brochures, guest lists, thank-you notes from visitors, and hundreds of photographs, Fred's Rocky Mountain Camps were world famous and his name alone became synonymous with Jasper. It seemed that most of Fred's guests felt a strong connection to their reliable guide and kept up correspondence with Fred even years after their visit to one of his camps.

There was a photograph of an English tudor style building with a fleet of cars in front with Fred and his staff. Fred was wearing a black suit and crisp white ascot, which seemed unusual compared to other photographs. I continued looking through the pile and came across a raggedy looking portfolio with Maligne in gold type set across the textured exterior. Inside were photographs, warm with amber coloured tones, the pictures looked like they had been developed in a maple syrup solution. I resisted the temptation to lick one. Some of them had even been placed, ever so carefully with golden corners to hold them in place. Perhaps it had been a brochure of sorts; however, the photographs were not your typical tourist brochure photographs. They appeared to be slightly less formal and the people in the pictures did not have that recognizable Kodachrome polish; these photographs seemed a little more sincere.

There were a lot of views of the interior of a log cabin and people at dinner parties, playing games, or just enjoying themselves. There were photographs of old log cabin structures with canvass tents for roofs. There was a wonderful shot of a group of men, lined up along the front of a cabin. I turned the photo over and written on the back in Fred's familiar scribble was *Fred's cowboys at Maligne Lake chalet*. The next one was of a single cowboy standing in front of the same cabin. The cowboy looked like a real cowboy and I imagined the excitement of city folk as they were introduced to their own personal Brewster

cowboy or cowgirl (Fred had been the first outfitter to hire female guides, known as the Harragin sisters. I had seen pictures of them before). But this particular cowboy must have completed each tourist's fantasy of camping in the Canadian wild. The cowboy's face continued to smile at me; it was a very charming smile. He must have been one of Fred's favourites.

I suddenly had an uncontrollable urge to go to Maligne Lake. I couldn't help my obsession and somehow I knew that I would not be able to get Fred out of my head until my mind was satisfied and my mind wanted to experience and see something that Fred had seen and maybe even felt. I called for a taxi and eagerly waited outside. When the taxi arrived I was surprised to see the driver was quite elderly. He smiled at me and I smiled back as I opened the door and got in the back seat, "Maligne Lake please."

"Maligne Lake? That's closed this time of year you know and it might end up costing you a pretty penny."

"Thanks," I said, "that's okay, I just really need to see it, today; I've never been there."

"Well in that case," said the driver, " I will most definitely take you there. It is a special place that gets into heart and soul."

I didn't respond. I was distracted by the winding road lined with brilliant gold and crimson hued trees and shards of grey rock poked up from behind the autumn palate, like stone daggers reaching for sky. I smiled to myself. My timing was couldn't have been better. It was going to be a wonderful fall day.

We rounded a corner and stretched out in front was the bed of Medicine Lake. The water had long since drained into its secret underwater labyrinth, leaving a few veins of water trickling over the gravel flat. "You know," the driver began, "it used to be this time of year that old Fred and the boys would start closing up the camp. We would cart all the left over supplies out by horse, in the early days, and then later with some old Packards and a couple of old Buicks. In the spring, old Fred would work just as hard as the boys to get the camp ready for the tourist season. The supplies were brought up by an old truck to Medicine and then from there it was another 15 miles by pack horse, to Maligne. Just think of all the things they had to lug up here, back then. It was a big thing."

The driver had said the magic word, "You knew Fred?" I asked, immediately intrigued.

"Yep, I was just a kid, my Dad was one of his cowboys and I spent most of my summers up at camp with my dad and old Fred."

I couldn't believe my luck what a coincidence. I started to think about how strange it really was. Come to think of it, I had never seen a taxi driver that old in Jasper. I was about to ask when he had started working in town, when he pulled off the road and stopped the car, "Here we are. You know, it's been years since I have been up here. I wonder if it is still here." The old man started to walk ahead of me, off the road and along an overgrown trail. I followed silently behind him and then I saw it. It was the log cabin from Fred's photographs. It looked pretty much the same. I followed the driver up the path and up the front steps. The driver reached for the doorknob and turned it slowly and flashed me a familiar smile.

I knew the door would be unlocked. Everything had fallen into place too easily today. I had surrendered to the feeling that things were beyond my control and it would just be best if I went with the flow. We stepped inside. The air was heavy with time and dust. I half expected it to smell of sweet tobacco, but that was my imagination running away, again. We walked through the kitchen, or what I imagined to be the kitchen. The room lacked all the amenities that would make it a kitchen, but the awful seafoam green paint was a dead give away. It seemed to be a popular colour for kitchens and hospitals of the 30s and 40s. We stepped into the main space, the dining room and living area. The vaulted ceiling and rotting floorboards emphasized the cabin's loneliness. I felt sorry for it. It had once been the hub of social gatherings at Fred's camp and now it was empty and forgotten. I looked over at the driver who had wandered across the room to look at a piece of paper tacked to the wall. As I got closer I recognized the piece of paper as a photograph of the charming cowboy I had looked at earlier and I now realized why the driver's smile had seemed so familiar. I was about to say something, but the driver spoke first, "That's Nick, my dad."

"Did he like working for Fred? What was Fred like?" I asked.

"You ask a hard question for this old fart. My dad loved Fred. Fred wouldn't even have to tell my dad what he wanted. Nick would just know what to do. It was a long time ago, but as I remember old Fred, he was a good man. I worked for Fred as a chore boy when I was young. He treated me well. I remember he would always say, 'hi Jimmie, how's it going?' Even

though he knew that I like to be called Mickey better. I especially remember how he loved his horses. He had many pack horses during the building of the railways and then even more as part of his outfitting business. I even remember him talking to his horses. I can still see him out there in the early morning, before they would saddle up and hit the trail, giving each one words of encouragement and admiration, or sometimes I imagined him apologizing for having to pair them up with a grumpy rider."

As we stepped out the back door of the cabin and walked down another overgrown path towards the water, I closed my eyes and took in the smell of the pine trees and the high note of the sweet cottonwood. When I opened my eyes and gazed on the legendary lake, I felt a strange sensation. It looked just like the pictures, but now it was real and I was standing where Fred had probably stood and I was gazing on the water that he gazed on and it filled my heart with warmth and made my soul expand, just as it had for him.

Mickey, the driver, drove me back to town and before I could invite him to see some of Fred's treasures, he had driven off, even though I hadn't paid my fare. I ran inside and called the taxi company to tell them that I would be by to pay the fare, but the person I spoke with told me that they did not have a driver named Mickey and that I must have called the wrong company. I knew I hadn't, but there wasn't much I could do about it. I had discovered a kindred spirit beneath Fred's stoic posture. I had only a sneaking suspicion that underneath it all Fred was a romantic, but now I was certain. As I began to put all the photographs and papers away, one last time, I thought about poor Azalia, and how it must have been sad for her to discover that not only would she have to share Fred with throngs of adoring tourists, but compete with charming cowboys for his attention. Perhaps she found solace once she discovered that the land that possessed his heart was the equal in beauty to his soul.