

The Concert Party Tour

Bringing Entertainment to Pioneer Alberta Communities

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by
Jane Cooper

The first weeks of January 1911 were particularly cold in Claresholm, Alberta. On a couple of days the high temperature stayed below -30°F (-34°C). Snow on the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) blocked coal deliveries and the town's new coal-fired electricity plant cut service back to twelve hours a day. There was plenty of home grown entertainment available – sleigh rides, tea socials, and of course, hockey. But for new immigrants, most of whom had moved to Alberta from Ontario or the United States less than ten years before, the promise of an evening's entertainment by a professional 'concert party' from central Canada must have been a welcome respite in the severe prairie winter.¹

Around 8:30 on the evening of January 26th, 1911, a good proportion of the population of Claresholm turned over their 75 cents or \$1.00, and sat down together in the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) Hall to enjoy a program of music and dramatic readings presented by the H. Ruthven MacDonald Concert Party from Toronto. The party had arrived by rail that morning and would leave again the next day. But for one evening, as the result of the combined efforts of an impresario from Brandon, the leaders of the Claresholm IOOF, the performers from Toronto, and the railroad, this rural audience could feel that they were seeing as fine an entertainment as anywhere in the country.

Like the province of Alberta as a whole, Claresholm was experiencing a rural boom. The town grew from only one household in



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1900 to 1,200 people ten years later. From little more than a stop on the Macleod branch of the CPR, the community rapidly established itself as a vibrant agricultural service centre for the settlers who arrived to break the sod on the virgin prairie. In 1911 the town offered farm services including four grain elevators, three chartered banks, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, lumber yards, veterinarians, and farm implement vendors. The town had recently installed an electric plant and water works, and it boasted a weekly newspaper, and telegraph and telephone connections to the wider world.²

But the people wanted more than economic services and communications. When they were finished a long week's work in the

H. RUTHVEN MACDONALD
Canada's Greatest Baritone
 Coming to Claresholm
THURSDAY, JANUARY 26

Mr. MacDonald has made triumphant tours of Great Britain, the United States and Canada and was everywhere acclaimed an artist in his line. He is a King among singers.

He will be accompanied by Miss Bertha May Crawford, soprano soloist in the great Metropolitan Church, Toronto. She is a Star of the first magnitude in the musical firmament.

Miss Mildred Gordon, reader who has received flattering notice from the press everywhere, and Mrs. Ruthven Macdonald, pianist.

This is one of the rare treats of the year. You can hardly afford to miss it.

I. O. O. F. Hall, Jan 26th.
Seats 75c. and \$1.00
 Book Early. There'll Be a Rush.

The arrival of the H. Ruthven MacDonald Concert Party was advertised in Claresholm in 1911.

fields, they aspired to be entertained like audiences in the cities and towns they had left behind in central Canada and the United States. Meeting the demands of an increasingly sophisticated audience for professional entertainment in small towns like Claresholm required the cooperation of several different actors and each was invested in the success of the evening.

9:00 am, Thursday, January 26th, 1911, YMCA, Brandon, Manitoba. Wallace Graham, elocutionist and impresario, sat at the desk in his YMCA room studying the train schedules in his Waghorn's Guide, Rail-Stage-Ocean-Lake.³ He was finalizing the details of an upcoming concert tour by Alick Lauder, a popular Scottish character comedian.⁴ As he flipped past the train schedules for southern Alberta, his mind turned to his current concert party tour. Would their performance meet the expectations of the next audience? His business reputation depended on the ability of his touring artists to maintain their stamina and charisma during a gruelling five month schedule of constant train travel and concerts from Winnipeg to Vancouver and back.

Graham was a well established impresario and was managing a concert party tour of western Canada in 1910-1911 with his old friend, H. Ruthven MacDonald, for the second year in a row.⁵ Like many immigrants from Ontario, Graham had seen his move to western Canada as an opportunity to reinvent himself. The orphaned son of a printer, in 1901 Graham was a 31-year-old husband, separated from his wife and daughter.⁶ He had worked as a labourer in a cotton mill in the industrial community of Merriton, Ontario,⁷ but by the end of 1904 he was leading a single life in the YMCA in Brandon, Manitoba,⁸ and making his living on the stage as an elocutionist – or in common parlance, a reader – and off the stage teaching elocution.⁹

Turn of the century concert audiences were accustomed to being entertained by professional readings of dramatic or humorous stories and admired good elocution. At 6'2" with blue eyes and wavy brown hair, Graham was a striking figure on the stage who needed no 'ranting or barn storming' to captivate an audience. He commanded respect with a quiet dignified

style that was underpinned by his large resonant voice and coloured by his effective use of pauses.

Building on his personal experience as a touring artist, Graham soon ventured into managing other performers. As early as 1906 he was organizing tours across the prairies and out to the West Coast.¹⁰ By 1910 he was heralded in a Toronto journal as the 'popular western impresario' who had 'placed the concert business of the west on a higher plane.'¹¹ He had displaced American Chautauqua talent with higher quality Canadian and British artists, and he enjoyed 'the esteem and confidence of committees everywhere.' Graham specialized in assembling and promoting 'concert parties.'

11:26 am, Thursday, January 26th, 1911, Calgary to Macleod local train near Parkland, Alberta. Bertha May Crawford, soprano, buffed a peephole in the heavy frost on the train window and studied the snow covered prairie, while she mentally rehearsed the verses of her songs for the upcoming concert. H. Ruthven MacDonald, baritone, was dozing across the aisle, conserving his energy, while his wife and accompanist, Eleanor MacDonald, snored softly in the corner of the carriage. Mildred Gordon, reader, knit her brows as she reviewed the new story she wanted to debut the next evening. In a few minutes they would gather up their bags before the train pulled into Claresholm.

A 1910 'concert party' typically included three or four performers – a reader, at least one singer, an accompanist, and another singer or musician. The concert party filled a niche market, performing in the venues too small to attract larger touring companies but able to accommodate an audience of a couple of hundred people. The economics of the business demanded a careful balance between the expense of the artists' fees, transport and accommodation, and the revenue earned from performing in a community hall in the small towns or in a large church in the cities. Tickets to the show typically sold for between 50 cents and \$1.00, generating perhaps \$100 to \$150 a show which had to be split between the local committee and the tour management. With hotels rooms running at \$1.00 to \$2.00 a night and train fares between towns costing \$1.00 to \$1.50, a profitable tour required shows booked every night or second night in towns less than a day's train journey apart.¹²

Like Graham, the headline artist on this tour was a man who had escaped a more mundane life by putting his talents on the stage. H. Ruthven MacDonald originally trained as a cabinet maker like his father before him. But by his mid-20s he had a job singing bass baritone, and leading the choir in a church in Chatham, Ontario. Choirmasters and soloists were well paid at the time. In 1901 he was earning an annual salary of \$700 at a London Methodist church, which made him one of the better paid people in his community.¹³

Early in the new century MacDonald moved to Toronto where he lived for the rest of his life, giving voice lessons and performing in churches, local recitals, and on concert tours across Canada and the United States. He was an indomitable performer and in the summer of 1910 he contracted with the Redpath Vawter Chautauqua circuit to sing in 66 cities over 66 days.¹⁴ MacDonald's accompanist on tour was his wife of over twenty years. Eleanor MacDonald's musical roots stemmed from her early years in the Salvation Army.

At forty-five years old in 1910, MacDonald was an established Canadian artist renowned for the 'splendid carrying power' of his voice and his 'full, mellow, organ-like tones.'¹⁵ He was described as 'a large man in every sense of the word.' He must have presented quite a contrast on stage with the slim 5'6" soprano, Bertha May Crawford and her 'voice of a bird.' She was only twenty-four in 1910 and just beginning her career. The daughter of a tailor from Elmvale, Ontario, she had broken out of her family's conventional tradesman mould to earn her living on the stage. She had been singing professionally in Toronto in church and in concerts for about six years. This was her second concert party tour in North America but she had ambitions to sing opera which would soon take her further afield. Mildred Gordon, the reader, was the youngest and least experienced in the party, but she received positive reviews for her 'youthful spontaneity.'¹⁶

12:36 pm, Thursday, January 26th, 1911, CPR Station, Claresholm, Alberta. Alfred E. Thompson, CPR agent in Claresholm, strode onto the frigid platform and peered through the hissing cloud of steam as the train pulled in from Calgary. Charles James from the IOOF had asked him to meet the concert party coming off the train and suggested he would recognize Ruthven MacDonald



H. Ruthven MacDonald was a veteran performer from Toronto who had toured on the Chautauqua circuit and was a baritone renowned for his "splendid carrying power."

from his generous girth! Thompson was to direct the party to the Wilton Hotel where R.W. Watson, hotel clerk and officer in the IOOF, would register them and send them on to the IOOF hall.

The history and economy of Claresholm was intimately interwoven with the railroad. The town was laid out by the railway company around a station on the Calgary & Edmonton Railway (C&E). Built between 1890 and 1898, the C&E was one of the last land grant railways. It received more than 1,800,000 acres from the Canadian government in return for laying a standard gauge railway between Calgary and Edmonton and then south from Calgary to Macleod. In 1904 this track was leased to the CPR for 999 years.¹⁷

Ribbons of settlement rapidly grew up along the rail lines. Immigrant farmers looked for homesteads less than a day's travel from the railway that brought them the goods they needed to farm, and exported the crops they produced. The railroad also brought them news and entertainment.

The H. Ruthven MacDonald Concert Party started its five-month tour from Winnipeg Union Station on November 1st, 1910,¹⁸ and worked its way west along the railways, crossing Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, before returning across southern Alberta in April 1911 on their way back home. During the second half of January 1911, the party was travelling



This is a view of Claresholm main street as it appeared during the 1911 visit of the concert tour. The group performed in the evening and left the following morning.

south along the CPR in Alberta, performing in Red Deer on the 18th,¹⁹ Crossfield on the 20th,²⁰ Calgary on the 23rd,²¹ Claresholm on the 26th²² and Lethbridge on the 28th.²³

1:00 pm, Thursday, January 26th, 1911, IOOF Hall, Railway Street, Claresholm. Charles W. James, insurance inspector, had been elected as the Noble Grand of the Foothill Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) only two weeks earlier.²⁴ He and his Vice Grand, Eric Moffat, of Moffat & Sons Hardware, opened the IOOF Hall to check that all was in order. Tonight was the first big IOOF event to take place under his leadership and he wanted it to be a successful entertainment and a profitable fund raiser.

The IOOF, a 'fraternal and benevolent society' founded in the United States in 1819 was one of the first volunteer organizations to open a chapter in Claresholm. Since 1904, Claresholm's Foothill Lodge #13 had brought together local men and helped forge them into the stalwarts of the new community. Bringing respectable entertainment into the new community was one of the services it provided, and a source of funds for the organization.²⁵

While the larger cities like Calgary and Lethbridge were served by theatres with professional managers, small communities like Claresholm relied on volunteer committees like the IOOF to negotiate with

the entertainment impresarios. In 1907 the Foothill Lodge had built a two-storey hall which became Claresholm's premier nondenominational meeting place.²⁶ The IOOF held its weekly meeting upstairs, while the hall downstairs hosted all kinds of community events. By 1912, the IOOF had so improved its hall that the *Claresholm Review* said it deserved to be called an 'Opera House.' It had a new stage curtain, electric lighting, gas heating, and improved seating that would be comfortable for 'any theatre goer from the featherweight class to the heavyweight.'²⁷

The hall provided a venue where the IOOF committee could sponsor travelling concert parties and theatrical groups. In return for providing a piano (well tuned one hoped!) and advertising the show, the IOOF probably kept 25 to 30 per cent of the receipts from the concert which it could use for its community programs.

8:00 pm, Thursday, January 26th, 1911, IOOF Hall, Railway Street, Claresholm. T.W. Quayle, IOOF secretary and editor of the weekly *Claresholm Review*, was down at the IOOF Hall early to collect tickets and sell last minute seats at the door. Some of the audience was already filing in, but he expected there would be stragglers and he worried the show might not get under way before 9:00. Quayle had promised his readers they would "hear the best that the large cities hear"! He hoped the concert would live up to his prediction.

The audience in Claresholm that night probably included all kinds of people. The dynamic economy of the frontier town gave many people the opportunity to improve their fortunes. Attending a formal concert was one way to publically demonstrate their newly achieved status. While the majority of local people were farmers, *Henderson's Alberta Gazetteer and Directory* for 1911 also listed a wide variety of tradesmen and workmen, commercial staff, and professionals. Predictably missing from the directory were most of the town's women, one of whom, Louise McKinney, would go on to achieve national fame.²⁸

Louise and her husband came to homestead near Claresholm in 1903 from Ontario, via North Dakota. By 1911 she was active in the local Methodist Church and was working at the provincial level with the Women's

Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). In 1917 she would become one of the first two women elected to the Alberta Legislative Assembly. And in 1929 she was one of the 'Famous Five' women who won a case against the Canadian government which ensured that women would be recognized as 'persons' for appointment to the Senate under the British North America Act.²⁹

The week before the concert, Mrs. McKinney had taken the train north to the town of Okotoks to speak to public meeting of the WCTU, and Mr. McKinney had been up to Calgary on business for a couple of days. However, it seems likely they were home and joined the audience at the IOOF hall on that Thursday night. Nellie McClung (another member of the 'Famous Five'), wrote about the excitement of a similar rural audience when concert parties came to her small town in Manitoba:

"The hall may have been a drab little place... but when the blinds were drawn and all the lamps lighted and the audience assembled, no opera house that I have ever been in gave out a greater feeling of high expectancy. We dressed our best for these occasions. We wore no hats. Brides wore their wedding dresses ... there were opera wraps which closely resembled piano drapes, but no remarks were made. We were too happy to be catty. The opening hour was eight o'clock, and if the artists obliged us with encores, the performance lasted well into the night. Then there were refreshments for the performers and the committee, and bouquets of garden flowers."³⁰

12:36 pm, Friday, January 27th, 1911, CPR Station, Claresholm. Bertha May Crawford hefted her travelling bag up onto the luggage rack and plumped herself down beside Mrs. MacDonald. H. Ruthven MacDonald was already in his seat and reading the provincial news in the previous day's edition of the Claresholm Review. The paper came out on the day of the concert so there was no review of last evening's performance. By the time the next week's issue came out it would be old news. Mildred Gordon settled into a romantic novel.



Wallace Graham was manager of the H. Ruthven MacDonald Concert Party. He also was an elocutionist who was well known for his large resonant voice.

And so the anticipation that built up to the evening concert dissipated the next day. The people of Claresholm would remember their concert evening, but now there were other events coming to the IOOF Hall to look forward to. There would be a Farmer's Convention the next weekend, and the United Farmers of Alberta social and dance to be held on Valentine's Day, followed by a performance by the Footlight Dramatic Society of Claresholm two nights later.³¹

The concert party was back on the train and already thinking about their Saturday night concert in Lethbridge, and bracing themselves for many more concerts and a 3,000-mile round trip rail journey across prairie and mountain over the next four months. Come the summer the McDonalds would again tour in the United States on the Chautauqua circuit, as they would do annually for years to come. Bertha May Crawford would leave for Europe in June. After three years' study in London and Milan she successfully launched her career in the opera houses of Poland and Russia.

The IOOF Hall would continue to be a venue for community entertainment until it was sold to the Canadian military in 1932. Wallace Graham would direct concert party tours across western Canada until they went out of fashion in the 1930s. By then radio and movies provided alternative entertainment in rural communities, and the poverty of the Depression had cut deeply into the profit margins of touring musicians. Graham eventually retired back to his home town in Ontario.

Ruthven MacDonald Coming

The H. Ruthven MacDonald concert party are booked for Claresholm in the I. O. O. F. hall, Thursday Jan 26th inst. This means a whole lot. It means that the greatest baritone singer in Canada and one who has no superior in the world is coming to Claresholm. Let that fact sink deep. He will be accompanied by Miss Bertha May Crawford a queen among clever soprano singers and soloist in the great Metropolitan church Toronto; Miss Mildred Gordon, a reader of more than ordinary note and Mrs. MacDonald, pianist. Mr. MacDonald has been acclaimed every where as a baritone. He has received the most eulogistic notices from the press of two continents and his coming to Claresholm is an event of considerable note. If you like to hear the best that the large cities hear reserve Jan 26th for this event. The seats will be seventy five cents and a dollar.

The Claresholm Local Press urged the public to attend the concert, describing it as "an event of considerable note."

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Cupid in the Personal Ads

During the past two weeks three young women who live in the Calgary district have been married to young men of the city, and their introduction, courtship, and marriage was brought about through correspondence. In each case, an advertisement was placed in the "personal" column of *The News-Telegram* and answers were received from every quarter. Two young women of the city received 34 replies to their advertisement, and four young men who were looking for suitable girls to help make their home happy received numerous invitations from young ladies to meet them. In fact it looked as though there were hundreds of lonely girls and young men in Alberta who needed only an agent to bring them together – and cupid did the rest.

One of the young ladies placed her advertisement in *The News-Telegram* three weeks ago. A tall good-looking young man answered her advertisement with nearly 40 others. After he and the girl met they fell deeply in love and in another week they were married at Calgary and are now living on a farm near Strathmore. In another case, a young man advertised for a lady partner. He received twenty-five replies and selected three from the list. He visited them all and finally decided on one of them. They are now engaged. Another lady advertised for a life partner and she has an appointment to meet him Tuesday night.

There are several other young girls and young men who have met each other through the personal column of *The News-Telegram* and although it is impossible to use the names of these who have become friends in this manner, they are in the city to testify that the courtship and marriages actually took place.

----- *Calgary News-Telegram*, August 13, 1913