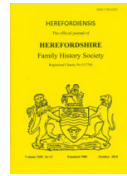


# From Herefordshire to Okanagan

David J Skyrme



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This article was first published in *Herefordiensis*, Vol. XV, No 2, pp39-44 (July 2022)

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Many of us tracing Herefordshire ancestors will have found that some of them emigrated. In my own Skyrme research I have found numerous descendants currently living in the USA, Australia and New Zealand. But this is a story of three young Herefordshire farmers, two of whom were pioneers in the development of the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia, Canada. I am grateful to the Okanagan Historical Society whose annual reports provide useful background material as well as specific details about some of the individuals mentioned.

## *Farmers of Puddleston*

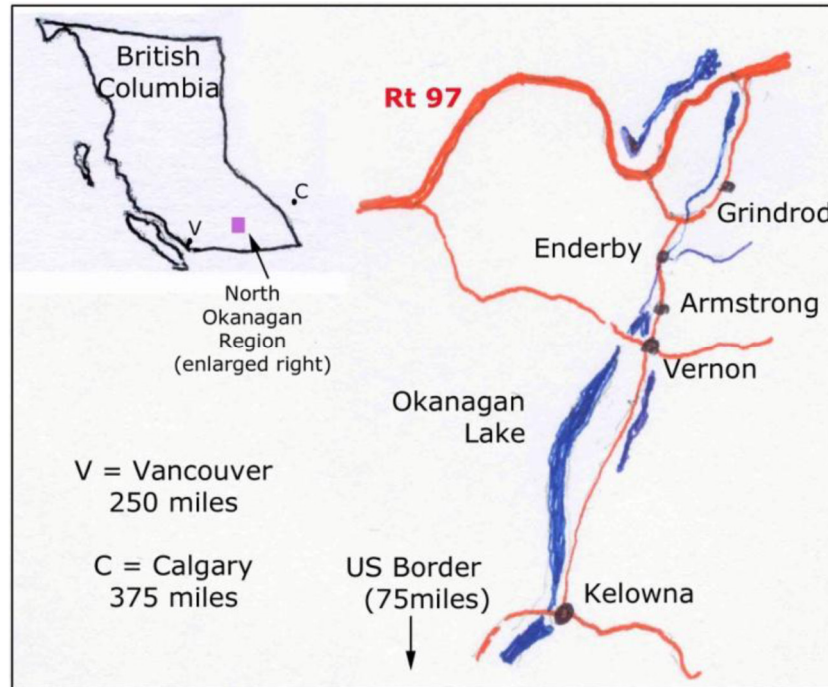
Ernest Henry SKYRME (1875-1948) and Thomas Richard SKYRME (1878-1953), were born into a farming family in Puddleston, near Leominster. Several generations of their ancestors had been farmers at places such as Norton Canon, Weobley, Winslow and Kinnersley. Their grandfather Thomas had moved into the 227 acre farm at Ford Abbey in Puddleston in 1861, the largest of the local farms. Their father Thomas married Elizabeth YAPP in 1870. Elizabeth's parents lived at Whyle House, while Thomas farmed next door at Upper Whyle. Ernest and Thomas were the middle of nine children. After they were born they lived at several different farms in the area, including Gatehouse Farm in Kyre just over the county border in Worcestershire.

Farming in Herefordshire had been through some bad patches in the 1870s and the British and Foreign Colonial Emigration Society were active in encouraging young farm workers to emigrate to the USA or Canada. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century some 10% of Herefordshire's population moved out of the county each decade to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

Ernest emigrated to British Columbia, it is said with two of his neighbours, around 1895 when aged just 19. His younger brother Thomas followed him a few years later. I have not found their first arrival records, but there are several passenger records over the years showing that they made several trips back to England. An early example is Ernest returning to Canada in 1902, listed as a "discharged trooper". Presumably this was from the Boer War though I have found no record of his participation. He also travelled from Liverpool to St Johns, New Brunswick in 1925 and from Liverpool to Montreal in 1934 when he was age 59 and retired. Both voyages were on Canadian Pacific steamers, and the brothers' initial immigration was probably a combined sea-rail ticket via St Johns or Halifax, Nova Scotia. The journey on the Canadian Pacific railway from there to British Columbia would have taken about a week.

## *North Okanagan*

During the Canadian gold rush in the early 1860s cattle were driven through the Okanagan Valley to feed the mining communities to the north. Vernon was the first established community and after the gold rush was over in 1868 several ranches were established. With the arrival in 1885 of the Canadian Pacific Railway to Sicamous, some 20 miles north of Grindrod, the communities in the valley started to grow.



Travel was difficult in those early days and other than by horse or wagon the main way of travelling down the valley was by steamer on the Spallumcheen (now Sushwap) river. A rail branch line came south through the valley in 1892. After that many of the ranches were subdivided and replaced by fruit farms and orchards in the dry, sunny climate. Today, the Okanagan Valley produces about a third of Canada's apple crop and most of its soft fruit.

Thomas was the first to marry. In 1908 he married Edith TURNER, a farmer's daughter born in Lancashire. One of their children Alice married James EMENY, the son of pioneer Edgar EMENY who founded Grindrod in 1888. On its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1988 Alice wrote:

"It is almost impossible for today's generation to picture Okanagan Valley as our pioneer families found it, with only rough wagon roads to travel on."

"The land was entirely covered with trees, and was slowly cleared off, using hand labour, axes, and cross-cut saws. Oxen and horses were used to pull stumps. Logs were used for buildings, fence posts and fire wood."

So this was what faced Ernest and Thomas when they arrived. And like other settlers their first task would probably have been to build a log cabin before their first winter. And as they continued to clear the land they would build a barn. There was a tradition of 'barn raising' in which the able-bodied people from the neighbourhood all worked together for the final assembly of the building. Alice reports that "Tommy and Ernie helped at many such 'bees'".

### ***Ranching and Farming***

After their arrival Ernest and Thomas (who had been a teamster in Herefordshire) started work at the Stepney ranch south of Enderby. This was a 1,600 acre ranch owned by Sir Arthur STEPNEY, a Liberal MP for Carmarthen, where he also owned 9,800 acres in the county. In 1895 he appointed Irishman George HEGGIE to manage his British Columbian ranch.



Photo (taken 1900 by C.W.Holliday, reproduced courtesy of the Enderby & District Museum and Archives): The Stepney Ranch Crew (known as "Heggie's Boys"). George Heggie is standing. Tom and Ernie are the first two on the left in the front row.

In 1909 George was appointed to manage the 17,000 acres of fruit and farm lands of the L&A (Land and Agricultural) company near Vernon. Ernest obviously moved with him since in 1914 he is foreman at this ranch. Both Ernie and Thomas are living in the Armstrong area at the time of the 1911 census.

### *A Tragic Accident*

A few years later, Thomas's wife Edith died in a drowning accident in June 1915 aged only 33, along with their 8-year old daughter Olive. The Enderby Press reported:

"The girl got beyond her depth while bathing, and the mother plunged into the river to save her. The bodies of both were rescued by Mr Skyrme."

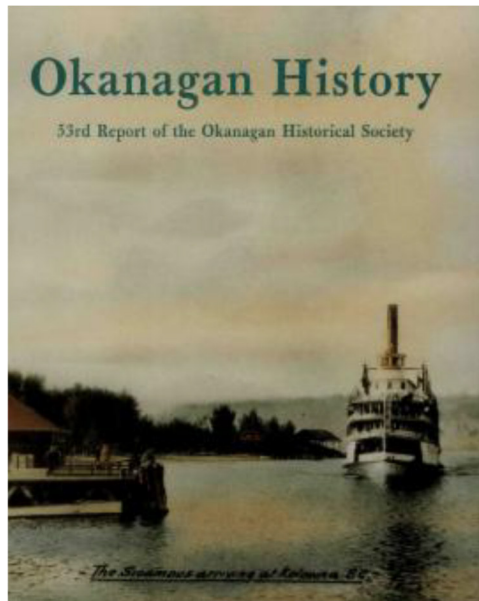
Three years later Thomas remarried. His new wife was Emily HARDCASTLE, originally from Surrey, the daughter of a bootmaker. The Enderby Press describes the marriage at St. George's Church on 2nd October 1918 thus:

"The ceremony was not of a public nature, but, in the beautiful surroundings of the harvest decorations, it was one of the prettiest ever held in the church. The groom has long been a popular figure in the Armstrong-Enderby district, and their many friends will be delighted to see Mr and Mrs. Skyrme at home on old Hazelmere, by the sleepy, soft-flowing Spallumcheen."

Thomas is described as "one of the district's most successful farmers and stockmen".

Meanwhile Ernest had married Isabella TURNER, the 33-year old sister of Thomas's first wife Edith. Isabella had moved from England in 1912 to join her sister. Ernest and Isabella's marriage certificate of 12<sup>th</sup> July 1913 says: "married in the house of Thomas Skyrme [Hazelmere, Enderby] according to the rights and ceremonies of The Presbyterian Church". Ernest was the Presbyterian while Isabella's was Church of England. The couple moved north with their one and only child Ernest Archibald in

1918 to set up their own farm in Grindrod. In the 1921 census Ernest and Thomas are neighbours at Grindrod, which is where they both lived until they died – Ernest in 1948 and Thomas in 1953.



In annual report No. 53 of the Okanagan History Society is a full tribute to Ernest and Isabel's son Ernest Archibald SKYRME (1914-1989). It describes how his father Ernest created a farm and how Ernest junior worked on the farm full-time from age 13. Judy Reimche writes:

"Right from the beginning, Ernie, like his father, was an innovator. And, again like his father, farming was his life."

"On Ernie's 13th birthday, his father bought him one of the first milking machines seen in the North Okanagan."

At its peak in the 1940s, Ernie's farm was over 300 acres with a herd of dairy cows. Descendants of Ernest and Thomas still farm in Canada today, some in the Okanagan area and others in Alberta.

### ***The Third Brother – Another Tragedy***

After Ernest and Thomas emigrated their two eldest brothers, William and Herbert, remained as farmers in Herefordshire for the rest of their lives. However, their youngest brother George Henry SKYRME, known as Harry, had followed them to British Columbia in 1912 when he was aged 23. He was a rancher at Vernon, about 20 miles south of where his brothers were living.

George enlisted in the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in February 1916. This battalion recruited its troops from north British Columbia. They trained near Comox on Vancouver Island and on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1916 started the long journey to Europe. 37 officers and 968 men travelled on the CPR steamship 'Empress of Britain' from Halifax, Nova Scotia, arriving in Liverpool on 28<sup>th</sup> June. After six weeks training at Bramshott in Hampshire they travelled to the western front in Flanders.

During the war, the battalion were in several big battles, such as the 4-day battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 where they lost 314 men. Before that, though, there was frequent shell bombardment of their trenches by the Germans, killing a few soldiers every week. George was one of six killed around 15<sup>th</sup> September 1916 – the battalion record gives this date, though UK records give either 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup>). He was killed in the St Eloi trenches near Reninghelst, a few miles into Belgium from the French border. He is buried at the Reninghelst New Military Cemetery. There is a memorial to him and Alfred HASKELL in Thornbury church not far from where his parents farmed at Lower Butterly after moving back into Herefordshire from Kyle.

### ***Conclusion***

I have been able to piece together something about the lives of three Herefordshire young men who sought a better life in Canada. Good availability online of contemporary records for both England and British Columbia such as census records, baptism and marriage records, and passenger lists provide a good starting point. What has really brought more insight into their lives are the memories and

research reports of a local history group, which started in 1925 and is very active today. Even so, there is a lot I would still like to learn about these remarkable men.

**David J Skyrme Membership No 3192 [www.skyrme.info](http://www.skyrme.info)**

**Footnote:** After World War 1 when Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union, there was a large influx of Ukrainians to the farms of British Columbia. Today around 10% of the population of Vernon are of Ukrainian descent.