

R. I. BAKER 1894 -1983  
-A short biography, May 4,2002-  
by Bob Baker

Roy Irvine Baker was born in Lindsay, Ontario on April 25, 1894. His family thereafter spent some years in Toronto, where his father worked in the original Timothy Eaton store. Then in 1903 the family moved to Calgary where his dad started a dry goods business. Roy recalled for us how he witnessed cattle drives proceeding down Eighth Avenue and how he used to ride with Joe Livingstone on a dray as he delivered goods for his dad. Joe was one of Sam Livingstone's many offspring and Sam was Calgary's first settler. Joe was a real tease and he said to Roy once on his birthday:

“On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 1894,

A boy by the name of Roy Baker rolled out on the floor,

Before he began to cry, his parents prayed for more,

But after he began to cry, they beckoned back to send no more!”

Roy went to school at Haultain School and Calgary Collegiate Institute and there he met Mom. He was reared in a strong Methodist environment and really developed both a sense of duty and became somewhat of a pacifist. Surprisingly, he enlisted in the army in 1916 and joined the signal corps with the hope he wouldn't have to shoot anyone. He went overseas on active duty and spent 1 year as part of the Army of Occupation. In 1968, he wrote me a letter describing the first Armistice Day for a Remembrance Day occasion I was organizing in my school. I will read some excerpts from it:

“On November 10 we were billeted on the stage of a theatre at Frameries and we were awakened at 3:30am and ordered forward to take over the front line. After about 5 hours of marching, a dispatch rider drove past and when he got to the head of the column to deliver his message to our colonel, there was a loud cheer. I said to the boys: “ I have got to find out what is up”, so I walked up the line and found an officer coming back. He said: ‘It's really true Roy. The armistice is to take effect at 11:00 am. We are ordered to move forward, take over the front line and continue the advance until 11 o'clock – then dig in.’ We marched forward to a crossroads called Malplaquet, where our signal officer ordered us to go into one of the houses. When we got into the kitchen there were two piles of straw on which German soldiers had slept the night before. The old lady seemed very glad to see us and she kept giving us cups of coffee. I said to my friends, ‘ I wonder whether this lady knows the war is almost over.’ We were watching a clock in the kitchen which showed the time was almost eleven. I said to the lady in French ‘madame the war is finished at 11 o'clock,’ and pointed to the clock. She broke down and cried and said “tres content monsieur, I am so happy”. Guns were firing outside and one or two fired after eleven o'clock. Then all was silent.

Our signal officer then ordered us to move forward to a place called Boissoit sur Haine, where German soldiers were posted across the river. We stood around and finally I went up to a man and asked if he knew of a place we could stay. He said ‘come to my place’ and he introduced us to his mother and 2 sisters. We were given a room with a bed, something we hadn't slept on for ages. The next day the townspeople went wild. They invited us into their homes; the men dug up brass instruments they had buried in a field to keep them away from the Germans and started playing them. It was a wonderful experience.”

Dad returned home to Calgary in 1919 and shortly thereafter went to the University of Alberta in Edmonton to get his degree and to court our Mom, Frances Stubbs. Both finished their degrees in 1924, Mom with an MA in English and Dad with a BSc. in Math. Dad was an excellent Math student. They married on November 8, 1924 in Mom's house in Calgary.

The next year they moved to Rowley, north of Drumheller, where Dad had a teaching job. The only place to stay was with the station agent and Mom, provided him with meals –“poor man” was her comment. They lasted there a year and then moved back to Calgary where Roy took up carpentry and helped build houses with his father-in-law. Then he received a principalship in Champion where they resided for 12 years and where Carol and I were first raised. It was a barren dry land prairie town with lots of wonderful people. Anyway Dad found out about a position in Coaldale, went down to be interviewed and came back most stimulated about the place.” .It's like an Eastern village, Frances, there are trees!”

It was exciting for us all when we moved to Coaldale in 1939. Mom was enthralled with the trees and Carol and I took to climbing a large and friendly willow in our front yard. And we had cold and hot running water in our house, and a flush toilet too-all this in 1939! How very gracious was the school board toward the principal and his family!

We found we had come to a multi-ethnic community, composed of two Mennonite groups whose first language was German, many others from all over Europe, some Anglo-saxons who were often WW1 veterans and finally in 1942 many Japanese who were forced to leave the Coast.

Dad quickly immersed himself in the life of Coaldale School. Roy's duty and passion was the school. He would just come home for supper and then go back often, not returning home until midnight. He had no school secretary, no counsellors, no librarian and no library. And he taught too – I had him as my teacher for Grade 9 music and for Algebra 2 in Grade 12. I remember he taught us Finlandia by Sibelius and I discovered I had a bass voice. Coaldale's population burgeoned after WW 2 and at one point he had over 1000 students in at least 3 different locations. I used to go over to the school in August and he would have me deliver supplies to the classrooms and then allow me to shoot baskets when we got into the new school. August was also a time for scheduling students into classes and Dad developed a system which caused one of his principal colleagues to state he was a master at time tabling. The population crunch caused him to seek construction of a new school and in order to do so, the district joined the Lethbridge School Division. I recall he and Ed Davidson spent hours pouring over plans: their mission to build a school which would accommodate all and still be reasonable in cost.

Both Mom and Dad believed in the importance of providing community service. Dad found time to become involved in Coaldale United Church. I remember him fixing things at the parsonage ; he was a choir member and he was envelope steward for over 30 years.

Both worked hard to see a library developed in Coaldale. Dad was on the library board, again for over 30 years ,and Mom was librarian from 1952 to 1966.

They were helpful in other ways as well. During WW2, when feelings were running high between WW1 veterans and the pacifist Mennonite Brethren, Dad acted as peacemaker and was able to bring calmness to a somewhat volatile situation. Mom was most upset about the Japanese being dispossessed of their property and deported from the West Coast. With

Dad's support we developed many Japanese friends who were often over for supper [the Aokis, the Oshiros, the Saitos and the Fujitas]. Dad hired Stee Fujita as caretaker for the school and I continue to correspond with his wife, Margaret, each year at Christmas.

Mom had many passions: books, the arts, nature, the multi-cultural variety of Coaldale. The new school didn't have a piano and as President of the Home and School Association, she orchestrated a very successful Arts and Crafts Festival, and then a highly successful Christmas Carol Festival all to help pay for a new piano but also to emphasize the heritage and artistic strengths of Coaldale people. As librarian she would bring school students into the library to train them as assistants and to immerse them in books. She implemented story hours, summer and winter reading clubs and Young Canada Reading Week essay and poster contests.

Dad became ill in 1955 and had to retire. He was most honoured that shortly thereafter the Student's Union, the Home and School Association, the School Board all agreed that the school should be named after him. So many of his former students have said to me how fair and honest he was, and how dedicated he was to their welfare. With Dr. Oshiro's help he was able to manage heart palpitations and lead a fairly active retirement life. As he was recuperating, so many people helped my Mom with trips to the hospital in Lethbridge. So Dad continued with his church and library work. He became an avid history buff of Southern Alberta. He and Mom went on many trips from the Cypress Hills, to Crowfoot's grave, to the Gap for the Old Man River. He was the Administrator for Blue Cross for the Division's teachers.

1974 was a big year for Roy. It was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Western Trek of the NWMP; it the year of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his graduation from University, and Mom and Dad's 50th wedding anniversary. What a wonderful celebration that was! So many people helped and so many people came.

Mom passed away in 1978 and Dad moved to live in Edmonton, so Carol and I came to know him again. His was a gentle and pleasant presence with us. He never complained – the staff at the nursing home always hugged him when he returned from visiting us. He liked to keep things orderly in his room and was always curious. We would read to him or play portions of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony and when we were done he would smile and say: "That's lovely, dear." He died in 1983.

One of his principal colleagues wrote at the time of his passing, the following:

"To the young administrator in the Lethbridge School Division, Roy Baker was a tower of strength – always ready to listen, always ready to help. There are many who have graced our profession but among them all in his own quiet way Roy Baker will always rank among the greatest. His memorial is a living one and he will be remembered so long as his compatriots and students have memory", and I might add he will live long in his family's memories as well.

Thank you Coaldale for remembering R.I. Baker who was a great educator and a profoundly a good citizen.

## Brief Biography of R. I. Baker

Roy Irvine Baker was born in Lindsay, Ontario on April 25th, 1894. His father was brought to Canada from Devonshire, England at the age of sixteen months. His mother was born in Ontario. Her grandparents immigrated to Canada from northern Ireland early in the nineteenth century.

R. I. Baker first attended school in Toronto but moved to Calgary, Alberta (North West Territories) in 1903, where he completed his public and high school training. He attended the Calgary Normal School in 1913 and taught in rural schools for two years and in Calgary for six months.

He enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1916 and spent three years <sup>with the</sup> army in Canada, England, France, Belgium and Germany.

After returning to Canada he taught in a Calgary Public School for two years and then resigned to attend the University of Alberta. Since graduation he has been teaching high school work. He was principal at Rowley for one year, Champion for twelve years and Coaldale for fifteen years.

Mr. Baker has always tried to take an active part in church and community affairs, wherever he has lived, but his chief concern has been the welfare of his school. He has had something to do with the building of new schools both in Champion and in Coaldale.

He has also taken a vital interest in his professional organization and has been president of both the Coaldale Sub-local and the Lethbridge Division Local of the Alberta Teachers' Association. He acted for a time as an A.T.A. representative on the High School Curriculum Committee.

He regrets very much that illness forced him to retire in 1954.