

THE NORTHMAN

William Creighton 'Rags' Wilson (1885-1929)

When Creighton Wilson suffered a fatal heart attack in the winter of 1929, at a lonely outpost on the 'Barren Lands' north of Great Bear Lake in the Northwest Territories, his frozen body was not discovered for nearly a month and could only be buried after a 120 mile (193 Km) journey by dogsled, in a grave that took his fellow fur traders three days to dig in the frozen ground.

Born October 23, 1884 at Perth, William Creighton Wilson was the son of John Wilson (1848-1919) and Mary Jane Bowie (1856-1930). His paternal grandparents, James Wilson (c1822-1890) and Margaret Divine (1822-1854) were immigrants from Ulster, Ireland, who farmed at C-7/L-21 in North Elmsley Township.

Called 'Creighton' rather than 'William', or by his later nickname 'Rags'¹, Wilson grew up as a resident of the 'Hicks House', Perth's leading hotel at the corner of Gore and North Street². His father had purchased the establishment the year before Creighton's birth. The three storey hostelry boasted 45 guest rooms, a billiard room, dining room, parlor and a 'well stocked bar'.³ In 1888 John Wilson extended the hotel to occupy the full Gore Street frontage from North to Foster Street, thus providing additional accommodation and five sample rooms for the use of travelling salesmen. The hotel sent a free bus (coach) to meet all trains and boats⁴ and provided stabling for its guests' horses.⁵

¹ The author has failed to discover the source of the nickname.

² #1 Gore Street West.

³ From 1879 until 1884 John Wilson had managed an earlier 'Hick's Hotel' at the corner of Wilson and Foster Streets (80 Foster Street, now the Red Fox pub), an establishment founded by John 'Craigdarroch' Ferguson (1780-1857) in 1823 and then run by his son Alexander 'Black Sandy' Ferguson (1818-1895) until 1849. From 1850 through 1869 it was operated by William Hicks (1816-1902) and by John McComiskey/McComisky/McCumisky (1835-1895) from 1870 through 1884.

⁴ Arriving at Rideau Ferry Landing.

⁵ William Matheson (1788-1852) operated an inn and tavern at the corner of North and Gore Streets from 1817 until 1835 when the site was purchased by William C. Glascott (1806-1875) who built a three storey stone building to serve as 'Glascott's Hotel'. In 1870 William Hicks (1816-1902) purchased the business and renamed it the 'Hick's House'. John Wilson owned and operated the hotel from 1883 until 1910 when Creighton Wilson's brother, Thomas Bower Wilson (1887-1943), took over day-to-day management from their father and renamed it the 'Commercial Hotel'. The Wilson family left the hospitality business in 1917 when the hostelry was sold to William James Glascott (1860-1928), great-nephew of William C. Glascott who had built the hotel in 1835. The 'Commercial' became the 'The Hotel Perth' when it was sold again in 1930. Under that name it was owned by Neil Nicol 1930-1944, Harold Duby 1944-1951, Ross McLean & Donald Selkirk 1951-1958, Dan Delaney 1958-1972, Max Matte 1972-1979, and George Kouloufakos. 1979-1996. In 1959 a serious fire killed two guests and destroyed the hotel's third floor which was removed as part of the repair and restoration of the building. The establishment stopped offering accommodation in 1979 but the bar, the last vestige of the hotel it had once been, remained in operation until 1996. The remaining two floors of the former hotel now provide space for retail outlets and cafes along both Gore and Foster Streets.



The Hicks House, #1 Gore Street West, Perth, c1880
(Photo courtesy of *Perth Remembered* <http://www.perthremembered.com>)

Creighton Wilson was educated at Perth Public School, was active on the Boys' Brigade Lacrosse Team, where he served on its management committee, and pursued a hobby raising pigeons. At the 1900 South Lanark Agricultural Society fair he took home both the first and second prizes for four different Pigeon breeds, as well as for ducks and a pair of rabbits. That same year, however, although his grades were sufficient to earn a 'recommendation', Wilson failed to pass his High School entrance examinations. Shortly thereafter he found work with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) which took him first to Montreal and then, by 1905, to Edmonton in the then Northwest Territories.

By 1911 Wilson was at Fort Chipewyan, at the west end of Lake Athabasca, where that year's census recorded him living in the household of fur trader Colin Fraser Jr. (1849-1941). Fraser's father, Colin Sr. (1807-1867), from Orkney, Scotland, had arrived in Rupert's Land in 1825 as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and, at one time, served as piper to HBC Governor Sir George Simpson (c1792-1860). His mother was Nancy Gaudry (d.1900), a metisse. Colin Jr. grew up at HBC posts across the Northwest and worked for the HBC for 15 years before establishing his own independent trading post at Fort Chipewyan in about 1880. The circumstances of Wilson's presence at Fort Chipewyan and his relationship with Colin Fraser are uncertain, but it was at about this time that he first became involved in the fur trade as an employee of a company called Northern Traders Ltd.

Nevertheless, six years later, on February 20, 1917, when 31 year old Creighton Wilson enlisted with the 218th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) for service in WW1, he recorded his residence as the St. James Hotel, Edmonton. His enlistment documents also stated that he was still employed as a railway worker and that, while living at Montreal, he had completed two years militia service with 3rd Regiment Victoria Rifles.

The 218th Battalion suffered a rocky beginning. It attracted a large number of Ukrainian and Polish recruits, men who had just finished a railway construction job, and required interpreters to relay its officers' commands. This convinced some of the local population that the battalion was infiltrated by Germans and Austrians. Recruitment began in early 1916 but critical equipment like tents and field kitchens were late in arriving. As the ill-equipped recruits endured a cold and rainy autumn at Sarcee Training Camp near Calgary, they joined a mob of discontented soldiers on October 11th in an attack the Calgary City Police barracks.

When the Battalion returned to Edmonton in January 1917, it was converted to a railway construction battalion under command of Lieutenant-Colonel James Kennedy 'Peace River Jim' Cornwall (1869-1955). Then, shortly before Private Creighton Wilson joined their ranks, its men rioted again. On February 9th, they tore up Edmonton's 101st Street, sacking more than a dozen stores, restaurants, and cafés.



Canadian Railway Troops repairing narrow-gauge track on the Western Front c1917.
(Photo courtesy of Library & Archives Canada)

The 218th Battalion CEF, comprised of 32 officers and 883 other ranks, reached England in the first week of March 1917 where it was transferred to the 8th Battalion Canadian Railway Troops (CRT), and sent forward to France in April.

The armies of 1914 had marched into battle with teams of horses hauling their supplies, but as the war progressed and stagnated, hastily constructed railway lines became the primary means of moving men and supplies to the front and of evacuating wounded to the rear. Canadian railway units played a major role in the construction and maintenance of railways of all gauges across the five British Army sectors in France and Belgium. Canada was particularly well suited to this role as in the years before the outbreak of war Canada had built more railway lines than any other part of the British Empire. By war's end the CRT numbered 19,000 personnel and had constructed 1,160 miles (1,860 Km) of broad-gauge and 1,414 miles (2,275 Km) of narrow-gauge line.

Private Creighton Wilson served in Belgium and France with the 8th CRT from 1917 through 1919.⁶ At demobilization in April 1919 he gave his intended future residence as Brockville, Ontario, but shortly returned to Edmonton and entered (or re-entered) the employ of Northern Traders Ltd., a company owned by his former Lieutenant-Colonel, 'Peace River Jim' Cornwall.

Cornwall was one of the larger-than-life pioneers of the northwest. A native of Brantford, Ontario, he first arrived in the Alberta in 1896 and spent two years working on construction of the Crowsnest Pass railway. In 1898, at the time of the Klondike Gold Rush, he chose to pursue commerce rather than nuggets and in 1899 joined William Fletcher Bredin (1862–1942)⁷ in creating a trading company called Bredin & Cornwall.



James Cornwall (1869-1955)
(Glenbow Archives NA-2760-8)

In 1906 the Bredin & Cornwall company was sold, and Cornwall established the Northern Transportation Company to operate steamboats on the Athabasca and Slave Rivers, and on Lesser Slave Lake. In 1905 he formed the Athabasca Railway Company to link Edmonton with his steamboat operations but was unable to raise sufficient funds to complete the project so, in 1908, sold out to an Eastern consortium that became the Alberta & Great Waterways Railway Company. From 1908 to 1913, Cornwall sat as the member for Peace River in the Alberta Legislature. In 1911 his Northern Transportation Company took over the firm of Hislop & Nagle and their fur trading posts across the Northwest Territories. He amalgamated his transport and trading interests under the name Northern Traders Ltd. and, with outposts in the Athabasca-Mackenzie River district of Alberta and the Northwest Territories, competed directly with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC).⁸

⁶ Creighton Wilson's brothers Herbert J. (1881-1931), Thomas B. (1887-1943) and James Clyde (1897-c1917) also served with the CEF. James Clyde was killed in action on Passchendaele Ridge on November 17, 1917.

⁷ Later an Alberta MLA 1905-1909.

⁸ By 1922 Northern Traders controlled an estimated 8% of the fur trading market in the north, but in 1926 the company went into receivership. It struggled to remain in business for the next seven years while under the management of its creditors, but in 1931 the firm was liquidated with all stock being sold to the Hudson's Bay Company and its transportation arm being sold and reorganized as Northern Waterways Limited.

Almost immediately upon shedding khaki in the spring of 1919, Creighton Wilson went (or returned) to work for Northern Traders Ltd., at Fort Chipewyan and by the mid-1920s he was the company's post agent at Fort Norman⁹, at the confluence of the Great Bear and Mackenzie Rivers.¹⁰ Fort Norman had begun as an exclusively HBC fur trading post in 1810 but a century later included the Northern Traders store and an RCMP post. In 1925, while post agent at Fort Norman, Wilson undertook a journey that stands as a measure of the adventurer that he and his fellow 'Northmen' were.

On January 2nd he left Fort Norman bound for Fort McMurray, heading south by heavily loaded dogsled along the Mackenzie, Slave and Athabasca Rivers. The weather soon turned against him, and a heavy steady snowfall slowed his progress to the point that it took 10 days to cover the first 184 miles. At Fort Wrigley on the Mackenzie, he was joined by a 17-year-old Slavey boy, Frank Hardisty, who undertook to break trail by running on snowshoes ahead of the dog team. Having covered another 136 miles, Wilson and Hardisty reached Fort Simpson where they were joined by the local Indian Agent, Thomas William 'Billy' Harris, and his dogsled. With Hardisty still breaking trail, the men and their dog teams carried on through Fort Providence, Hay River, Fort Resolution, Fort Smith, Fort Chipewyan and at last, after 1,148 miles and more than six weeks on the trail, they reached Fort McMurray¹¹. At the Fort McMurray railhead they boarded a train and completed their journey at Edmonton on February 20th.¹²

Four years later, when Wilson made a visit home in March 1929, the *Perth Courier* only hinted at yet another remarkable journey that had brought him back to Perth.

*Mr. Creighton Wilson, of Fort Norman, NWT, 1,200 miles north of Edmonton, was in Perth for the past two weeks visiting his mother, Mrs. John Wilson and left on Wednesday on a business trip to Montreal and New York prior to returning again to the far North. Coming out from Fort Norman he travelled 200 miles via dog train and some 800 miles via airplane. He is connected with Northern Traders Ltd. and the frozen north surely agrees with him for he looks ruddy and well. He received a hearty welcome back to town by his numerous acquaintances who were certainly glad to see him once more.*¹³

In confining mention of Wilson's visit home to a few lines in the social news, the *Courier* editor missed a story of much greater scope and significance. Wilson's trip of "800 miles via airplane" that winter made him a participant in the first ever airmail flight in the Northwest Territories – "arguably the most prolonged Canadian airmail flight in history".¹⁴

⁹ In 1996 Fort Norman was renamed 'Tulita', meaning where the rivers meet'.

¹⁰ Great Bear Lake, NWT, is the largest lake entirely in Canada (Lake Superior and Lake Huron straddling the Canada-USA border are larger), the fourth-largest lake in North America and the eighth largest lake in the world, 31,000 Km² (12,000 sq. miles).

¹¹ Frank Hardisty had broken trail from Wrigley on the Mackenzie River to Fort McMurray on the Clearwater River, a distance of 964 miles, over 39 days.

¹² Thanks to author and historian Blair Jean for the account of the 1925 dogsled journey.

¹³ *Perth Courier*, March 29, 1929.

¹⁴ *The Inaugural Airmail Flight to the Northwest Territories, January 23 – February 5, 1929*, by Derek, *The Canadian Aerophilatelist*, September 2002.



In early 1929 Western Canada Airways, Ltd. (W.C.A.) introduced an airline service providing weekly flights from Fort McMurray to Fort Simpson and a bi-weekly flight to Fort Smith, to carry anything that would provide revenue. The primary purpose of the first flight was to bring out a consignment of furs accumulated by Wilson's Northern Traders post, but to increase revenue, a contract had been made with the Post Office to also transport a large amount of mail that had accumulated at Fort McMurray.



Creighton 'Rags' Wilson, fourth from left, at Fort Norman c1925
(NWT Archives/Fred Jackson fonds/N-1979-004: 0233)

The flight was scheduled to depart from Edmonton January 15th, 1929 but repairs to the single engine Fokker Super-Universal aircraft and bad weather kept it on the ground until January 18th. When Pilot Clennell Haggerston 'Punch' Dickins (1899-1995) and flight mechanic Lewis 'Lew' W. Parmenter finally took off they were carrying passengers Fred W. Lundy, a W.C.A. agent, and Tom. J. Reilly, a Post Office Inspector. Only 28 miles north of Edmonton, however, freezing snow clogged the carburetor and forced an emergency landing in a farm field. The passengers returned to the city by car and Dickins flew the plane back to Edmonton the following day.

On January 21st, the aircraft once again left Edmonton but about halfway to Fort McMurray it hit a blizzard resulting in another frozen carburetor. It was forced back to Lac la Biche to make repairs. The following day, January 22nd, it finally reached Fort McMurray. Fully eight days behind schedule the mail flight left Fort McMurray on January 23rd with the thermometer standing at -44°F (-42°C). After stops at Fort Chipewyan and Fort Fitzgerald it landed at Fort Smith that afternoon. Fifty mile-per-hour winds and temperatures of -62°F (-52°C) caused repeated delays but, in the midst of a blizzard, the plane finally reached Fort Simpson, via Fort Resolution, Hay River and Fort Providence, on January 26th.

The next morning the plane took on 750 pounds (340 Kg) of mail, 11 bales of Northern Traders' furs and "*celebrated northern musher 'Rags' Wilson*"¹⁵ and took off on its return journey. Landing at Fort Resolution later that day, however, the aircraft came in hard, hit a snowdrift, buckled its undercarriage, and nosed over bending both ends of its propeller.

¹⁵ Ibid.



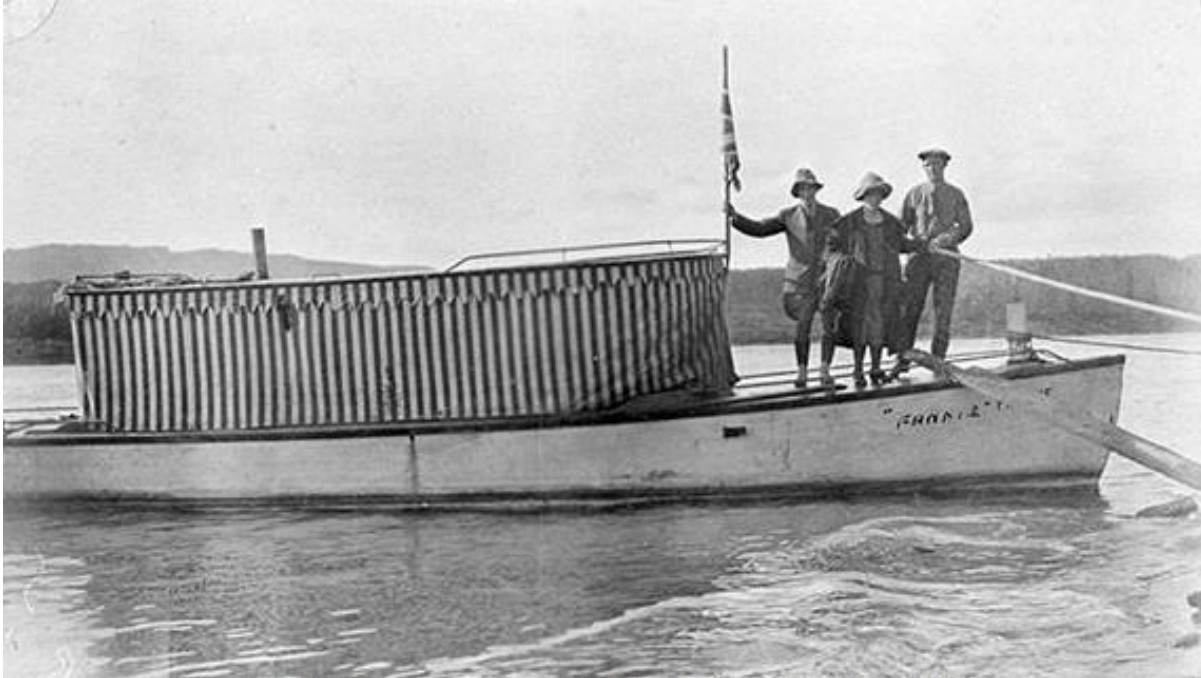
A 'Fokker Universal Super' aircraft of the type flown on the Northwest Territories inaugural air mail flight of March 1929.
(Photo courtesy of the Royal Aviation Museum of Western Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba)

Pilot Dickins and flight mechanic Parmenter, with the assistance of Postal Inspector Riley and fur trader 'Rags' Wilson, spent the next four days making repairs. One propeller end was so damaged that six inches (15 cm) had to be cut from the bent tip, meaning the other end had to be docked to match.

The unorthodox repairs worked, but the damaged aircraft was judged unfit to carry freight and passengers. It was flown on to Fort McMurray empty and Dickins returned with a replacement plane on February 5th. He picked up the mail, the bales of fur, Wilson and Reilly and returned to Fort McMurray the same day, making a round trip of 800 miles (1,300 Km) in just over seven hours. The next day, they flew to Edmonton.

In transporting the fur bales from Fort Norman to Fort Simpson, Creighton Wilson had actually made a journey of 250 miles (400 Km.) by dog sled, along the McKenzie River, not just 200 miles as reported by the *Courier*, and had then flown 800 miles (1,300 Km), in two aircraft, from Fort Simpson to Edmonton via Fort McMurray – all in the dead of a northern winter. In doing so he had played a significant part in a history making moment in Canadian aviation.

When Wilson returned to the north that summer, following his March 1929 business trip to Montreal and New York, and the stop-over at Perth, he went to a new post he was establishing nearly 125 miles (200 Km) north of Fort Norman; located at Good Hope Bay, close to the Arctic Circle on the north shore of Great Bear Lake, on the edge of the Barrens. In the early 1900's, RCMP Inspector Charles Deering La Nauze (1888-1952) recorded that the bay's name came from the fact the area was regularly frequented by Indians from around Fort Good Hope to the west.



Creighton 'Rags' Wilson, far right, on his boat 'Fannie' on the McKenzie River at Fort Norman c1925.
(NWT Archives/Fred Jackson fonds/N-1979-004: 0051)

The HBC had operated a trading post at Fort Good Hope, on the McKenzie River 125 miles (200 Km) north of Fort Norman as the crow flies, and about the same distance west of Good Hope Bay on Great Bear Lake, from 1805, but closed it down in 1918. Creighton Wilson spoke Cree fluently and the objective of the new Northern Traders Ltd. post at Good Hope Bay seems to have been the capture of trade that had once centered on the defunct HBC post. Within a few months, however, Wilson was dead.

Early this month, on December 8th [1929] four dog trains came to [Fort] Norman with the information that Wilson had been found dead. W. F. Cooke¹⁶, the trader at Norman and Constables McIntyre and Hutchinson, of the Mounted Police, left immediately for Great Bear Lake, and on the night of December 13th, discovered that the report was correct. The dead trader was slumped beside his long silent dynamo and there was nothing of foul play.¹⁷

Alone in the arctic winter darkness, 44-year-old Creighton Wilson had died of a heart attack, apparently brought on by the exertion of attempting to start a balky electric generator. The *Edmonton Journal* reported that Wilson had died on November 19th, but this death had not been reported to the Fort Norman RCMP post until three weeks later, on December 8th, and his frozen body did not reach Fort Norman until December 20th. Drawing upon the account of Edmonton Postal Inspector Raymond Walter Hale (1889-1950)¹⁸, who had flown into Fort Norman with the mail, the *Journal* reported that,

¹⁶ William Forrest Cooke (1882-1939).

¹⁷ *Ottawa Citizen*, December 24, 1929, publishing a report by *Edmonton Journal* staff correspondent E. B. Watt.

¹⁸ District Superintendent of Postal Service, Edmonton, Alberta, 'the flying postal inspector'.

... the post inspector, who had been looking forward to a possible meeting with his old friend, Rags Wilson, at this post [Fort Norman], discovered men completing the three days' task of digging a grave for the well-known Northman in ground that was flint hard with frost.



Fort Norman Anglican Church

It was impossible to bury him at Good Hope Bay, so the body was carried by dog train over the 120 miles to Norman, where at the end of his last trail a resting place was prepared for Wilson in the Anglican Church yard. It is fitting that he is to be above one of the most magnificent stretches of the [Mackenzie] river that, for more than a century, has seen a constant vigorous progress of men of this open, adventurous, breed.

The post where he died is the most isolated in the Mackenzie district, being on the edge of the 'Barren Lands' north of the lake. The house, itself is comfortable, but the landscape is a desolate, cheerless waste facing the water

A poignant close was given the tragedy by the fact that his closest companion, a cat, stood guard over his body during the days it lay alone and travelling back on his trip to Norman. It will receive a home with the Cookes.¹⁹

Thirty-Four days after his death at Good Hope Bay, Creighton Wilson was finally laid to rest on December 23rd in the Anglican churchyard at Fort Norman, Northwest Territories.

- Ron W. Shaw (2021)

¹⁹ *Ottawa Citizen*, December 24, 1929, publishing a report by *Edmonton Journal* staff correspondent E. B. Watt.