

HENRY GEORGE NEWS

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Smashing a Pioneer Land Monopoly

By DOUGLAS CRAIG McTAVISH

THIS is a tale of heroism, sacrifice and devotion on the northern frontier of our Dominion. I am enclosing with it a photograph of what I regard as one of the most historic and significant incidents in the annals of our Canadian West. This picture represents the successful climax to a long drawn out legal battle, in which Mrs. McTavish appears as the central figure, handing a sheaf of duplicate certificates of titles, which had been held up in the Supreme Court of Alberta, to the chairman of the school board.

In the spring of 1912 the late Reverend D. G. McQueen sent me as a lay missionary to the District of Ft. McMurray in Northern Alberta. There was a small chapel, a Hudson's Bay store, the residence of a local dealer which also served as a postoffice; but there was no school.

On finding that there were a sufficient number of children to entitle the district to a school I took steps toward that goal and a board of three trustees was appointed. As I had been a builder in my youth and had about \$50 worth of carpenter tools with me, I started building a small school which was finished by the end of the year. My wife who had previously been a teacher, opened the school with thirteen children in attendance.

Shortly prior to my arrival the entire townsite had fallen into the hands of three or four real estate syndicates in Edmonton and they were paying no taxes. I was supporting my household on a remittance of \$90 a quarter from the Home Mission Board, and supplementing it occasionally from building operations. Some idea of the cost of living is suggested by the fact that Mrs. McTavish paid thirty cents for three eggs, with other kitchen necessities in proportion. In the course of a couple of years, when the number of pupils had increased to forty or fifty, an additional school building was erected.



McMurray, Alberta Canada, January 12, 1923.

Summary action was needed to raise support for the growing school, and it proved drastic and imperative. Every owner of land in the McMurray townsite whose taxes were five years in arrears, was notified that unless these arrears were paid in full within sixty days, the lands would be posted for sale. Of course the syndicates blustered, swaggered and threatened. They had held lands all over the West without paying taxes, and they refused with disdain the payment of all taxes which had been levied by the McMurray School District but they overshot their mark, their bluff was called, and on the first of May, 1919, a red letter day in the annals of Northern Alberta, a tax sale was put on, at which, of the approximately 4,000 lots in the townsite, nearly 3,000 changed hands in the course of the day, and the McMurray School District was rescued from the bottomless pit of bankruptcy into which it had fallen.

Now this happy and auspicious consummation must be attributed, under a favoring Providence, to the courage and constancy of the heroic American lady who taught for five years without remuneration, under conditions otherwise distressful. She has recently celebrated her ninetieth birthday and is still wonderfully intact in mind and body.