

Westbank Pioneer and Entrepreneur; John A. Brown

by Gordon H. Ficke



“To the best of my knowledge,” John Brown recalls, “my family moved from their half section of land in Morris, Manitoba, where they farmed, to settle in Peachland in June 1909.” Washington, John’s father was born in 1862 on the Isle of Man. Kathleen his mother, was born on the family estate, ‘Oaklawn’, in King’s County, Ireland. “My mother’s family, the Drought’s, had moved to the Peachland area earlier.” Drought’s Hill on Highway 97 was named after them.

Shortly after they arrived, Albert Drought, being a carpenter, built the Brown house on Elliott Road in Westbank over a period of a year. Drought commuted from Trepanier to Westbank on foot during the time he built the house. The ten-acre parcel that the house was built on was initially covered in pine trees with trunks two feet in diameter. The local natives cleared the timber, and the logs went to Hitchner Bros. Sawmill in Glenrosa.

John was born in the family house on February 27th, 1915 and has many memories growing up there. One that stands out is the time, one winter, when he and a friend undertook a major renovation project.

The front of the house stood on five-foot posts, while at the back, the house rested on the ground. John was about fifteen at the time, when he dug almost all the basement out using a horse and scraper. Brown constructed a concrete foundation and created a $\frac{3}{4}$ basement. His good friend Frank Browne (no relation) helped him with the project. Frank would frequently live with the family during the winter.

The Westbank Legion, Branch 288, purchased the property in recent years, and about two or three years ago the house was torn down.

Once the land was cleared and the house built, the Browns planted an orchard with cherry, pear and apple trees. Ten crab apple trees stood on the property for many years.

John and Washington ran the farm together for a number of years. They purchased more land and orchards around Westbank to expand their farming operation. In 1930 they bought the Gellatly farm. This was a vast holding that formerly occupied all the flat land from the south end of Whitworth Road and north to where the public beach and Angus Drive meet today.

“When World War II came,” John related, “my two brothers talked me into staying home and help dad with the farm.”

The family operated their own fruit packinghouse on the Gellatly property for a number of years and transported their fruit via a CN barge that ran the length of Okanagan

Lake. That changed when the Westbank Co-op and dock (formerly located next to The Point at the mouth of Powers Creek) was built. The fruit was loaded on railway cars and then transported by barges.

Farming was not a sustainable occupation, even back in those days. John went logging but his back was giving him severe problems. In his early thirties he paid a visit to the doctor to see if his back issue could be rectified. He informed John that he could have an operation but oftentimes they weren’t successful.

“Why don’t you get a job where you can walk on a level surface.” The doctor advised. Brown took his advice and was hired at the Westbank Co-op Packinghouse where he was quickly promoted to foreman. He had that job for three or four years. His son Doug also worked for him there.

In the early years the farm was losing money and the Browns owed the federal and provincial government taxes on their properties. John made an arrangement to work for the Provincial Highways Department. He owned a truck and Bill Miller, the road foreman would put him to work any time they required his services.

In 1947 Washington passed away and a new chapter in Brown’s life was about to begin.

“We had about a hundred acres of orchard in Westbank, between my father, my brother and me.” Brown admitted. “That included the Gellatly property on the lake.” John’s father was in partnership with Cecil Clark on that particular 150-acre parcel. Cecil wasn’t interested in the orchard and preferred instead to raise his 100 head of cattle on the section of that land that hay was grown. “I can remember when I was hauling logs down the back road from Glenrosa to the lake,” recalled John, who was 17 years old at the time. “My brother and Clark were working with the land surveyor dividing the property in half.” Powers Creek was the dividing line for the property and ran up to the Reece property.

John’s dad never worked very much on the properties, but was around if he needed his help. “Everything was pretty much left to me,” Brown said.

Because they owned so much land and fruit farming was not providing the family with an adequate income during the depression of the 1930s, their property taxes were in arrears. Something had to be done to produce the extra income required to pay for those taxes. John and his dad purchased a new 1937 Ford three-ton flat deck truck. Before that they had a used 1926 two-ton Chevrolet truck, without a cab, and his brother got that truck.

Brown acquired a license to operate the truck and worked for the Department of Highways, whenever he was called upon for his services. A wooden box conversion for dumping gravel would replace the deck on the truck. The rear overhang was quite long because arm strong power was required to operate the hand crank cable winch to raise the box that would allow the gravel to exit the box and spill onto the icy roads during the winter. Brown could also open the tailgate via a nifty cable from inside his cab.

That venture started his trucking business. He expanded his services by delivering cattle for Wyndam Lewis to the sales in Armstrong. "I never came home from Armstrong with an empty truck," John commented. "I always brought back some wheat or something, to make the trip worthwhile, and besides, the truck rode better with some weight in it." He hauled wood, sawdust, fruit and even coal one time returning from Princeton. It was difficult to sell though as very few people in the area heated their houses or cooked using coal as fuel.

Brown's second truck was a 1938 or '39 Ford three ton. As time progressed they had a total of six trucks. Most of them sat around all summer until the fall when John had the license to haul fruit throughout the Okanagan Valley from Osoyoos to Salmon Arm. Each year Brown hauled three truckloads of fruit for B.C. Tree Fruits Ltd. to Oroville, Washington. A railway car would be loaded and shipped east and re-enter Canada. This saved the company shipping costs.

The locally hired truck drivers put in a long day, both driving for hours and the physical labour of unloading the fruit once it reached its destination. They would still show up to work bright and early the next day to repeat the process over again.

During the hard times on the prairies they would also haul load after load of loose culled apples in apple boxes and dump them in specially made wooden bins fitted in railway cars. This fruit was shipped to Alberta where the residents there would pay next to nothing for it.

Fuel was in short supply in Kelowna during World War II, particularly for heating, and Brown, along with four-man crew cut firewood in Glenrosa. "I remember Doug Webber driving truck at the time," John recalled, "would put in three loads a day, split, hand loaded and unloaded at customer's houses, mostly in Kelowna. There was no end to their customer base through referrals from John's brother who lived in Kelowna at the time and burned wood.

Some of the trucks were sold as time went on and John bought a logging truck. He hired a driver and John only drove it when the driver, who suffered from an asthmatic condition couldn't drive. He had contracts to deliver logs to both Gorman Brothers Sawmill and S.M. Simpson, later Crown Zellerbach in Kelowna. This proved to be a conflict of interest and as a result Crown Zellerbach bought his logs on the condition that only a certain percentage would go to Gorman Brothers. As a result, Crown Zellerbach offered to

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His books and purchase his sales as well. "It was the best deal," declared Brown.

John continued to operate his logging truck as well as the other trucks, but cut back on using them. The logging truck was making more money than his other trucks. Eventually, in 1965, John sold the trucking business to Don Campbell but kept the logging truck.

John reduced his farming activities considerably and began selling those properties the family had purchased decades before. The Gellatly property was finally sold in 1965 to R.J. Bennett.

Brown, who had been working concurrently at the Westbank Packinghouse, was advised by the head fruit inspector, "why don't you put your name in for a fruit inspector? You have done enough hard physical work in your lifetime." John took the advice and worked for the Federal Department of Agriculture as a fruit inspector for one year in Kelowna before being sent to Vancouver. From 1969 to 1973 he inspected fruit that was imported into Canada from California and Mexico.

John and Marjorie, his first wife, were given the opportunity to transfer back to either Kelowna or Summerland with the Federal Department of Agriculture, and he chose the latter. He worked in Summerland and Penticton until his official retirement in 1989.

The packinghouse manager from the Summerland Co-op, the last remaining packinghouse in Summerland, approached John to work part-time as a field manager. Their Field Manager had just retired. John was reluctant to take on the job at first, but accepted the position, working for the next five years during the fruit season.

John's wife Marjorie for 56 years, passed away in 1998 from cancer. He married Iris Walker in 1999, but due to Iris' failing health she now lives in Ontario to be close to her family.

In 2009 Brown came full circle to his roots in Westbank and now lives in the Village of Smith Creek. At 95 years young, John A. (named after his Uncle
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Albert Drought) Brown has lived a very diverse and interesting life. A true Westbank pioneer.