

Who and What was a 'Ditchrider'? Part One of a Series

~ by Kay Clarke, CHF Member

Chestermere Lake was first constructed by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) as part of an irrigation system and originally known as Reservoir # 1 by the CPR. After the water was flowing in 1906, many people were needed to make sure that it kept moving to meet the needs of those farmers who would benefit from irrigation. One group of CPR Irrigation Department (CPID) employees vital to keeping things operating efficiently were called "Ditchriders". They were the front line, so to speak. Chestermere had a Ditchrider from the time the irrigation system became operational. What were they expected to do and who were they?

At first glance it seems like a great job. All one had to do was ride up and down the irrigation ditches. Well wait a moment, there was a lot more to it than that. In 1923 Canadian Pacific Railway Irrigation Branch produced circular number 31, called "Instructions for Ditchriders"¹ with several sections. The following is a summary of the Ditchrider's responsibilities.

In looking through this directive you notice that there is a lot of paperwork to be done daily from April 1st to November 1st. There were reports daily to the Watermaster (the Ditchrider's direct supervisor) and the Superintendent. It was impressed on these employees that they were the face of the CPR Irrigation system and that they should act accordingly. They were instructed to be impartial and fair but firm in all their dealings with water users and to record conversations and work so as to have a record in the case of dispute or lawsuit.

The next thing that one notices when looking at the circular is that the Ditchrider was expected to have a lot of knowledge about irrigation, crops and be able to give that information to farmers or water users who required it.

The job itself was to patrol the ditches, making sure that gophers, badgers and muskrats had not put holes in the banks. They needed to ensure that grasses not weeds were growing and that the fences were in good condition. They needed to be able to open water gates as required (after the proper paperwork was in place). They were expected to work 10-hour days from April 1st to November 1st.

One of the jobs in 1923 was to patrol the telephone lines as this was an essential part of the daily reporting system.

The circular lists the items that the Ditchrider should have and the items that the "Company" (CPID) would provide. CPID supplied a house and barn (big enough to house two horses) and five to eight acres of land with which the Ditchrider was expected to feed his animals. The Ditchrider was expected to acquire two horses as well as a buggy and saddle. The Company could supply these but would deduct the cost from his salary. The Ditchrider was allowed not more than two cows and their calves, a sow and piglets and 100 poultry. He was not allowed to sell or give away any of the produce. If there was extra, it was to go to the company stores. The Ditchrider was also warned that care of the animals or crops was

¹ Robert S. Stockton, "Instructions for Ditchriders," 1923. Irrigation Research Project (W.L. Jacobson) Collection, Series 2, M-3761-34, Glenbow Archives, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary.

not to interfere with the job. The circular states that if the Ditchrider wanted to farm he should go elsewhere to do so.

Chestermere Historical Foundation is researching this important piece of our history and will provide brief biographies of those who filled the Chestermere Ditchrider position and lived in the Ditchrider home which was located at the SE corner of the Lake (Reservoir).



A Griffin and GH Patrick with 3 young badgers
Glenrose District of Western Irrigation District
June 1924 © Glenbow Archives

Aerial photo of Chestermere Lake SE Corner.
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and Numeric Data Services, University of Calgary.