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Whiskers and Straight Whiskey



Also

*Minutes of the 2017 Annual
RCNA General Meeting • Procès
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annuelle de l'ARNC de 2017*

Alfred Sandham (1838—1910)

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CANADA 150

The Commercial Hotel, Maple Creek, c.1890



The original Commercial Hotel in Maple Creek, shortly after its opening in 1885. The hotel was billed as the largest of its kind in the North West Territories, "... first class in all its departments."

Only a handful of merchant tokens from Western Canada are old enough to be listed in Pierre Breton's 1894 catalogue (Breton 1894), and only one of these is from a Saskatchewan community. This unique piece of early Saskatchewan numismatics is Breton #930 / #931, a small round brass drink token issued by the Commercial Hotel in Maple Creek and good for one drink in the hotel bar. They are thought to have been issued around 1890–91 by J. H. Fleming, the manager of the hotel at the time, as his initials "J.H.F." appear at the bottom of the obverse. It's not known exactly why Fleming issued these tokens. They may have been promotional pieces to help boost business in the hotel saloon, or used to extend credit or manage bar tabs for certain customers. What is known is that within a year or two of their issue the tokens were quickly pulled from circulation, the whole lot promptly sold to a collector from eastern Canada.

First class in all its departments ...

The Commercial Hotel dates back to the early 1880s, at a time when Maple Creek was little more than end point along a newly built Canadian Pacific Railway branch line. It was established by Thomas Melfort Rasin, an American "adventurer" from Maryland, by way of St. Paul, Minnesota. Around 1880 Rasin went to work for T. C. Power & Brother, the largest of the mercantile companies operating out of Fort Benton, Montana (and a company notorious for their support of the illegal whiskey trade in Montana and southern Canada). Rasin was a clerk in the company trade store near the North West Mounted Police post of Fort Walsh, in the Cypress Hills of what is now southwestern Saskatchewan. When the NWMP abandoned Fort Walsh in 1883 in favour of a more strategic position at Maple Creek, T. C. Power & Brother quickly closed down their Fort Walsh store and followed the police north to town.

Rasin, with financial backing from two T. C. Power & Brother managers, purchased a lot on Pacific Avenue, adjacent to the new T. C. Power trade store. There, he built a grand two-storey wooden hotel, framed with skinned logs and covered with milled lumber. Open for business by 1885, the hotel boasted 25 guest rooms, a dining room, spacious lobby and, of course, a fully stocked saloon. Church services were held in the lobby of the hotel every Sunday, as no permanent church had yet been constructed in the area. There were display cases in the lobby and adjoining hall, allowing travelling salesmen to display their wares to prospective buyers, and rooms were available for meetings and conducting business transactions. An article in the *1886 Territorial Directory* billed the Commercial Hotel as, "... the largest such hotel in the North West Territories ... first class in all its departments."¹

Rasin sold the Commercial Hotel in 1890 to local rancher Edward Fearon. As Fearon was busy with his ranch and his political aspirations (he was elected to the Territorial Assembly in 1894), it appears he left the day-to-day management of the hotel to the aforementioned J.H. Fleming. It's around this time that Fleming likely began issuing the brass drink tokens.

John Henry Fleming, better known around town simply as "J. H." (Myers 2000), was an American cowboy turned businessman who managed (and later owned) the hotel during its heydays in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born 1862 in Lake City, Minnesota, Fleming had come to Canada in the 1870s on a cattle drive from North Dakota.² He spent the next decade working as a ranch hand for a number of cattle operations in the Maple Creek area, including the famous Oxarart Ranch (later known as the Wylie Ranch), where he eventually worked his way up to ranch foreman. He also established his own ranch in the Skull Creek area east of Maple Creek. In 1890 he married Mary Isabelle Kirby, from the well-known Kirby farm south of Regina, and the two settled down in Maple Creek. The 1891 Census of Canada shows Fleming already living at the Commercial Hotel with Mary; on the survey form he lists his occupation as "hotel-keeper."³

1 As cited in Pettyjohn, R.E.W. 2014. "Your Home on the Range:" *The Commercial Hotel in Maple Creek*. March 2014 Guest post on *Railway & Main: Small Town Saskatchewan Hotels*, blog maintained by Joan Champ. Accessed on the Internet at www.hotelhistories.blogspot.ca, January 2016. Much of the material can also be found in an article by the same name in *Heritage Magazine* 18, pages 16 to 20, also by Pettyjohn.

2 Myers claims that J.H. Fleming first came to Canada in 1886, but in the records of the 1891 Census of Canada Fleming states he came to Canada in 1876. There are other discrepancies in Myers biography that make me question the accuracy of his dates; he states Fleming "disposed" of his ownership of the hotel in 1903 or 1904, but Fleming is known to have built a brick addition to the hotel in 1906, and he remains the owner-of-record until he sells the hotel (to Norman Robson) in 1910.

3 Census of Canada, 1891. Accessed via Ancestry.ca, January 2016. The census records can also be accessed at the *Library and Archives Canada Web portal* at www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1891/Pages/about-census.aspx

Token Varieties

Breton lists two varieties of the Commercial Hotel drink token. Breton #930 contains two errors in spelling: Fleming's initials are misspelled, "I.H.F.," and the initials for the North West Territories are misspelled, "N.W.S." Breton #931 corrects both mistakes, as well as adjusting the layout of both the hotel and town names on the face of the token. The reverse side of the token, containing the phrase, "Good For One Drink," remains the same for both varieties.

According to Breton the #930 variety was the original token order placed by Fleming, but used only sparingly by him until the second order (Breton #931) with the spelling corrections was received. Afterwards, Breton claims, Fleming put aside the #930 tokens and used the #931 versions exclusively. Breton bases this claim on information from fellow numismatist F. R. E. Campeau, who apparently bought all the remaining tokens from Fleming sometime before 1894. Campeau reported there were 75 of the #930 type tokens in the lot, but only 20 of the #931 tokens. The rest, presumably, had disappeared during the normal course of business at the hotel.

In his 1980 publication on the trade tokens of Saskatchewan (Tannahill 1980), Cecil Tannahill questions if the tokens were ever actually used at the hotel. While researching the tokens back in the 1960s Tannahill spoke with Matthew Fleming, John H. Fleming's younger brother.

Matt Fleming had been a bartender at the hotel in the early 1900s and later managed the hotel on behalf of new owners from 1920 to 1945.⁴

4 Matt Fleming and his wife Rose are recorded as living in the Commercial Hotel during the 1901 Census of Canada; Matt Fleming lists his occupation as "bartender," while Rose is listed as "domestic" (i.e., a maid). John Fleming, his wife Mary, and their two kids are also recorded as living at the hotel.



Left: original drawing of catalogue. Right: photo of the mistake in the initials "N" and "I.H.F." (should be "J.H.")



Left: original drawing of Breton catalogue. Right: photo of a Breton token showing mistakes in the initials and layout of the hotel name and town name. Brass, 25mm, 4.45g.



Left: original drawing of the reverse side of the token as shown in the 1894 catalogue. Right: photo of the reverse side of Breton #930 token. Brass, 25mm, 4.45g.



Breton #930 in the 1894
a Breton #930 token. Note
"N.W.S." (should be "N.W.T.")
"J.H.F.")). Brass, 25mm, 4.2g.



Breton #931 in the 1894 cata-
log #931 token. The spelling
has been corrected and the
town has changed.



The reverse for Breton #930,
same design. Right: photo of reverse
The same design was used

The younger Fleming stated that, to the best of his recollection, the tokens were never used at the hotel. Moreover, Tannahill comments that all of the specimens he examined appeared to be in extremely fine to uncirculated condition, suggesting little to no use. However, as Campeau had bought the tokens from J. H. Fleming prior to 1894 (long before Matt Fleming arrived in Maple Creek) it's certainly possible the tokens saw at least some circulation in town during the early 1890s.

Why the tokens were withdrawn from use is anyone's guess. Were they part of a failed business experiment? Did the hotel guests or townfolk not trust them? Or did Fearon, a respectable businessman and aspiring politician, not want bar tokens from his hotel circulating around town (lest some less savory character get a hold of them)? Local history books have plenty of information on both the Commercial Hotel and J. H. Fleming, but there's no mention of tokens and thus no further clues as to the motive behind their quick withdrawal. Whatever the reason for the initial withdrawal, however, it must have been significant enough that Fleming himself did not re-issue these or similar tokens once he took over ownership of the hotel in 1898.

Rare Finds

The Commercial Hotel drink tokens do show up for auction, but not very often. When they do, both varieties tend to appear with roughly the same frequency, and command similar prices. This trend contrasts with the conventional thinking in which Breton #931 is considered to be the rarer of the

Fleming sometime in the early 1890s. Sales results from both online and in-house auctions over the past five or six years, however, have shown a roughly equal number of each variety being offered. For example, of the seven Commercial Hotel tokens offered in the 2013 Toronto Coin Expo Fall Sale (by Geoffrey Bell Auctions), three were of the #930 variety and four were the #931 variety. Searches of online sites such as iCollector and eBay show similar equal frequency of sales between the two varieties.

The prices realized at these auctions are also similar for both varieties – both are currently trending around \$75 to \$100 depending on condition. Particularly nice examples of each variety may sell for as high as \$145 to \$180. Interestingly, the #930 variety currently appears to be selling an average of \$20 more than a #931 variety in the same grade. Admittedly there are too few sales over the past five years to determine if this is a long-term trend or not. However, if nothing else this trend does suggest that Breton #931 is possibly underpriced in the current online collectors' market.

In Closing ...

John Fleming eventually bought the Commercial Hotel from Ed Fearon, on Christmas Eve 1896. He continued to own and operate it through the first decade of the 20th century. By 1904, however, the hotel was beginning to show its age. Several new hotels had been built in Maple Creek, eclipsing the Commercial Hotel's position as the premier accommodation in town. As the hotel aged some townfolk began to refer to it derisively as a "dollar hotel." As a result, in 1906 Fleming had the original wood building moved to the back of the lot and a new, 3-storey brick addition constructed on the front. Sadly, plans for further expansion of the hotel were dropped after Mary Fleming passed away in August, 1909, leaving John a widower with five children. He sold the hotel in early 1910 and went into the hardware and dry goods business.

The Commercial Hotel itself passed through a series of owners; at one point it was even owned by the Bank of Montreal and housed the local bank branch. But despite several attempts none of the later owners were ever able to restore the grandeur of the place during its peak.

When the original wooden portion of the Commercial Hotel was finally torn down in 1940 the editor of the Maple Creek News, W. J. Redmond, lamented the loss of such an important part of the town's cowboy history:

... the accommodation didn't amount to much, judged by present standards, but it was O.K. in the days when men wore whiskers and drank their whiskey straight.⁵

5 As cited in Pettyjohn, R.E.W. 2014. "Your Home on the Range": The Commercial Hotel in Maple Creek. March 2014 Guest post on Railway & Main: Small Town Saskatchewan Hotels, blog maintained by Joan Champ. Accessed on the Internet at www.hotelhistories.blogspot.ca, January 2016.

two varieties. Tannahill assigned a rarity rating of 4 (31 to 40 known examples) to Breton #930 and a rating of 6 (11 to 20 known) to Breton #931. This 3:1 ratio, in turn, roughly matches the number of each variety reported by F. R. E. Campeau when he purchased the remainder of tokens from



The 3-storey brick addition built by J.H. Fleming in 1906. The original wooden building was moved to the back of the lot forming the hotel's annex. It was demolished in 1940. After continued devastating floods, the brick structure was restored in 2014; it continued business as a hotel and restaurant until 2017.

There is, however, a happy ending to this story. After the devastating floods in 2010 and 2011 the Commercial Hotel was bought by a Philippine investment group whose members worked hard to restore the hotel to its original condition. Today the Commercial Hotel is still open for business, with the distinction of being one of the oldest, continuously operated hotels in Western Canada.

If you ever get the chance, pay a visit to the old hotel – maybe even drink a straight whiskey in honour of Rasin, Fearon and the Flemings. But at \$100+ for one of the original 1890s brass tokens, you may just want to pay for your drink with cash.

Oh yeah, and whiskers are optional.

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Editor's Note: If you're planning a trip to Maple Creek anytime soon, though, you may have to wait for that drink. The Commercial Hotel closed in July, 2017, the building and business was put up for sale by its owners.

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