

Ode to David Fife

Introduction

This is the story of David Fife
And how he developed the staff of life
Searching for a solution
To agricultural pollution
Wheat crops ravaged by frost and rust
Finding a better grain was a must
He searched in Canada and Scotland too
He obtained some seeds from a friend he knew
A new strain of wheat from a ship docked in Glasgow
Save some for the spring, plant the rest now
The fall planting did not survive
The spring planting did indeed thrive
In 1842, David Fife developed Red Fife Wheat
For 50 years, Red Fife reigned supreme and could not be beat

The wheat known as Red Fife
Has a renewed shelf life
In 2003, Slow Food Canada nominated Red Fife for the Ark of Taste
Renowned for its nutty and robust flavor, it should not go to waste
Organic farmers consider it the best heritage wheat
Discriminating consumers consider it a nutritious treat
Artisan bakers use a slow wild yeast fermentation
To develop a richer and fuller wheat taste sensation
Chefs discovered its hearty flavor
And diners have bread they can savor
Red Fife has been rediscovered; it is a revival
Red Fife's place in history is more than archival

Red Fife is a story of myth and legend and mystery
Who is David Fife and where is his place in history
And what about Jane, his wife
Who played a key role in developing Red Fife
There is much to tell and the tale should be told
Children should know it before they grow old
Without David Fife, who knows what might have been
The story begins with David at age fifteen.

Section I – From Scotland to Canada

Riding a white horse, his father, John, rode through each town
Announcing the news with a bugle, Napoleon was down
In Scotland, there was not that much to do
After the Battle of Waterloo
In 1820, David and John and the rest of the clan
Left Kincardine, Scotland for a new land¹
It was a dull day in May when they set sail
On a ship called Hope, how could they fail
In mid September, they came to the village of Port Hope
Arriving via ferry drawn by horses on shore with a rope

In the township of Otonabee
David settled there with his family
Lot 23, Concession 4
200 acres, a log cabin and more
Indian River runs through the north end
To a place where it takes a bend
On its way to the village of Lang
Where meetings were held with rest of the gang
David met Jane Beckett one day
Marriage plans were quickly underway
In 1825, they were wed
A bright future lay ahead

As the daughter of a seed merchant
Jane knew a thing or two and had a penchant
For seeking a better way
She was sure to have her say
David and Jane kept a watchful eye
For new grains they could try
There had to be something that would beat
The tired and troublesome Siberian Wheat

Planting wheat in the soil
Involves much blood, sweat and toil
Reaping the wheat harvest
Weather permitting is hardest
Using a scythe to cut a swath to make a sheath
Stooking sheaves to prevent moisture underneath
Modern technology brought the threshing machine
With the combine, operations became lean and mean

¹ The Peterborough Evening Examiner, January 30, 1909; The Peterborough Weekly Examiner, July 15, 1920

Section II – Red Fife Wheat developed in 1842

Early in the 19th century
Settlers faced a climate of hostile fury
Plant diseases such as rust, mould and rot
And in case it should be forgot
There were pests and floods and storms
And rapid temperature changes beyond norms
Farmers dreamed of rejoicing and bringing in the sheaves
Growing wheat for export is an idea no one believes

In 1812, the Selkirk settlers came²
From Lord Selkirk they got their name
In Canada, he received a land grant
Providing these Scottish fishermen a place to plant
The first crop of wheat of record on Canadian soil
With no proper tools, they used a hoe to toil
Seeds planted too late did not survive
In 1818, wheat crops were eaten alive
It was a severe and devastating attack
The grasshopper plague turned the sky black

Wheat harvesting conditions would become less severe
In his search for seed, David Fife did persevere
His friend, Will Struthers, in Glasgow
Should be able to help somehow
Will sent samples of wheat to Port Hope
After winter storage they were taken from the envelope
The wheat was sown
Nothing was grown

David sent word to his friend, Will
To be on the lookout still
Down by the docks, Will took a trip
He spotted some grain from a Polish ship
From the Ukraine, direct from Danzig
The freighter was a mighty rig
He scooped up a sample and put it in the mail
Not realizing the puzzle it would entail

² Buller, A.H.R., Essays on Wheat (New York, 1919) Chapter 1, section 1 – 5.

Not knowing whether to plant in spring or fall
David decided not to plant it all
He sowed half in the fall and it did not survive
He sowed half in the spring and five stalks did thrive
When David was not in the field with the horse and plows
He tended to chores with the pigs and chickens and cows
While David was working under the hot summer sky
Jane worked in the house always keeping a watchful eye

The five stalks of grain were growing well
Jane looked through the window and let out a yell
Two oxen had broken loose
She chased them and made them vamoose
They had munched on the new strains of wheat
Jane caught them in time to limit their treat
Of the five stalks, Jane saved three
More care was needed, it was plain to see

Jane took special charge of the experimental plot
Reaping three stalks of grain did not yield a lot
The wheat was hung on the kitchen rafters with care
In hopes that a bountiful yield would soon be there
Every year yielded more of this rust free variety
And soon the Fifes provided wheat to all of Otonabee
By 1848, they had 260 bushels to provide³
They were very gracious, it could not be denied
No patents, no desire for personal gain
Everyone should try this new strain

Section III – Red Fife Wheat spreads to the West

By 1851, its popularity had spread
Farmers were keen to get this wheat that was red
Through Ontario and into Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin⁴
Red Fife was sown, grown and stockpiled in the wheat bin
This sturdy, high-yielding red wheat
Rust resistant, it could not be beat
With its superior quality of flour, it met the test
These qualities led to its adoption throughout the West
In the prairie soil, Red Fife seeds produced great yields
Across the United States and Canada were golden wheat fields

³ Old Farmer's Almanac, 2001: The Day Jane Fife Saved Canada's Wheat Crop.

⁴ Old Farmer's Almanac, 2001.

Section IV – Red Fife’s Origins

Where did Red Fife originate
It is a subject of great debate
Some believe it came from the Ukraine
Where it was a very hardy strain
This strain was known as the Halychanka variety⁵
With records dating back to the 12th century
It is unique and valuable due to its stability
Cultivated over centuries with great ability
By Ukrainian peasants
Using basic common sense
This variety was not grown on experimental fields
By a plant breeder or geneticist to increase yields
Halychanka also known as the Galician variety
Stems from Galicia, an historical region of Ukrainian society
Located between Poland and Ukraine
In old folk songs there was a refrain
Of ‘dear spring wheat’
It was known as a treat
Of happiness and prosperity
The truth will be known to posterity

Section V – Canadian Confederation, July 1, 1867⁶

In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was created
Political deadlock issues with Great Britain were placated
Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia joined the unification
The new country focused on economic development and diversification
In 1870, Manitoba became a member of the Dominion
In 1871, British Columbia joined the union
In 1873, with a ferry link promise
Prince Edward Island became the seventh province
In the Prairies it would be necessary to forgo
The idea and dream of one province called Buffalo
In 1905, the vast Prairie became Alberta and Saskatchewan
“King Wheat” was the dominant crop on this new land
In 1949, Newfoundland joined the country
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee

⁵ From a single seed: Tracing the Marquis wheat success story in Canada to its roots in the Ukraine, by Stephan Symko, a Web Publication of Research Branch, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 1999.
<http://www.careerchem.com/NAMED/Patents/SSymko-wheat.pdf>

⁶ Wikipedia articles.

Section VI – Expansion of the West⁷

In 1870, a decade of improvements to flour-milling began
A technical revolution that facilitated a wider wheat growing plan
The invention of the first flour-milling purifier created a huge demand
Spring wheat production had to expand
To meet this growing need
Minnesota supplied Manitoba with Red Fife seed
Transportation problems proved to be a bit of a kink
In 1878, this was solved by a rail line to provide a direct link

In 1871, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald proposed a transcontinental railway
With the Pacific Scandal, there was a major delay
The railway contract proved to be a great temptation
Allegations of bribes led to Macdonald's resignation
In 1874, the Liberals were voted into power
Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie was the man of the hour
With an economic depression, the Liberals reigned for just four years
The Liberals free trade policy was rejected due to economic fears

In 1878, Macdonald's Conservatives won the election
At the time, his National Policy was deemed perfection
In this era of defensive expansionism
High tariffs on manufactured items were considered necessary protectionism
The National Policy focused on increased immigration
To increase the Western Canada population
During this economic expansion, threats to Canadian independence abated
Corporate concentration emerged by monopolies that were created
The latest flour milling processes were adopted by William Watson Ogilvie
With the Canadian Pacific Railway, he formed a monopoly
Ogilvie's grain elevators were competition free
Built on valuable land it was plain to see
In 1895, WW Ogilvie was the world's biggest individual flour miller
In business and financial and philanthropic circles, he was a pillar

In 1880, the CPR received a loan of \$25 million and a federal grant of 25 million acres of land
An incentive for westward railway construction to meet increasing demand
A decade of delays must be overcome
CPR took the incentives and then some
\$25 million was a deposit but they needed more
Another \$25 million or so doubled the score
The Dominion of Canada footed the bill
For an impressive feat of engineering and political will

⁷ Wikipedia articles.

In 1885, the transcontinental railway to BC was completed
With the final spike, threats of BC secession were defeated
The promise of a railway link enticed BC to join the federation
Years of delay and scandal had created some resignation
In 1886, Vancouver received its first train
From Winnipeg, it was loaded with grain
Bushels of wheat for export so the world could be fed
Red Fife Wheat satisfied the world's need for bread

Section VI – Marquis Wheat⁸

Since railway construction required a major government subsidy
Improving wheat production became a necessity
In this agricultural country, wheat was the shining star
Its contribution to the economy led all others by far
In 1886, the government established the Dominion Experimental Farm
Controlled experiments under ideal conditions could do no harm
Initial studies concluded Red Fife was critical to any test
Its attributes were superior to the rest
Hard Red Calcutta from India matured 20 days prior to Red Fife
With early frost ruining crops, early maturity would ease the strife

In 1892, Red Fife and Hard Red Calcutta were crossed
Markham, an early maturing new strain may avoid early frost
There would be a delay in new wheat development however
It would take several years to re-start this endeavour
In 1903, Charles Saunders re-examined cross bred strains of previous years
Proving that discoveries are made if one perseveres
In musty bottles, he discovered Markham filed away on a shelf
His brother, Percy, had determined the discovery routine in and of itself
For some reason, Markham caught Charles' eye
He thought he would give it a try
This strain was plucked from obscurity
He renamed it Marquis due to its strength and early maturity

Charles did not have a proper lab, an oven or a mill
He chewed a few grains, testing them at will
Although it may sound somewhat uncouth
Chewing grains created dough in his mouth
Based on this crude test, he took a stab
At flour and bread qualities later confirmed in the lab
It supplanted Red Fife and is remembered still
It could be considered grist for the mill

⁸ From a single seed, Stephan Symko.

In 1910, Charles Saunders was named Dominion Cerealist
The first of many titles on his list
He received honorary doctorates and degrees
In 1934, he was on his knees
King George V bestowed on him a knighthood
For his contribution to agriculture and all things good
Canada became known as 'granary to the world'
As the details of history are unfurled
There is one obvious certainty
Without Red Fife, there would be no Marquis

Section VI I– The role of Senator JJ Duffus⁹

In 1929, it was Senator McGuire
Who created quite a fire
A David Fife Memorial he dared to propose
Most listeners did oppose
With hard times and a major war, it fell on deaf ears
He soldiered on for many years
In 1938, a roadside cairn was on the slate
For a House of Commons debate
“Totally inadequate and unbecoming such an outstanding achievement”
Stated MP Mr. JJ Duffus in his speech so eloquent

In 1954, Senator JJ Duffus
Created quite a ruckus
In his speech titled, A Debt Unpaid
He was warming up to the best speech he ever made
Canada became “the greatest wheat producing country in the world”
He continued to praise David Fife as his speech unfurled
Red Fife Wheat was not only good for one’s health
It “added millions of dollars to the national wealth”

In 1955, he achieved notable success
In his speech to the Senate, he made a formal address
Recommending a Memorial to the late David Fife
For the unbending efforts of David and his wife
He “revolutionized world wheat farming”
It is rather alarming
The Senator declared
That we have erred
“Canada owes more to David Fife than anyone can tell”
The Senator went on to explain it very well

⁹ Duffus, J.J., Debates of the Senate of Canada (Ottawa, 1955)

Without Red Fife, Canada would have been put to the test
“There would have been no rush of settlers to the Prairie West”
“The importance of Red Fife
In the development of our economic life
Cannot be exaggerated”
The Senator deftly orated
“It is time the debt was given national recognition”
He further advised he was seeking permission
To construct a school and a hall
And that was not all

He proposed that it be called Fifeville
A fitting tribute to a man of iron will
11.5 acres next to the Indian River
Senator Duffus could not deliver
The Senator made a vivid proclamation
He described the sought after memorial in his great oration
“As practical as was the great discovery of this sagacious pioneer”
In reality, the tribute was delayed year after year

Senator JJ Duffus made his final plea
On deaf ears again, it was plain to see
In 1957, he came to the end of his life
Without achieving recognition for David Fife
Finally, a roadside cairn was unveiled in 1964
The Senator had wanted so much more
His words echo as a tribute to his stamina
“Has he not been just about the most forgotten man that ever lived in Canada?”

Section VIII – Tributes to David Fife¹⁰

In the words of Senator Duffus, “What of David Fife”
And what of Jane, his wife
In 1959, the David Fife Memorial School opened in Otonabee
In 1990, the David Fife Elementary School closed and is now a faded memory
In 1963, David Fife’s portrait was unveiled at the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame
There was little fanfare and little acclaim
Duffus declared a cairn to be “totally inadequate” in 1938
In 1964, a cairn was unveiled, a case of too little, too late
The cairn was erected on the side of the Trans Canada Highway
Only local traffic had an interest in this display
David Fife’s log cabin was considered great heritage
In 1967, it was moved to Lang for the opening of the Lang Pioneer Village

¹⁰ From a single seed, Stephan Symko.

In 1977, the roadside cairn found a new place to dwell
The David Fife Memorial Cairn was moved to Lang as well
And so with much chagrin
Tributes to David Fife are rather thin

PART II – REVIVAL OF RED FIFE WHEAT

Section I – Saved from Extinction

In 1988, Sharon Rempel initiated the Heritage Wheat Project¹¹
She believed heritage wheat had been the subject of neglect
Of all the heritage wheats that were embraced
Red Fife thrashed them all in milling and baking qualities and taste
Rempel had a vision that one day Red Fife would be re-commercialized
Organic farmers, artisan bakers, pastry chefs and consumers would crave this grain so prized
The Red Fife Wheat Project does not want GMO
Rempel believes it is not the way to go

In 2001, Marc Loiselle, began growing Red Fife on his organic Saskatchewan farm¹²
The landrace wheat quickly adapted to the soil and could do no harm
Demand for Red Fife quickly spread across the land
Artisan bakers and discerning pastry chefs developed it as their own brand
Loiselle describes Red Fife as unexpectedly rich with a slightly herby and spicy flavour
With aromas of anise and fennel and a nutty taste to savour

In 1989, eco-gastronomists founded the International Slow Food Movement¹³
An alternative to the tediousness of fast food, it was a major improvement
Slow Food promotes food that is good, clean and fair
Their Ark of Taste is a project to catalog heritage foods to share
Only the best tasting endangered products make it onto the Ark
Foods at risk of extinction receive a check mark
The Slow Food Presidium Project would save foods from extinction
Promoting traditional forgotten foods provides a distinction
The Presidium promotes the work of the artisan
By cultivating consumer demand

¹¹ Rempel, Sharon, notes on her website. <http://www.grassrootsolutions.com/>

¹² Loiselle, Marc, notes on his website. <http://www.grassrootsolutions.com/>

¹³ Slow Food Website. <http://www.slowfood.com/>

In 2003, Slow Food Canada's Vancouver Island Chapter¹⁴
Determined Red Fife should flourish hereafter
Red Fife was nominated to the Ark of Taste
Fears of extinction were laid to waste
Red Fife is Canada's first and only Presidium
Between extinction and salvation, Red Fife found a happy medium
Red Fife was re-introduced to artisan bakers
And is favoured by celebrated bread makers

Artisan bakers bake bread in small batches
In brick ovens with secure door latches
Hand formed loaves provide a personal touch
Fresh baked aromas are loved so much
Stone hearth ovens produce a reddish brown crust
A richness of flavour with a taste so robust
Good for gluten-sensitive diets and so nutritious
Red Fife bread is simply delicious

Section II – Revival

For several years, Jamie Kennedy has served Red Fife bread¹⁵
Red Fife flour is a staple in his kitchens including Gilead
For a delicious Red Fife pancake
There are two good options to partake
Globe Bistro or the Windsor Arms Hotel^{16, 17}
Many Toronto chefs have found a new place to dwell
Edulis Restaurant, Ursa, Woodlot and Keriwa Cafe^{18, 19, 20}
Serve Red Fife bread, scones, pasta or bannock in an impressive display
For fresh baked bread of course
Go straight to the source

¹⁴ Slow Food Canada website. <http://www.slowfood.ca/>

¹⁵ Jamie Kennedy, Gilead. <http://www.jamiekennedy.ca/kitchen-about.php>

¹⁶ Globe Bistro. <http://www.globebistro.com/>

¹⁷ Windsor Arms. http://www.windsorarmshotel.com/dining/prime/breakfast_menu

¹⁸ Edulis Restaurant. <http://edulisrestaurant.com/>

¹⁹ Ursa. <http://ursa-restaurant.com/>

²⁰ Keriwa Cafe. <http://www.keriwacafe.ca/>

St John's Bakery offers Red Fife in Loaf and Peasant size²¹
At the Evergreen Brickworks Farmers' Market, they have limited supplies

Cliff Leir, a renowned chef on Vancouver Island²²
Developed his first bakery and decided to expand
He sold Wildfire Organic Bakery and Cafe
And built Fol Epi Organic Bread and Pastry
In 2003, Slow Food Canada's Ark of Taste Project
Approached Cliff Leir with a stated object
Working together, they brought Red Fife back into production
In 2004, he took Red Fife bread to Italy for its Slow Food introduction

In Italy, he met Marc Loiseau who produced and sold him the Red Fife grain
The goal of the Terra Madre conference in Italy was one of mutual gain
Cliff and Marc were part of the "Red Fife Community"
Terra Madre provided a superb opportunity
Cliff believes food community relationships could have a rebirth
Providing a better understanding of the larger relationship with food and earth
Cliff built a silo exclusively for Red Fife at Fol Epi which is French for "wild wheatstalk"
As a miller and a baker, he not only talks the talk, he walks the walk

On Vancouver Island, Bruce and Leslie Stewart operate True Grain Bread
In 2008, they moved from Ontario to their new homestead
They continue the tradition of old-world style baking
Hand-scaling and carefully forming each loaf of bread they are making
True Grain is pleased that Red Fife was rescued from obscurity
They chose it for its unique flavour and its non-hybridized purity
True Grain slowly mills Organic Red Fife Grain at low temperatures to preserve the flavour
And partnering with Vancouver Island Farmers to foster the 100 mile diet is something they favour

South of Madoc, Ontario, down on the farm
Patricia Hastings works her special charm
Her Organic Red Fife Wheat is much in demand
With her stone mill on site, she creates her particular brand
For Evelyn's Crackers and Chef Jamie Kennedy
Other customers include St. John's Bakery
Patricia is popular when the Royals are on the scene
Red Fife flour appeals to Prince Charles, Will and Kate and even the Queen

Toronto-based Grainstorm has a catchy marketing tagline
"Bake like it's 1869"
They use only ancient grains and Red Fife Wheat
To produce baking mixes with real nourishing food and not too sweet

²¹ St. John's Bakery. <http://stjohnsbakery.com/breads-sweets/breads/sourdough/>

²² Cliff Leir and Fol Epi. <http://www.farine-mc.com/2012/06/meet-baker-cliff-leir.html>

In both taste and nutrition, modern wheat is inferior
Red Fife has not been genetically modified and is thus superior
Red Fife Muffin and Loaf Mix is the base recipe
Baking bread and muffins and cakes is easy

These forgoing artisans are dedicated and diverse
Representing a portion of the ever expanding Red Fife universe
The Red Fife Community grows and expands
All across Canada, the United States and other lands
Red Fife supporters are connected to this heritage wheat
Red Fife consumers are supportive and eager for the next treat to eat
New and different recipes support the revival
There is little question of Red Fife Wheat survival

Conclusion

David Fife developed Red Fife Wheat
Widely acclaimed as no mean feat
As you sow, so shall you reap
As the harvest is done, it is no big leap
Red Fife increased the land under cultivation
Red Fife played a key role in developing a nation
Development of towns and migration West
Rail lines through the Rockies put engineers to the test
All of the development was easy to sustain
Canada thrived due to an abundance of grain

“Granary to the world”, Canada did proudly proclaim
Red Fife Wheat was responsible for Canada’s nickname
The story of Red Fife Wheat is the story of Canada itself
Supplanted by Marquis, Red Fife was put on the shelf
All but forgotten in Canadian history
Relegated to a distant memory
“Those who don’t know history are doomed”
Repeating history isn’t pleasant it’s assumed

Red Fife Wheat is hardy and robust
Its traits include immunity to wheat rust
Through many centuries it remained genetically pure
Its unmodified nature means it will endure
David Fife and Red Fife Wheat are closely entwined
Canadian history has not been so kind
Red Fife’s history is one of survival
Red Fife will live on due to its revival

“Granary of the world”, proclaimed the Canadian Government
In 1903, the Department of the Interior ran the advertisement
U.S. settlers journeyed north to Canada at a rapid pace
Wheat farming promised vast wealth in this new place
In 1877, David Fife died and became a distant memory
In 1888, Jane Fife died and joined him in the Fife Cemetery
In the 19th century, Red Fife Wheat solved the problem of fungus and rot
In the 20th century, David Fife became the man Canada forgot

For three decades after the passing of David Fife
Red Fife Wheat’s increased production and cultivation supplied the staff of life
Canada evolved into a growing nation
Red Fife Wheat provided the foundation
Red Fife Wheat is revered
David Fife all but disappeared
Looking back one hundred years at this seeming paradox
There is no rhyme or reason, no thinking outside the box

With the revival of Red Fife Wheat, it begs the question
Where is David Fife’s place in the history session
His experimental farm led to the “Granary of the World” proclamation
A commensurate gift or tribute to this man is worthy of consideration
In this era of internet and cell phones and all that is new
Children teach adults a thing or two
Historians and educators had best move with due haste
Or children will teach them about David Fife and the Red Fife taste

Epilogue

Queen Victoria Day marks the beginning of the planting season
There is a rhyme and reason
To remember David Fife on this planters day
Red Fife seed benefited Canada in every way
David Fife and his wife developed Red Fife
A few seeds of grain created a better way of life
1842 was a very good year
Give a cheer
Halleluiah
David Fife, we are glad we knew ya