

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
May 13, 1959

Al Oeming, well known Edmonton zoologist, has been telling on the radio recently, some of his experiences with the Swan Hills grizzlies, and very interesting listening it was, to my thinking.

Before the coming of the white man, when buffalo and pronghorn antelope far outnumbered most other animals on the plains, they were harassed by two major predators; the large grey wolf and the huge plains grizzly, largest of all the grizzlies.

Henry Kelsey, who came west to the Saskatchewan prairies in 1690, and Anthony Henday, who reached the Alberta foothills in 1754, each reported large numbers of both wolves and grizzlies living off the buffalo herds. So did Lewis and Clark when they passed through Montana in 1806.

Al Oeming, by his research of the past few years, has established that the Swan Hills grizzlies are actually the last surviving descendants of the great grizzlies of the plains.

Wolves were still abundant less than a hundred years ago, but the bears, being a much easier target for the white man's gun, were becoming scarce by 1850. By that time too, the buffalo were feeling the squeeze. Pushed out of millions of square miles of their former range to the east and south, some of them had begun a slow migration to the northward. This migration was halted at the sixtieth parallel sometime during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With them of course went some of their predators, the big wolves and grizzlies; and the grizzlies apparently never succeeded in getting beyond the Swan Hills area, which is about a hundred fifty miles northwest of Edmonton.

The easy way to examine these bears and take their measurements would be to shoot a few and do the work in comparative safety, but Al Oeming worked hard to get these animals put on the protected list and has no intention of harming one himself if he can avoid it.

Instead he constructs a large trap that somewhat resembles a huge garbage can, baits it with a chunk of meat and places it at a spot where the bears come to feed, often at the garbage dump of one of the oil rigs working in the area. Sometimes the men on the rig are completely unaware that their camp is being visited by one of the big humpbacks. This is chiefly because the monster scavengers appear but rarely in the daylight.

It usually takes four or five days before the bear becomes familiar enough with the appearance of the trap to enter it and spring the door shut. During this time a twenty four hour watch must be kept, because once the bear is in the trap he must be dealt with immediately, lest he become too rambunctious and create a bear-sized hole in the cage.

A dose of ether is the method used to quiet him and Al Oeming describes as "rather ticklish" the job of taking him out of the cage to weigh him.

The extremely fresh air of a spring evening in the wilderness can dispel the effects the effects of the ether rather quickly.

If you wish to see one of these Swan Hills grizzlies, you can find one in the Calgary Zoo. He is a rather small, nine hundred pound specimen named Dynamite. He is twenty four years old and has spent his life in captivity, being taken as a cub by a homesteader and kept and tamed as a pet. In the wild state these bears attain a much larger size, although they still fall short of the enormous Alaska brown bear.

Thanks to Al Oeming, the Swan Hills grizzlies may roam the wilderness for a long time to come.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN

May 27, 1959

Tourists and travelers entering or leaving Alberta via the Crowsnest route, must traverse the site of Alberta's most famous disaster; and in all the vast length of the Rocky Mountain chain, there are few scenes to stir the emotions or the imagination as does this great expanse of jagged, jumbled limestone boulders that is called the Frank Slide. Here, more than half a century ago, the whole side of a mountain toppled, burying the town of Frank and taking sixty six lives. Today, fifty six years later, the scene is so little changed that it seems as if the dust had only just settled over this mass of broken rock that spreads across the valley and up the other slope.

Beside the highway, where it cuts through the outer fringes of the slide, a commemorative plaque has been erected by the Alberta government. On the plaque is this inscription:

"Disaster struck here at 4:10 A.M., April 29, 1903.

A gigantic wedge of limestone 1,300 feet high, 4,000 feet wide and 500 feet thick crashed down from Turtle Mountain and destroyed the town of Frank. Seventy million tons of rock swept over two miles of valley, taking 66 lives and burying numerous homes, the mine and the railway along with 3,200 acres of fertile land to a depth of 100 feet in 100 seconds."

For many years following the slide there was great confusion across the country as to what actually happened that cold, grey April morning. This may have been due in part to the imperfect means of communication in use at that time, and, as is so often the case in an event of phenomenal proportions, the stories that were told were of even greater proportions and some of them persisted for many years.

The best known of these stories and one that is still given credence today, tells of a tiny baby girl who, tossed up on that turmoil of tumbling grinding limestone, miraculously escaped injury and thus became the slide's sole survivor, and because her name is unknown, they called her Frankie Slide.

This story was almost pure fiction, but it so appealed to the mood of sentimentality that it prevailed in those days that it was given wide circulation and a rather popular song recorded it.

The fact of the matter is that there were many, many people with a legitimate claim to being survivors of the Frank Slide, and several of these escapes verged on the miraculous.

The slide buried about a mile of railroad track and occurred just as a C. P. R. freight train had pulled clear of the slide area. A brakeman from this train made an almost impossible journey back across the debris of rock, breathing the thick, limestone dust that hung over everything, and clambering over and among the settling boulders to flag down a passenger train that was due in minutes.

Many miners were on the night shift and emerged from the mine at dawn to meet an appalling sight; a mass of grey, dust-veiled rock where their homes, their families, friends and neighbors had been.

At the scene of the disaster was a long time resident of Bluffton, the late Felix Montalbetti. He was section foreman on the railroad and took part in rescue operations.

One of the best known old timers in the Crowsnest Pass is "Cap" Beebe, who remembers the slide very vividly. He was awakened by the noise, but thinking it to be thunder, he went back to sleep "About five o'clock," he relates, "I was awakened by a loud pounding on my door, and getting up, I found Felix Montalbetti, the section foreman, in great excitement." "It's gone!" gasped Felix.

"What's gone?" I asked in perplexity.

"The town of Frank." "The town of Frank?" I repeated slowly, as if trying to analyze his words. "Was there an explosion? Do you mean it was blown up?"

"No," he replied fearfully. "The mountain fell on it."

With that, the two of them hurried back to the dusty, still settling slide, while boulders weighing many tons continued to fall from the raw, new face of the mountain.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 3, 1959

April, May and June are peak months for us birdwatchers. Migrating species, some of which we see only for brief intervals spring and fall as they pass to and from the barren grounds, are all returning to their summer breeding grounds. They and the year round residents are going about the business of selecting a mate, appropriating a nesting site and rearing a brood. This all means that they are more readily noticed and

more easily observed at this time than they are likely to be for the remainder of the year, wherever they may be.

In the first place, most birds are much more vocal at nesting time, whether the song reaches our ears as eerie loon laughter or the high, clear, sweet notes of the White-throated Sparrow.

Secondly, all species will be decked out in their finest plumage, which in many cases is far showier than at other times. Thirdly, most birds, when nesting, and especially once the brood is hatched, can be approached more closely and easily than is normally the case.

Adding it all up we might say that distinctive song, more brilliant garb and decreased wariness combine at this time of year to reduce identification problems to a minimum.

Out in the woods the other day I disturbed a mourning dove. I was sure the bird had a nest close by and began to search about on all the old stumps and logs I could see. I never did find the dove's nest, but suddenly noticed, at the base of an old fire-blackened stump and one short step away from my boots, a Ruffed Grouse on the nest. She was flattened right into the leaf mold, head hunched back, mottled brown back blending marvelously with the dead leaves and old fireweed stems and bits of decaying wood. The wonder was I had seen her at all without her taking flight.

For long moments I watched her - and she watched me - neither of us moving a muscle, until finally she could stand the strain no longer, and shot from the nest with a whir of wings, to alight clucking some distance off. Even with the bird's startlingly sudden departure, the nest was left effectively camouflaged. Hung over with bits of dead grass, the circular depression held eight very plain eggs, about the shape and color of ordinary hen's eggs, but smoother, slightly browner and only half the size. They were half concealed by soft brown breast feathers, many of which were wafted in every direction when the bird erupted from the nest. Had she walked off the nest, it might have been harder to find them with her on it.

A Red-tailed Hawk has built a new nest in a balm tree just five minutes walk to the west, on Harry's place. Being new, it seems small but it will grow larger each year it is used. I didn't try to climb the tree, although once, many years ago, I climbed to a Red-Tail's nest that was far more difficult of access than this one, being about seventy feet up in an old pine. This one is only half that height, but I feel more accident prone than I did twenty odd years ago.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 10, 1959

I have long grumbled over the fact that the best season for bird watching coincides with one of the busiest times of the year in my occupation. Yet there are almost always birds to watch, even from the tractor seat,

affording me the opportunity to combine business with pleasure. In early May there are always pipits running down the furrow ahead of the tractor. Usually they are in the field before I get there with the machinery, but this year I beat them by a matter of weeks. A few days after the pipits arrive, there will be mixed flocks patrolling the fields, composed of pipits, Lapland Longspurs and Horned Larks.

Blackbirds too, love to follow the tractor just as they once followed the four horse teams; picking up great beaksful of wireworms, cutworms and other insects the farmer can well do without. Gulls often spend the morning with the farmer on the land and it is a joy to watch these beautiful birds in flight.

Once I observed for several hours a group of three Sandhill Cranes feeding in a stubble field next to where I was plowing. These are the birds that used to be called wild turkeys and they were used extensively on the table in the early days. They were greatly hampered in foraging feed off the ground by their long legs, but one of them had the problem licked. He folded his long stilts beneath him and fed at his ease, even shuffling himself along in this position, while the other two had to spread their legs wide to pick up the heads of wheat they were gleaning from the last autumn's crop.

Hawks are interesting birds to watch in the field. A Marsh Hawk skimming low over the meadow in search of mice; a Sparrow Hawk spotting his by hovering stationary near a strawstack or granary; a Broad-winged Hawk beating a strawstack with his wings, trying to scare up his dinner; a Cooper's Hawk diving swiftly onto his prey right beside the tractor, then carrying it off a few yards to eat it; all these things I have observed from the tractor.

There is one thing that seldom fails to surprise me when I'm working with the tractor. That is, when I come to the windbreak or the woods at the end of the field, to hear, clear and sweet above the tractor's noise, the song of a tree sparrow; or it may be a White-crown, or a White-throat, or a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Like many another wild creature, the average songbird pays little attention to machinery.

Twice I have run over flocks of tiny Hungarian Partridge with the tractor. Once, a rear wheel rolled over two of them, pressing them into the dust of the headland. I stopped and got off and picked up both tiny dust covered forms. I blew the dust off them and they opened their eyes, completely unharmed. Scarcely larger than a good sized bumblebee, they had been spared by occupying the space between the lugs of the rubber tire.

Another time I ran right over a newly hatched flock with the tiller. Apparently the hen had been hovering them there in the middle of the field and had warned me too late by flying out from under the tractor. I had a glimpse of one diminutive yellow and black spotted chick as he was being buried, so I shut off the engine and located ten more by listening for their cheeps and digging them out carefully by hand. One by one, as I rescued them, I put them in my shirt pocket, until I had all eleven in there and my pocket wasn't half full! I carried them to the edge of the

woods in the direction the hen had gone, and dumped them in the grass. In a few seconds not a chick was in sight.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 17, 1959

Many a western Alberta home these days is featuring a distinctively beautiful style of furniture and bric-a-brac. Although locally produced it is usually featured in a small way, yet it is certainly distinctive, and in many cases it has been created right in the home by one of the members of the household.

Diamond willow is probably our most popular native hobby wood. The variety of items that can be turned out from this beautiful home grown material is infinite, limited only by the imagination and the time available to work on it. Here are a few of the items for which it has been used: legs for coffee and end tables, walking sticks and candlesticks, plant stands and smoking stands, tie racks and magazine racks, serving trays and bon-bon dishes, picture-frames, book cases, and many more. Perhaps the most popular articles turned out are lamp stands and stems, either table or floor style.

What, exactly, is diamond willow? What does it look like in the natural state, and what makes it unique among the hobby woods?

In the woods, diamond willow is the stem or trunk of a living willow tree, of the type used for fence posts, and it seems safe to say that over the years, thousands upon thousands of feet of diamond willow stem have been sold from western Alberta at slightly more than one cent per foot: thousands of potential items of beautiful furniture and ornaments used to hold up the barbed wire around miles and miles of prairie pasture.

However, only a very small percentage of willow posts can be classified as diamond willow, for diamond willow makes a less than perfect fence post. This is because diamond willow, for whatever reason, comes with patches of dead bark with dead wood beneath them. If these patches are true to form, which they often are not, the live wood has grown in around them to give them the shape of a diamond. More accurately, they are eye-shaped, with the long dimension of the eye or diamond up and down the stem and indented more or less deeply into it. The wood beneath, if it has not begun to decay, is a rich, red brown, while surrounding it, beneath the live bark, the exposed sapwood is a smooth, creamy white, giving the desirable contrast that is the essence of the diamond willow pattern.

Whether anyone knows for sure what causes these dead patches, I cannot say. There are several things I can think of that might do it. Most likely they are the result of injury to the bark and this may have been caused by any number of things: hailstones, gnawing rodents such as rabbits and porcupines, insects and disease, the rubbing of cattle or antlered game, or sometimes two branches growing partly into one another.

This latter is a definite cause in a few cases. The others are merely guesses.

I have been so impressed with some of the beautifully finished pieces I have seen in the homes of the area, that I have made up my mind to try it myself, in spite of a lack of natural ability for wood carving or woodwork of any kind.

Now, whenever I pass a willow thicket I sometimes walk around and through it, in search of diamond willow, trying to visualize the red and white pattern that would be revealed by the removal of that rough, grey outer bark.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN

June 24, 1959

To start off this week's column, let us indulge in a bit of space fiction. Picture to yourself a planet in another solar system, a little larger, let us say, than earth, but similar in geologic age and structure and with a sun about like ours. Imagine that due to a strange filtering component in this planet's atmosphere there is no evaporation from its surface; therefore no rainfall and no fresh water. Life on this hypothetical globe has adapted to these conditions and among the higher forms of life. There are some highly intelligent types who have learned, as earth men are in the process of learning, to utilize and control for the common good, just about everything else, animal, vegetable or mineral, on their planet.

Like many earth dwellers they are appreciative of beauty and perfection. They are peaceful but adventuresome and their appearance cannot be described by any language in use on this earth. They transport themselves freely through outer space and many of them have visited our planet. On the few occasions when their presence has been detected it has been shrugged off by us as just another flying saucer story.

They come as sightseers, interstellar tourists, if you like. And what, do you suppose, is the special attraction that brings them to our planet earth, which is really pretty much out of their way? Not our mountain vistas, for theirs would pale ours to insignificance. Not our vast desert regions, for theirs are much more vast and far more colorful. Not our forests or our tundra or our tropical jungles, although these interest them, being different in almost every way from the equivalent on their planet. What really brings these strange travelers into our area of activity is the phenomenon of evaporation with its resulting weather and precipitation, and above all, clouds.

Their intellectuals come to observe and study our meteorology and weather patterns. Their tourists come to view the clouds, and they watch and marvel, not just because our clouds are to them something foreign and exotic but because they recognize in them a spectacular creation of beauty and purpose.

Their own sky is not lacking in beauty. Their sun is of a somewhat different composition than ours and their spectrum is different, giving color to their planet we cannot even imagine. Their sky glows at various times of their day with tints and hues never seen on earth; but they have no clouds.

So to earth they come in their flying saucers, travelling millions of miles to view our clouds - and we have only to look up. Next time the sky is filled with clouds look at them as though you had just arrived from some far cloudless corner of the universe. You may realize for the first time that for sheer scenic beauty our cloudscapes vie at times with the grandest of landscapes or seascapes. And the view is ever changing.

Yet it is not enough just to look and marvel for a moment and then go about our business. Our pleasure in cloud scenery can be greatly enhanced if we know a little about the different kinds of cloud formations.

And that is what I'll be dealing with next week.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
July 15, 1959

Clouds are photogenic. Not all the time of course, and some clouds more than others, but, by and large, clouds photograph well.

Summer is the season for variety in clouds and it is the season when amateur photographers are most often abroad with their cameras. Combine these two facts and you have the possibilities for a different and very interesting side hobby; a collection of cloudscapes.

Take a picture of a mountain, or a bridge, or a building, or even a landscape, and you might easily come up with a print identical to one taken by some other photographer. Your chances of doing this with a cloudscape are slim indeed. No two clouds are ever the same and no one cloud stays the same for long.

Any camera, from the simplest to the most expensive, will take good cloud pictures if properly equipped. With black and white film in your camera you will need a filter to bring out detail in the sky. For box cameras a yellow filter is perhaps best; for cameras with faster lenses a red filter may give maximum results. A polaroid filter is very good too, although it is more expensive to buy than the others.

If you are using color film, clouds usually show up quite effectively without any filter, but a haze filter can improve most pictures, while a polaroid filter will darken the sky and give more contrast to cloud scenes.

I would certainly recommend color for cloud photography. It is quite easy to expose and extremely pleasing in the result. Not only can you get a perfect rendition of white cloud on blue sky, but in late afternoon when the lowering sun has more dusty atmosphere to shine through, the sky and

clouds both assume delicate and beautiful pastel shades and tints that can only be recorded on properly exposed color film.

Cloud photography, of course, will include sunsets. While clouds are not an essential factor in every sunset picture, their presence usually enhances the scenery at this time of the day. They serve as reflectors for vivid and gorgeous colors, and some of the most beautiful color photos ever made have depicted cloud-strewn sunsets.

Sunset pictures require more careful exposure, mainly because of the contrast between the dark, shadowed foreground and the glowing sky and unless the foreground is very important, it should be ignored, and attention directed to the rich coloring in the sky.

So this summer, as you wander with your camera to all sorts of scenic spots in this province and elsewhere, keep your eye open for fine cloudscapes to photograph. You may be surprised and pleased with the results you get.

Whatever you take pictures of, I hope you get 100% good prints or slides; but if you don't, remember that the professionals don't either. I read recently about a photographer for the National Geographic Society who made a hundred exposures of a column of leaf-cutting ants in the South American jungle before he felt he had one or two that would be satisfactory.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
July 22, 1959

I have good news for the prophets of gloom. Gophers are on the increase, and the last time they overran the country in plague numbers was in the drought stricken, Depression-ridden '30s.

For years there hasn't been a sign of a gopher or even a gopher hole anywhere on this farm, but this summer I have noticed several fresh diggings and today I actually saw one of the cheeky little varmints. They seem more numerous other places too, and are again providing carrion for crows, magpies and other scavengers along the highways. Then there was a recent report in the **Record** about two gophers being caught together in one trap, and when I read this I couldn't help reflecting that unusual as this occurrence might be in 1959, it would hardly have been considered newsworthy twenty years or more ago. In those days there were gophers almost anywhere you looked, and virtually every rural schoolboy owned a string of No.1 steel traps, used to take weasels in winter, and moved to the gopher ridges as soon as the weasels turned brown and the gophers came out of hibernation.

Trapping gophers was the commonest and easiest way of obtaining them if not the best sport. If you were old enough to be allowed to carry a .22 rifle, you had more sport but less profit, as .22 shells cost half a cent apiece. The trick then was to get two gophers lined up in your sights and take both with one shot.

Many a gopher was caught with a snare of store string or binder twine arranged carefully around the entrance to the burrow, while you lay motionless just back a way, holding the other end of the string. The moment Mr. Gopher showed his head against the sky, you yanked the string, jumped up, and began twirling him around your head, to dispatch him as best you could.

If you were fleet of foot there was another way to procure gopher tails. You plugged every hole in sight with dirt and stones, then went away for half an hour or so. Returning very cautiously, you would find that a few had dug their way out, so you waited at a distance until one ventured well way from his burrow. Then you ran out and cut him off from home. This never worried Mr. Gopher much until he discovered that all the bomb shelters were closed for the duration.

However, the odds were in favor of the little guy still. He could head for the nearest brush, or go under a fence that would slow him up not at all but really hampered you, or find a hole that you had failed to plug, or just plain outmaneuver you until you were plumb out of breath and the two cent price on his caudal appendage began to look smaller and smaller.

And even when you won, and had foot-stomped or clubbed the life from your quarry, and had transferred the tail skin from the gopher's tail bone to the pocket of your whoopee pants, you sometimes still wondered if it was all worth it.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN

November 11, 1959

Winter has been impatient, lurking and skulking at summer's end, hovering over September, swooping down with vigor and some endurance in the early days of October, and seldom far in retreat thereafter.

Winter's power and sting was felt in the marauding gales of autumn - gales that ripped the leaves from their birthplace and buried them under an Arctic snowstorm, their brilliance still upon them. And some, as if demanding a legal tenure, resisted the fierce winds and were dealt a punishment even more severe; they were frozen onto the branches, to hang like bleak, brown, lifeless skeletons, rattling in every spiteful breeze.

Winter has made the headlines, sweeping across the parklands and prairies; maliciously spoiling the harvest, piling drifts deep on the highways, or making them icy and dangerous. The Thanksgiving weekend brought warnings from the AMA and the RCMP, "stay off the highways," they said.

Winter deprived us of a glorious autumn; it almost deprived us of autumn. Coming so early, it has vexed and annoyed us and thwarted our plans.

Give the country back, we said, to those who were here before us. But we didn't mean it at all.

It's a great Next Year country, we said, and meant it.

Next year, the pioneer said to the unbroken land, as he leaned on his grub-hoe or axe, next year I'll get some oxen and a plow and I'll break up some of this valley. I'll cut some logs and I'll build a house. And he did.

Next year, he told his oxen, as he worked his new plowed field, I'll have some wheat to sell. I'll buy two more oxen and a team of horses, and clear some more land. Next year it will be better.

Next year, he boasted to his wife, I'll haul some logs to the mill and get them sawed into lumber, and we can have a floor in the house. We'll get some chickens and raise a few pigs and have bacon and eggs for breakfast. Next year we'll be sitting pretty.

Next year, he told his new neighbors, we'll build a school and fix up the roads and petition the government to give us a post office. Why, this country's growing by leaps and bounds.

Next year the railroad's coming through, he said to the hired man. No more hauling our produce forty or fifty miles down the valley. A far cry from the old days, eh?

Next year, the old pioneer told his grandchildren, you'll be going to a fine large school in town, with dozens of classrooms and a gymnasium and an auditorium and all the best of equipment. You'll travel there in a yellow bus over graveled roads and concrete bridges, where I once drove the oxen through the mud, fording the creeks and the river. You'll do your homework by a better light than that from the coal oil wick, and you'll look at photos of the moon's other side.

And you wouldn't if you could, even for a week, go back fifty or sixty years to the days and ways of the pioneers. You wouldn't go back twenty years, or ten or even five. Not many of you would want to relive the fall of '59. For you know that however bad our weather may be, it's never so bad but it could be worse - and it's always worse on some other part of the globe. And next year is always better, here in sunny Alberta.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 18, 1959

It is November, by tradition the dreariest month of the year. A sad and quiet month outdoors; nothing growing; no singing birds; no flowers. The sun is brief and low and distant. Frost in the ground; ice on the pond; snow in the air.

Our northern autumn is over; summer is far behind; spring a far-off time in either direction. Next month is a festive month; last month a busy one. November is the month of in-between; of transition; the month of freeze-up; of nature going to sleep.

Yet not all November's moods are sad and somber and subdued. For November has her livelier moments: her splashes of color and motion.

All plant growth is dormant. For the annuals all life has been infinitely - almost unbelievably - condensed into a very tiny, very dry, very durable thing called a seed. Perennials, having produced seeds or not, have compressed life into their root systems, while trees and other plants with woody stems have drastically reduced their water content. Even so, some trees, especially among the poplars, will be split by the frosts of deep winter.

Small rodents are snug in insulated nests. Some are already in hibernation. Porcupines have been reduced to a diet of pine and willow bark after a summer in the grain fields. Beaver, their busy season over, are imprisoned but safe beneath the pond ice.

Early winter is the time of uncertainty for the weasel and the snowshoe rabbit. The first snowstorm may find them conspicuous in a summer coat of brown, but if November goes by without snow, they'll be more conspicuous still in winter peltage of snowy white against a brown and snowless landscape.

Game animals in November are harassed and gun-shy. The deer that last mid-summer looked back at you from a little distance are now alarmed at the slightest sound and bound away in great frightened leaps.

The cheerful, friendly robin has left for a softer climate, but his place is taken by the equally cheerful, equally friendly Pine Grosbeak. They are the robins of November, rosy red and burnished brown on the dry dead delphinium stalks. Their cousins, the Evening Grosbeaks, adorn the Manitoba maples, yellow and black and white in the frosty dawn.

Birds return to the feeding station. They come with the first fall of snow, revealing memories that reach back at least to the previous spring. Bluejays come looking for wheat and the heads of dark ripe sunflower seed. Redpolls, jewelled heads flashing in the pale morning, are hungry for weed seeds. Canada Jays and chickadees and two quarrelsome downy woodpeckers come seeking the suet bags.

Out in the fields and woods, if we are lucky and observant, and keen of vision, we may sight a snowy owl on a fence post, or a raven flying low; the one from the Arctic tundra, the other from northern forests or western mountains.

Even more rarely seen are the flocks of White-winged Crossbills, birds of exotic plumage, showing little fear of man, shredding spruce cones with bills unsuited to any other purpose.

And when the first fall of new snow covers the ground, a walk through the November woods will tell us that nature is not so much asleep as we had supposed. Tracks and trails in the snow reveal much about what goes on out of doors that we would not otherwise be aware of.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
May 6, 1959

One of the most intriguing of Alberta legends is the story of the Lost Lemon Gold Mine. Not so well known up in this part of Alberta perhaps, but a popular campfire yarn down in the chinook country of the southwest.

The legend had its origin more than eighty years ago when two prospectors known then and ever after as Lemon and Blackjack, discovered the deposit. As has so often happened to two men who prospect together for years as the best of friends, once Lemon and Blackjack struck it rich they quarreled over the riches. The quarrel became a fight and Blackjack was killed by his partner, Lemon.

Lemon brought out some of the gold but wouldn't divulge the location of the mine. And he got so that every time he returned to the gold in mountains and the scene of his partner's demise, he went crazy, and he finally refused to go back at all. Eventually he was tried for murder and sentenced to be hanged but cheated the gallows by dying of smallpox, and with him went the secret of the mine's location.

Now the hunt was on. All that was known about the position of the mine was that it was somewhere south of High River, between the Oldman and Highwood Rivers; on the map, a big chunk of high, rugged terrain.

An early Albertan named Lafayette French is said to have discovered the Lost Lemon Mine a few years after Lemon's death, but French perished by fire in his cabin and the secret was lost again. Since then hundreds of men have looked for it in vain, some of them spending most of their lives in quest. One, a Stoney Indian named King Bearspaw, has been looking since 1907 and is still searching today. King claims that his grandfather, the famous chief, Moses Bear's Paw, knew the mine's location and so did two of the chief's brothers, one of whom claimed to have witnessed Blackjack's murder. The chief told grandson King everything he knew about the mine except where it was. He held back this information because he had no use for the gold himself and he knew that if the mine were ever found the resulting gold rush into those mountains would spoil a wonderful hunting ground.

Today the hunting is spoiled anyway and King looks for the mine in spite of his mother's warning. She said that if the mine were ever rediscovered, tragedy would surely result.

King Bearspaw is not the only person convinced of the existence of the Lost Lemon Gold Mine. Many a grizzled old prospector and some not so grizzled, dream of its riches as they wander around in the Livingstone Range where it is thought to be.

So far, the only gold ever found on the eastern slopes of the Rockies has been free gold, usually in the form of fine dust, and washed from the gravel-bottomed streams that wind down out of the mountains.

So if this tantalizing mystery is ever solved and there really is a Lost Lemon Mine, and the gold is found in the veins in the rock, it is really going to be news in a geological sense.

To tell the truth, I wouldn't mind having a look myself. Anybody willing to grubstake me?

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 25, 1959

Facts and figures are often dull, but here are a few for your consideration.

Number 2 Highway is the only easy-to-travel north-south route in the province.

Nine thousand to ten thousand vehicles per day make use of this road between Edmonton and Calgary; over four hundred cars per hour past a given point on a normal weekend, and this figure is mounting.

With the completion of four traffic lanes between the two cities Number 2 will accommodate about nineteen thousand vehicles per day.

Alberta, with some three hundred thousand passenger cars and over one hundred thirty thousand trucks, has more cars per capita than any other province.

An increasing number of car owners, they say, when they buy a new car, keep their old one and run two.

Add these items up and what do you get? It seems obvious that even with four lanes, Number 2 isn't going to be adequate to the north-south traffic for very long. When its limit is reached will it be widened to six lanes, then to eight, with the whole length built up on either side to look like one long, strung-out metropolis, in the manner of some U.S. Highways today?

Surely there must be a better way, and some people in western Alberta think they have the answer; to begin at once the survey and construction of a second north-south route approximately thirty to fifty miles to the west of Number 2. A suggested route would start at the Crowsnest in the south and run through Turner Valley, Cochrane, Sundre, Caroline, Rocky Mountain House, Alder Flats, Drayton Valley, Entwistle, and onto the Valleyview cut-off at Mayerthorpe.

But relieving the congestion on Number 2 would not be the only purpose of such a road. It would also provide a boost for the farming and forest industries that are a major part of the economy in this western country, and it would receive much usage from the oil, gas, pipeline and power activity that is changing the whole face of this foothill and near foothill region. And not the least to be considered, of course, is the

tourist industry, for this foothills route would prove a far more scenic and interesting drive than Highway 2.

Another thing to be considered is the fact that right-of-way, which should be for at least a four-lane divided road, could be acquired in this area along the base of the foothills for a fraction of what it will cost for an additional two lanes along the Calgary-Edmonton trail. An abundance of gravel and no red lights are further arguments in favor of a western route.

The time is long past when all that is needed is one main provincial artery with laterals leading in to it from the hinterlands at well-spaced intervals. It is a long way from Sundre, say, to Rocky on a good road; about a hundred ten miles via Number 2. It would be about forty over the route suggested above.

Alberta's economy is expanding and most of us think that it will continue to do so. But if residents of the western parts aren't alert they may find that all the expansion is either along Number 2 or in the far north.

Residents of the Bentley, Rimbey, Bluffton, Hoadley, Winfield and Breton areas can testify what even a comparatively short loop of rough graveled road like Number 12 means to the prosperity of a region. We wouldn't care to find ourselves suddenly deprived of this gradually improving traffic route, and a through road to the west would benefit in like manner everyone west of Highway 2.

In the fall of last year, the Liberal Party in Alberta announced that, if elected, they would build a second north-south road east of Number 2. About the same time, an Alberta cabinet minister hinted at a western Alberta route in one of his public speeches. However, he gave no indication that anything of the sort was slated for the near future. It was merely something to dream about for a few years before anything in the way of action was considered.

But western Alberta should press for action on this now if they are at all interested, and they certainly should be. Even with immediate action such an undertaking would take a long time to complete.