

One of Alberta's leading entrepreneurs

Alexander Hamilton

Alexander Hamilton (also known as Ali Ahmed Abouchadi) came to Canada from Lala, Lebanon in 1905. He was only twelve when he arrived in Canada with his uncle, Hussein Abouchadi, and his friend, the late Sam Jamha. Alexander and his uncle heard of the Klondike gold rush while in Lebanon and decided to immigrate to Canada to try their luck at discovering the precious metal. His uncle purchased a half fare ticket for Alexander for \$24.00 which got him space on the bottom deck of the ship to Canada.

Enroute to Canada he was so sick that he said that he wouldn't travel by ship again. After a short stay in Montreal, Alexander, his uncle and Sam Jamha took the train to Winnipeg. While in Winnipeg they met fellow Arabs, from Lebanon, who immigrated earlier to Canada.

In Winnipeg, Alex began peddling paper fans from door to door for 10¢ each. They were in Winnipeg for only a short period and during that time period they heard the expression, "young man, go west," so they travelled to Edmonton by train in 1905. He and his uncle peddled dry goods in the vicinity of Edmonton by using a team of horses and a wagon. They bought their supplies from Tarrabain's Store (owned by a Lebanese from Lala) located in the Strathcona district.

Alex and his uncle also travelled with their new "transportation system" from Edmonton to Lac La Biche selling supplies and buying furs from the Indians along the way. In 1909, his uncle returned to Lebanon and Alex was left on his own to look after the store they had opened in Lac La Biche. His customers at the store were mainly Cree Indians and he didn't find it hard to communicate with them because he learned to speak the Cree language. He also had buyers as far away as Prince Edward Island. In 1912 and 1913 there was a great demand for silver foxes for breeding purposes in Prince Edward Island. For a good live silver fox, the price started at \$2000.00 and went as high as \$6000.00 each. In 1914, though, World War 1 broke out and money became scarce and the silver fox market collapsed.

In 1919, the whole village of Lac La Biche was destroyed by fire. The only buildings left standing were the McArthur Hotel, railroad station and the Roman Catholic Church. In 1919, the Hudson's Bay Co. left Lac La Biche. Alexander Hamilton remained in Lac La Biche and built a new general store measuring 32 ft. by 130 ft. Besides owning the general store, Alex became active in the areas of contracting ties for the Northern Alberta Railway, taking on the agencies for both Ford Motor Co. and International Harvester, and operating a gas station. In addition he operated a sawmill. With these businesses he was responsible for creating employment for a number of people in the Lac La Biche area. Alex was also instrumental in the building of the first grain elevator in this area. He later sold it to Gillespie Grain Co. in Lac La Biche. He had become a very successful businessman.

In 1925 Alexander had an urge to explore new frontiers. He went off to Ft. McMurray and built a floating boat store. He travelled all the way from Ft. McMurray, via the MacKenzie River, to the Arctic Ocean. On his journey, Alex followed the government boat which travelled this route annually to pay money to the Indians at various locations along the MacKenzie River. His aim was to compete with the Hudsons Bay Co. boats which were also selling merchandise to the Indians. After his long and tedious trip, Alex left the barge and boat at Aklavik with a Catholic priest by the name of Father Tresellier. While in Aklavik, he experienced a sight he had never witnessed before, the midnight sun.

Alex sold all his remaining merchandise and decided to return to home. In Aklavik he boarded the Hudson Bay Co. boat "Distributor" which took him to Ft. McMurray. From Ft. McMurray, he travelled by N.A.R. to Lac Biche. Alex went back to operating his business ventures. In 1937 he became interested in breeding mink and this venture developed into a large industry. Also during this period, he received a contract from the federal government to build one of the breakwaters in Lac La Biche. During the 1940's business was going extremely well and he built a new department store which was completed and officially opened in 1943. After twenty seven years away from Lac La Biche, the Hudson Bay Co. returned in 1946 to purchase Hamilton's department store.

Alexander and family moved to Edmonton, where Alexander continued his business ventures in real estate. As well as being proud of his Arab background, Alexander also took pride in being a Canadian. In his own words he has stated that, "I've been around the world twice and I'm still proud of the fact that I am a Canadian."

One final comment has to be made in our story about Alexander Hamilton. Many Lebanese families moved to the Lac La Biche area because of the success achieved by Mr. Hamilton.

(story submitted Faisal Asiff)