

Mike Mountain Horse

(1889 – 1964)



1 Mike Mountain Horse
(Glenbow Museum)

Mike was employed as a Wiper¹ of coal-fired steam engines. He came home from work filthy, his traditional striped, gray railway bib-overalls covered in coal dust. His face was covered too, but it was not as noticeable because he was the darkest skinned Indian I ever saw, dirty or clean.

He was confident and well liked by his fellow workers. After work he went with them from the engine roundhouse to the small beer parlour² across the street. But he could not sit with them because it was then against the

law for Indians to go into beer parlours or buy liquor.

¹ The Wiper's job was to work a 12-hour shift in the roundhouse, where he packed the internal moving parts of the engine with wads of greasy waste. The pay was \$1.75 a day. This was the bottom rung on the ladder that climbed to the train engineer's seat.

² The law at the time strictly limited liquor sales. The provincial government had a monopoly on retail liquor sales, for which the customer required a "permit"; and Indians were not allowed permits. Nor were they allowed inside beer parlours, rooms that had to be associated with hotels. The size of the parlours was related to the number of rooms in the hotel. Therefore, small hotels, small beer parlours; large hotels, large beer parlours.

The beer parlours were divided into two – one half for men, and the other half for "ladies and escorts". Women were not allowed to go alone into beer parlours.

Mike had to sit alone in the corner of the beer parlour, the bartender turning a blind eye because the railway workers who brought Mike in were his regular customers, and the bartender did not want to risk losing their business.

Mike took much pleasure describing the scene to me, many times, jabbing his finger with vigour into the air, he would mimic the non-Indians in the bar who would point at him and say, "look at that dirty old Indian", that dirty old Indian being him, and every time, as though it was the first time he was telling it, he would laugh loudly.

Mike would laugh loudly, every time he told the story, because *he was dirty he was old and he called himself an Indian*. Looking at his eyes, he was saying he was proud of himself and the things he had done. That is all you can do, and that is more than enough for anybody.

Mike Mountain Horse, before he was a "dirty, old Indian", was a scout and interpreter for the North West Mounted Police; and then during the First World War, he served in the *Canadian Expeditionary Force*³, fighting at Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Cambrai, and Amiens.

Wounded three different times, he once led a machine gun section of his battalion behind enemy defences. He was wounded⁴ and buried when an exploding enemy shell covered their shelter. It was four days before he was discovered.

He was awarded a *Distinguished Conduct Medal* for his bravery on the battlefield and at the end of the War was demobilized as an acting Sergeant⁵. If Mike had been White, he would have been an

³ Canadian Expeditionary Force, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 4th Division, 50th Battalion.

⁴ Mike Mountain Horse, *Dangerously wounded* Page 316. Also, "Two of the stalwart Indian boys who were at Red Deer ... are reported as wounded. They belong to the Blood Reserve at Macleod and are named Mike Mountain Horse and Strangle Wolf." (Red Deer News, September 5, 1917.)

⁵ L. JAMES DEMPSEY, *Alberta History 50th Anniversary Issue, A Warrior's Robe*: "he came home with battle scars, along with rank of acting sergeant ..."

officer and awarded a medal of valour for his service, which is illustrated in *The Military Museums* in Calgary.

Mike missed the comradery of his fellow veterans. He used his CPR pass (he earned a pension with the railway) to visit veterans at the Colonel Belcher Hospital in Calgary, often taking candy to them. He also visited vets at St. Michaels Hospital in Lethbridge.

He was on the executive of the Disabled Ex-Service Men's Association.⁶

Elected president of the "first all-Indian LEGION ... was Mike Mountain Horse, D.C.M."⁷ The membership of the LEGION was seven Alberta Tribes.

Saturday mornings in the old library at the Galt Gardens in Lethbridge, he would mesmerize children with stories from his ancestors' past, or simply read stories to them. He was a spell binding storyteller.

Mike Mountain Horse Elementary School in West Lethbridge has his name in honour of the work that he did with young children.

⁶ THE LETHBRIDGE HERALD, *Disabled Veterans Hold General Meeting*, November 20, 1935.

⁷ THE EDMONTON JOURNAL, *Indian Vets Organize*, June 21, 1957.