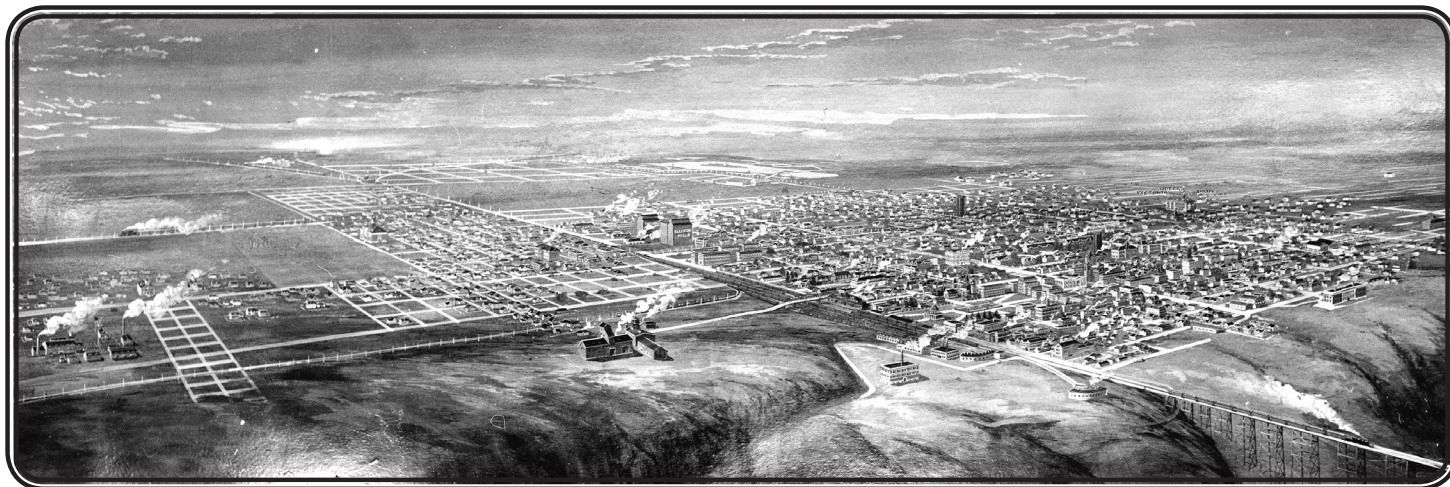


Who Painted the 1912 Bird's-Eye View of Lethbridge?

By Rhys Stevens



City of Lethbridge, Artist Unknown. Galt Archives (P19754374013).

The U. of Lethbridge Art Gallery includes *City of Lethbridge* (Object no. 1971.2) in its collections. This large (42 x 108 in.) oil painting of Lethbridge depicts the city as it would have appeared in 1912.² The southeast-facing scene is portrayed from an imaginary "bird's-eye view" several hundred metres above the ground at about where Crowsnest Trail (Hwy 3) descends into the Oldman River valley from the west. Identifiable structures include the Galt Hospital, AR & I Roundhouse, CPR shops, Woolen Mill, Galt Mines Nos. 3/6, Ellison Milling, CPR High Level Bridge, schools, churches, and hotels.

In April, 2001 I moved to Lethbridge to take up a position as a professional librarian at the University of Lethbridge Library. At that time, the Library was located in University Hall and there was a shortage of office space. As a result my desk was set up in a quiet corner in the University Archives. Although I was only in that spot for a few months, I remember my fascination with the extremely large, detailed oil painting hanging behind the reception desk. It was a depiction of Lethbridge, but this Lethbridge was one from a bygone era. It appeared that the outline of city streets was accurate but there were other oddities -- unfamiliar buildings, entire city blocks of empty lots, and obviously re-touched to obscure partially-hidden details.¹ The only legible label was for "QUEEN VICTORIA PARK." That August the Library moved to the LINC Building and I soon forgot all about the painting. But early this year I stumbled upon it again in the form of a blurry photograph from the University Archives. Curiosity rekindled, I became intent on learning more about this unique bird's-eye view of Lethbridge.

Provenance of the Bird's-Eye View Painting

Information is scarce regarding the origins of the painting and its artist. What is known is that it came into the University's possession in October, 1971 as a gift from the Ukrainian-Canadian Society³ after a short exhibition at the Galt Museum.⁴ Before that it had been hanging in the bar of the Plainsman Hotel for as long as anyone could remember. At the official donation event in 1971, Mr. Wally Mysyk the co-owner of the Plainsman Hotel⁵ said he believed the artist was a relative of the original owners of the hotel when it was known as the Arlington. Since then, the painting has visited the Galt Museum several times, most recently in 2011 as part of *The Greatest Years You Never Knew* exhibit.

There have been several theories about its creation. In a weblog posting,⁶ Belinda Crowson suggested that it was likely done as a promotional painting for incorporation into brochure-style advertisements for Lethbridge. She also pointed out several inaccuracies (e.g., the Galt Hospital entrance faces west rather than east). Similarly, in

1992, University of Lethbridge history professor Dr. William Baker described bird's-eye view paintings as often produced by travelling commercial artists commissioned by city councils, boards of trade, or real estate developers.⁷ In discussing the Lethbridge painting specifically, he stated, "Detail that had played up the interests of a real estate company for a 1912 advertising brochure has been obscured by strategic retouching."

The 1912 Real Estate Brochure

With assistance from Galt Archivist Andrew Chernevych I came across what was probably the real estate brochure mentioned by Baker. It appears as a reproduction on pages 92-93 of *Lethbridge: A Centennial History* (1985) by Alex Johnson and Andy A. den Otter. The brochure includes significant details not included on the painting. These are: (1) a vignette of Galt Mines Nos. 3/6 on the lower-left side;⁸ (2) prominent lettering for "DOMINION SQUARE" atop a grid of empty streets immediately north of Galbraith School; (3) identification of "C.P.R." and "IRRIGATION DISTRICT" land parcels; (4) eleven locational pointer arrows numbered from one to eleven, and, most importantly; (5) a label with the words "GIBSON CATLETT REAL ESTATE LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS" on the extreme lower-right corner.

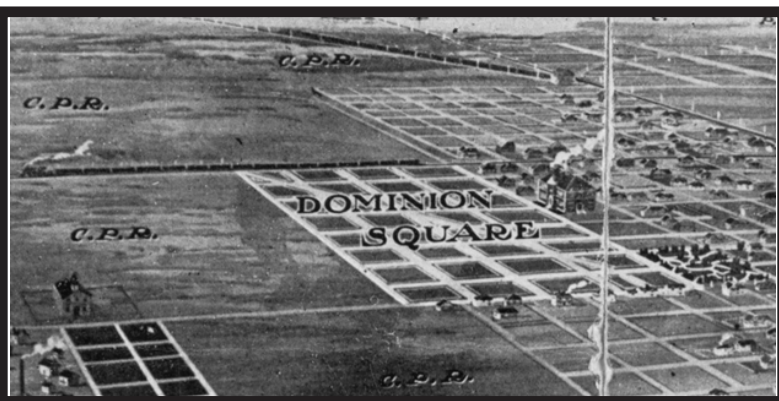


At Left: Arlington Hotel Lethbridge. 1911-1912. Galt Archives (P19891049184).



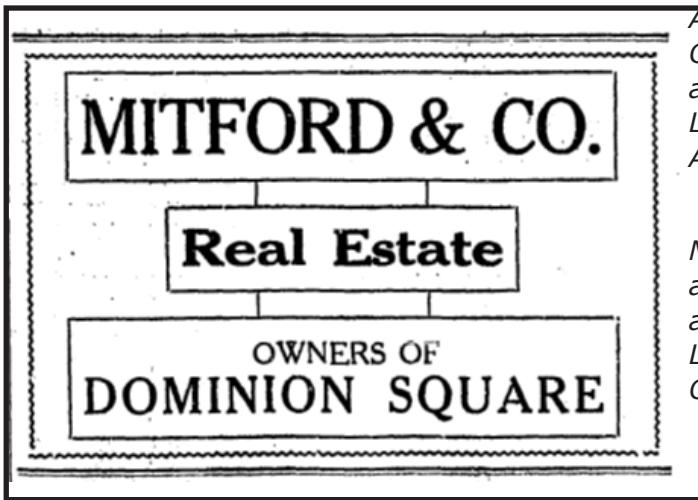
At Right: Bar In The Arlington Hotel. [1900]. Galt Archives (P19760211018).

A bird's-eye view of Lethbridge in 1912, from a real estate brochure. Galt Archives (P19754374013 - Copy 3).



Detail of Dominion Square from A bird's-eye view of Lethbridge in 1912, from a real estate brochure. Galt Archives (P19754374013 - Copy 3).

Dominion Square Heavily Promoted by Mitford & Co. Real Estate



At Left: Mitford & Co. advertisement appearing in *Lethbridge Herald*, April 14, 1913.

Mitford & Co. advertisement appearing in *Lethbridge Herald*, October 10, 1912.

Here's a Good One

The people are talking about
DOMINION SQUARE

\$25 is to be awarded for the **BEST LIMERICK** on **DOMINION SQUARE**.
Send in yours at once.

In *Lethbridge North* is Mitford's
Peach
DOMINION SQUARE
A "Spec" or home in easy reach
Get in there
*Street Cars, Boulevard and Light,
Water, Sewer, Gas in sight,
More than that the price is right*
DOMINION SQUARE

MITFORD & CO.

Lethbridge, like other Canadian prairie cities, experienced a population explosion in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its population nearly tripled in size in roughly five years when it grew from 3,228 in 1906 to 9,242 by 1911. As expected, real estate sales were frenzied and there were even Lethbridge-area land rushes in years 1908 and 1912. It was during this time that Mr. William Mitford, manager of Mitford & Co. was buying tracts of undeveloped land in the Lakeside (Henderson Park) area and flipping them for a quick profit.⁹ Mitford & Co. advertisements were a fixture in the *Lethbridge Herald* over the course of 1912. The subdivision receiving the greatest attention was Dominion Square. Mitford must have decided he required an enticing picture of the property to ensure prospective buyers could suitably visualize the attractive location of Mitford properties for sale at Dominion Square, Lakeside, and near Queen Victoria Park. Enter Mr. Gibson Catlett.

Gibson Catlett & Catlett Studios, Calgary, Alberta 1911-1914

Gibson Catlett (b. Aug. 22, 1866, d. May 25, 1935) was an American commercial artist who specialized in real estate paintings. Calgary directories show him as maintaining a residence

and studio in the city from years 1911 to 1914. Catlett was born and raised in Fauquier County, Virginia and he started out as an itinerant



Austin Cooper (left), Gibson Catlett (centre) and possibly Adam Sherriff-Scott (right) in the Calgary studio, 1912.¹⁰

newspaper editor and advertiser. His newspaper work was largely promotional and he was a city and industry "booster" in New York, Philadelphia and several other cities in the southeastern United States. Catlett found his way west and, after his arrival in Los Angeles in 1906, he turned his hand to commercial landscape painting.

Catlett was evidently quite a talented artist and was commissioned by real estate developers, railway companies, and city councils in

California, Oregon and Washington State. He was accomplished enough that he was able to employ promising artists to assist him with his commercial work. In an interview with the *Seattle Daily Times* in 1910¹¹ Catlett described his process of creating landscape paintings this way: "I first view the city from every high point I can find. Then I make a careful, accurate 'lay-out' in the shape of a rough drawing. After this I proceed to get huge panorama photos and work out every building in each district with the pen. Bear in mind that every detail from start to finish must be exact. Then comes the color scheme...." After several years based in Los Angeles and a few more in Portland, Catlett's next stop was Calgary, Alberta. It must have been during Gibson Catlett's time in Calgary that William Mitford commissioned him to create a painting as reported in the *Lethbridge Daily Herald*.¹²

Was Gibson Catlett the Artist that Painted the City of Lethbridge Bird's-Eye View?

Several pieces of evidence point to the Gibson Catlett Studio, Calgary as being responsible for the creation of the Lethbridge bird's-eye view painting. The first is the Dominion Square real estate brochure that includes a photograph of the painting and a logo for Catlett's studio.¹³ A second piece of evidence is the *Lethbridge Herald* newspaper article reporting that Catlett had visited Lethbridge in August 1912 to make paintings for Mitford & Co., developers of Dominion Square. Perhaps the only real mystery left is whether Gibson Catlett alone did the painting. Catlett's Calgary artists at the time included Austin Cooper, Adam Sherriff-Scott, and David Schwartz, all of whom went on to make significant contributions in the world of art.

Catlett left Calgary when the real estate boom went bust. He went looking for greener pastures and evidently found them in Toronto, Montreal,

Will Paint Subdivision

Mr. Gibson Catlett, landscape artist, of Calgary, official artist for the Harriman system of railways in Oregon and Washington, is in the city for a few days. Messrs. Mitford & Co., at a cost of one thousand dollars, have secured his services to make paintings of their new property, Dominion Square. Mr. Catlett's work in real estate drawings have secured un-qualified praise from the many large firms for whom he has done work in all parts of Canada and the States. The local firm expect to have their painting on exhibition in about three weeks. A couple of them will also be exhibited in various parts of Ontario by the salesmen of the company.

San Francisco, Chicago and ultimately Miami. It was while in South Florida that Catlett's reputation grew such that he proclaimed himself as the most famous real estate landscape painter of the 1920s. The bursting of the great Florida real estate bubble in 1926 severely curtailed Catlett's business but he quickly found new opportunities in Texas and produced real estate paintings for several more years.

And what of Lethbridge's Dominion Square? It turns out the only construction ever completed was a solitary concrete block engraved with the words "DOMINION SQUARE." Lethbridge's real estate market crashed in 1913 and with it went plans for Mitford & Co.'s signature development. The site sat virtually empty for the next thirty-nine years. It wasn't until 1951 that building re-commenced and the area began its transformation into what is today the Winston Churchill neighbourhood located northeast of 13th Street North and 9th Avenue.¹⁴

Dominion Square in 1951. Galt Archives (P20151006-1850).



Rhys Stevens is a librarian at the University of Lethbridge. His areas of subject responsibility include Geography, Anthropology, Maps, Government Documents, and Spatial/Numeric Data. He has also been involved with the digitization of historical Southern Alberta newspapers, LHS publications, and other materials accessible via the U. of L. Library's Locally-Digitized Collections.

Endnotes

- 1 .Condition of the painting described in: Trevor Kenney, “Lasting Images – Lethbridge art,” UNews, April 15, 2011, <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/lasting-images-lethbridge-art#.WqrRk-ch2Xw>.
- 2 .William M. Baker, Lethbridge: Founding the Community to 1914: A Visual History, (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Historical Society, 1992), 2.
3. “UofL gets unique painting,” Lethbridge Herald, October 26, 1971.
4. “Lethbridge 1912,”Lethbridge Herald, July 28, 1970.
- 5 .The Plainsman Hotel was located at 316 1 Avenue South. It was re-named Bridge Inn (1976) and demolished in 2007.
- 6 Belinda Crowson, “Where would my house be today?” Galt Museum & Archives blog, May 12, 2011, <http://galtmuseum.blogspot.ca/2011/05/where-would-my-house-be-today.html>.
- 7 .William M. Baker, Lethbridge: Founding the Community to 1914: A Visual History, (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Historical Society, 1992), 2.
8. This might explaining the bulge and water damage described by the U. of L. Art Gallery in Trevor Kenney’s 2011 story mentioned in footnote 1.
9. “Buy land around the park,”Lethbridge Herald, August 3, 1912.
10. Colin Salter, “Austin Clare Cooper (1890-1964) and the Calgary Christ” Galt Museum & Archives blog, November 7, 2015, <http://talltalesfromthetrees.blogspot.ca/2015/11/austin-clare-cooper-1890-1964-and.html>.
11. “Huge painting of Seattle ordered,” Seattle Daily Times, May 19, 1910.
12. “Will Paint Subdivision,” Lethbridge Daily Herald, August 22, 1912.
13. Similar logos appear on Gibson Catlett real estate landscape paintings of Kelowna, B.C. and Westmount (Waterloo, Ontario).
14. Lethbridge Herald, June 2, 1951 & Lethbridge Herald, Nov. 6, 1994.