

James Alexander
1846 - 1913

*"Braw, braw Lad on yarrow braes
Ye wander thro' the heather and the shaw....."*

James (Jimmy) was a sandy-haired, blue-eyed lad, born in Foveran Parrish, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, where his childhood was devoted to family, work and school. The green, yet unproductive hills to the west, and the North Sea, sweeping in on the ribbon of "homes" and fisheries along the eastern shores, seemed to limit his world.

His parents, David and Katherine McBain (McBane) Alexander, had a farm on a fertile spot and maintained a comfortable living for themselves and their seven children.

Katherine was from the Highlands, north of the Grampians, in mountainous country, and perhaps her mind often admitted an inner yearning

*"My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the Highlands, a chasing wild deer
A chasing the wild deer and following the roe,
My heart's in the Highlands wherever I go...."*

but, dutifully, she spent the rest of her days with David and the children on their Lowland farm.

Jimmy was not the youngest in the family, but his day began the same as the other children with a hearty serving of "panritch" made of oatmeal. The British termed this a "grain to be fed to horses in England, and as a food to men in Scotland." But, never-the-less, it nourished Jimmy sufficiently to grow into a man of great stature, both physically and mentally. He absorbed knowledge quickly and eagerly, and poetry fell easily from his lips.

"When ye gang awa', Jamie, far across the sea, Laddie...."

When he was twenty-one, his home ties were broken by joining two of his brothers, Peter and George, in sailing off to Canada. A brother, David, had already established himself in the Luther-Mount Forest area of Ontario. Two uncles, John and Peter McBain, were mill owners in the same locality. A sister, Jean, and two brothers, Alex and John, remained in Scotland.

Jimmy took with him a mottled green chest full of beautiful books, two large Morocco bound Bibles, a cloth bound Pilgrims Progress and colored plates of beasts and birds and fish. And, unable to leave behind him were the many songs of his childhood that flowed through his mind like rhythmic waters - "Ye Banks and Braes O' Bonnie Doon" ... "Annie Laurie" ... "Blue Bells of Scotland" ... "By Yon Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond" ... "Flow Gently Sweet Afton" ... "Duncan Gray" ... "Wi' a Hundred Pipers An' A' An' A'" ... "Come Under My Plaidie and Sit Down Beside Me" ... "Scots Wha Ha'e Wi Wallace Bled" ... "Gin a Body Meet a Body Comin' Thro' the Rye" ... and many more that remained a part of his nostalgic moments.

He was a man with many talents and quickly found work in the new country. He met and properly courted Catherine (Kate) Fisher, a daughter of prominent farmers, John and Margaret Wynne Fisher. They were married June 17, 1872, and, when his brother George made plans to move to British Columbia, Jimmy bought his farmland. On it, he built a two-story log house, a barn, a milk house and a pen for the pigs, all in addition to his daily chores on the farm. He added a shop later, in which he made pumps for wells, and sinking them required traveling about the area.

Within the next eight years, four daughters were born to him and Kate, Margaret, Ellena, Katherine and Mary.

Jimmy was an avid reader and newspapers came regularly, and, from one, he learned that the Detroit-Mackinac & Marquette Railroad was being extended into the upper part of Michigan. He immediately sold some of the farmland and a cow, but left one for Kate and the children, together with the house and the chickens. It was in 1880 when he left for the States, arriving in Chicago, where he took a job on a boat on Lake Michigan. The captain, realizing the potential of this huge man, offered him double salary if he would stay on, but Jimmy left and continued his purposeful journey to Marquette, where the construction company for the railroad had its headquarters. He was accepted and assigned to Sage Station, nine miles east of Newberry, with the responsibility of

supervizing the laying of the steel rail from St. Ignace to Marquette.

The "section house", where he was to live, was a clapboard building set in the dark elegance of the Luce County primitive forest, with the crystal waters of the Tahquamenon River splashing through walls of rock nearby. This was not only a physical challenge to Jimmy, but one to which his poetic soul responded.

As "section boss" he managed his men with firmness, finding it seldom necessary to raise his voice, and, because of his impressive stature, few ever disagreed with him.

Now that he had attained a certain permanency, and, undoubtedly needing a woman to help run the "section house" properly, he sent for Kate and his daughters. On July 1st, 1881, they arrived on the doorstep of their new home, with the cascading waters of the river almost under their feet. Jimmy hoped they would find the surrounding beauty as overpowering as he had, but Kate's disappointment was obvious and he probably re-acted to the situation as a lover of verse might by reciting.

"What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden-grey an' a' that
Gi'e fools their silks and knaves their wine,
A man's a man for a' that
For a' that an' a' that -
Their tinsel show an' a' that,
The honest man, tho' e'er sae pair,
Is king o' men for a' that!"

but the words fell on ears deafened by the realization of isolation and loneliness ahead.

Jimmy was a man of few words and, perhaps, one of the reasons his children did not assume his heavy Scotch accent, for, as they grew older, only words or phrases were repeated by them. He owned a concertina, a small hexagonal instrument with bellows and ivory button-like keys, which his massive hands played to accompany his singing of Scottish melodies.

Kate raised the children with a strict hand and they loved and respected her. Jimmy seldom interfered, his concern was with their conduct as "little ladies" and the proper length of clothes.

While still living at Sage Station, a son was born October 28, 1884.

He wore the same crown of red hair as Jimmy and the father pride was evident as he whispered

"Hush ye, my bairnie, my bonnie wee laddie,
When ye're a man ye shall follow ye're daddie..."

but it was not so. Walter, named for a brother of Kate's who had died in a boat explosion, never quite attained the stature of his father, lacking the introvert qualities and quiet manner. Walter was more out-going and volatile, yet possessing a similar gentleness.

After four years at Sage Station, Jimmy was transferred to Au Train in Alger County. The "section house" was located more than a mile from the town and the family moved there in 1885. Kate was happier in this new location for she met many people and was able to participate in town events.

"Au Train" was an Indian word for river so the name was obviously derived from the one that flowed into Lake Superior from the interior, dancing over rapids, moving slowly at times through the thick growth of trees, and then sprawling into the lake. At this point the buildings of the town clustered about in friendly fashion.

The commercial activities of Au Train were fishing, picking blueberries and hunting deer, but Jimmy was one least likely to stalk an animal and kill it.

The children were attending school in town and following a pattern of life consistent to the activities available. There were parties, dances, good neighbors and friends, and many joys no one could conceive unless a part of them. Jimmy stood by, never interfering but always watchful. His speech was firm but tempered with love, and when his children said "Daddy" it was with great affection.

One winter day, on their way home from school, the wind and snow combined to make the return trip impossible, so they took refuge with one of their teachers for the night. Without any means of communication, when they did not arrive home by nightfall, Jimmy, carrying a lantern, fought through the storm to the village and then knocked on doors until he found them safe. His gratitude was marked only by silence.

Few people realized Jimmy had a genuine sense of humor. It was a spontaneous thing which surprised his listeners, but another side of him he did not flaunt.

As the County Seat, Au Train held court sessions frequently, and jurors came from distant places. With few means of travel, some came by foot over rugged trails carrying heavy pack sacks. During this special "court week", there was much public discussion, and the Circuit Judge, in his off hours, engaged the natives in conversation in bars and on street corners, delighting in the stories of hunting and fishing, often told in French-Canadian dialect.

Jimmy's name appears in the historical records of Au Train, but he was not one to socialize or try to be a "man-about-town" person. He did make use of the local industry, a shingle mill and a shoe shop. The latter was a busy place as there was great need for made-to-order shoes and river boots, the work being done by hand.

The three hundred people in the town supported two newspapers, two general stores, three hotels and two bar-rooms. The saloons stayed open very late and were patronized by politicians, lawyers, lumberjacks, hunters and business men. The combined heavy odors of malt liquors, the scent of wool and buckskin clothing and pungent tobacco smoke filled the air. The gleaming brass rails and polished spittoons peek-a-booped through the moving shutter-like wall of leather boots and high thong-laced shoes. But, again, Jimmy would not be found here for, if, and when he drank it was a private and solitary thing.

When Munising became the County Seat, it was as if a spell of indolence had been cast over the village, and Au Train, the once lively, politically-active town, retreated into a state of lethargy. Still remaining though, the original deep tangle of forest, the rambling river with its tumbling falls, the tree shaded winding roads and the sad empty buildings. Thence-forth, it would be a center for vacationers to replenish their supplies; spend a few days disturbing, and even destroying, the beauty that Nature had been so kind to provide.

Jimmy and Kate separated around the turn of the century, a quiet private parting that the children accepted unhappily, with the realization that the Fisher pride and independence could no longer tolerate the Alexander self-indulgence in dreams and fantasies. To Kate it was a new beginning, but to Jimmy there was still a part of living that was done only within the mind, and his only expression was in his writings.

