

Title: Honouring the Black Community of Amber Valley Alberta

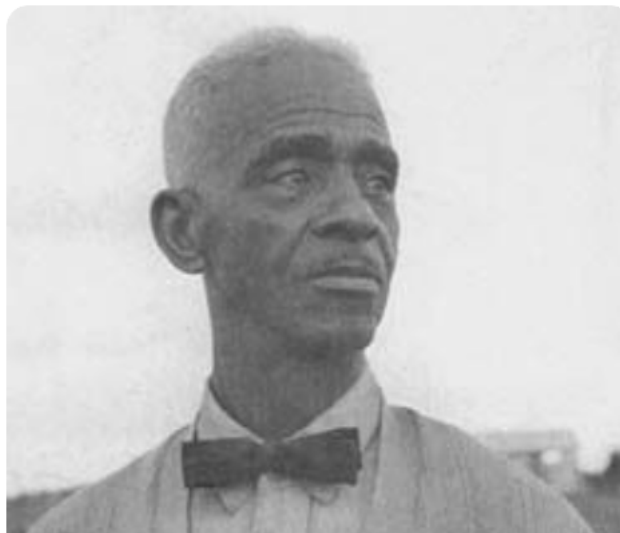
Sub: Black History Month in Canada

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It is hard to describe the sense of pride that I felt when I learned that Canada Post was creating a stamp paying homage to Alberta's first Black settlement, Amber Valley. I vividly remember hearing countless family members repeating stories that they recalled as children, as well as stories that were passed on to them from previous generations. That same pride I felt, clearly permeated my family history and will now continue to be honored by our Canadian postal service.

### **My Connection to Amber Valley**

The origin of this pride stems from a pre-civil rights era in the United States of America. My Great-Great Grandfather Jefferson Davis Edwards (Papa Edwards), like many other southerners from Oklahoma, sought a greater life, free from segregationist Jim Crow laws and constant racial hostility and violence. The spark of this great 'exodus' northbound originated in response to the Canadian government's offer to settle on free land\*. Papa Edwards, at the age of 21, was one of the few initial pioneers, out of what would later grow to approximately 1,200 people, to act upon this opportunity.



Papa Edwards

Yet, instead of the picturesque prairies advertised by the Canadian government, the free land was uncleared, swampy and teeming with insects. Nonetheless, Papa Edwards was determined to face any challenge in order to establish a greater future for his family and community. This initially meant clearing and sowing countless acres of land by hand, over many years, in order to sustain a suitable income-generating crop. Gradually the fruits of his labor increased, one head of cattle turned into two, then three and so on. His will to march on far outweighed the harsh climate and landscape in front of him.

As father of 10 children, Papa Edwards next realized that a school was needed, and in turn was instrumental in establishing the 'Toles' school district in 1913. As a spiritual leader in the community, he opened his house for church gatherings and social interactions. As the community rallied behind a growing sense of self-pride and identity, Papa Edwards went on to be co-founder of the Alberta Wheat Pool, established Alberta's famous first all-Black baseball team and was an active leader in local politics, sitting on the local hospital and school boards. His commitment to his family and community was a lifestyle, one that inspired and continued to better the lives of those around him.



Amber Valley Baseball team

As the families in the community grew, some left for other regions of our country hoping to lay down roots like those planted in Amber Valley. It seems to me that Papa Edwards had the ability to look down the corridor of time and consider future generations, every step he took was for the benefit and progress of those he loved. In 1973 the Government of Alberta recognized his significant contributions to the province of Alberta with an Achievement Award in Humanities, recognizing his exceptional contributions to the province of Alberta.

### **Canada Post's Recognition**

Each year, Canada Post releases stamps depicting Black Canadians or communities to mark Black History Month. For me, seeing these stamps, and especially this year's recognition of Amber Valley, is a reminder of the struggles and triumphs of past generations and a motivating force to current and future generations. It is a great way to honour our past and start conversations about Canadian history that might not be as well known.

### **Papa Edwards Memories Live On**

Over the years, countless memories of hardship were shared among my family. The achievements of Papa Edwards did not come easily, and my family faced racial hostility and discrimination in those early years. The results of this hardship continued to saturate and inform the identity of the generations that

followed. I believe it is important to recognize this aspect in order to understand personal identity, in hopes of moving forward... a continued journey toward a greater future.

The belief Papa Edwards personified of a 'greater future', I believe, is a 'cause so just' that others eagerly adopted it as their own. Perhaps similarly, during the civil rights era, Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech was so easily adopted as it too was a genuine belief of a greater future. I often remind myself of this and try to build upon it in my own life. The passion and commitment to strive for the betterment of all people is a noble cause worth fighting for. Thank you, Papa Edwards, for believing in a noble cause, for paving the way for those that followed, you are a true inspiration and will be remembered for generations to come.



Late 1940s, Papa Edwards stands beside a grain field in Amber Valley