

SECRET PLACES - ALBERTA'S HIDDEN STORIES
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Excerpt from “**Swiftholm**”

In 1892, American born Lewis Swift came up to Canada as a trapper and gold prospector. He roamed around for a time but then set up camp in the Rocky Mountains. The enterprising bachelor eventually took the long sojourn to get supplies in Fort Edmonton where he met a native, or most likely, a Métis woman named Suzette Chalifoux. She moved to the mountains with him. They homesteaded and began their family under the regal shadow of Pyramid Mountain.

The old Athabasca Pass Trail led through the Rockies near Mt. Edith Cavell, and descended into the Columbia River Valley. The Yellowhead Pass Trail branched from the Athabasca Trail at the confluence with the Miette River. It then followed the latter in a westerly direction up to and over the Yellowhead Pass into the valley of the Fraser River. The Klondike (Yukon) Gold Rush of 1897 and 1898 had reached a fever pitch. Hundreds of people seeking the mother load travelled up through the mountains to hook onto the Yellowhead trail.

Settled in with his wife and growing family, Swift recognized opportunities in the Rocky Mountains outweighed the elusiveness of trying to find gold up north. Swift remained in the Athabasca Valley near what is now the Town of Jasper, Alberta and became one of region’s most influential pioneers.

Lewis, Suzette, and their six children maintained a self-sufficient way of life by farming, fur trapping, hunting, and taking annual trips to Fort Edmonton to trade furs for staple goods. They became known for their hospitality. Lost or stranded travellers who showed up at the Swift home were never turned away, as was the mountain custom.

Lewis Swift's bigger than life personality and his exemplary community building initiatives made their mark. The fact that historic records and memories of Suzette exist — regardless that she was a native or Métis woman living in a time when no women were considered "persons" under Canadian law — can be attributed to her impressive, generous character.

Suzette was known as a splendid cook, fine homemaker, and a master craftswoman. One story that has been passed down about her is that she would quietly appear at an expectant mother's doorstep with a gift. All she ever asked for was a hot cup of tea. In exchange, she would present the mother-to-be with a beautiful moose tufted, embroidered, or knitted garment for the baby.

Mary Schaffer Warren, author of *A Hunter of Peace*, recounts her first encounter with Swift the mountain man and his family. Mary Schaffer was on expedition to Maligne Lake (Stoney Indians called it "Chaba Imne", Beaver Lake). Her companions were Molly Adams and guides Billy Warren (whom she later married) and Sidney Unwin. This particular journal entry would have taken place in the summer of 1908. She and her companions were trying to find the best way to get across the Athabasca River.

With the packs and saddles removed from the horses, "K" decided to fire a couple of shots with his rifle before getting lunch. Nothing materialized. Consequently the horses were turned loose, the tea was made, and we sat down to lunch, wondering how far Mount Robson and the Yellowhead Pass were from us.

A grating, thumping noise from over the water suddenly arrested our attention and we beheld a man loosening the queer-looking craft and about to make his way over. It was Swift. Chief went to welcome him. "M" and I in our excitement, forgot our unconventional garb and when he came upon to join us, felt no reminder of our extraordinary appearance in his greeting. "Women in your party?" he is said to have exclaimed. Well, well, whatever brought them here? Prospecting or timber cruising? No? Now look here, I've been in this valley for thirteen years and they're the first white women I've seen around these parts. Are you sure they aint prospecting?" He was courtesy itself. He told us "his woman" had heard the shots, so he came down promptly, knowing that Moberly and his family were away hunting. ...

By the time we could look around not a horse was in sight; Swift's two little girls were standing there glued to the spot, and not one word could be extracted from either of them. No wonder. Later we found we were really the first white women those children had ever seen: that they had been sent to tell their father to hurry home as a surveyor wanted to buy some potatoes, and that he was sending them back with a message, frilled in his own inimitable fashion, that "two white ladies had arrived and he was going to visit them and get all the news, potatoes or no potatoes." ...

Accepting Mr. Swift's invitation to camp near his home, we strolled leisurely up the next day, were met by our host, who was leading a very small boy in a very large hat, whom he introduced as "my son Dean Swift," and who used his eyes to effect to see those "first white women." ... Our tents were barely up when a hospitable procession was seen making its way through the poplars. First came Mr. Swift carefully balancing a pitcher brimming with milk, little Lottie followed with a pail of new potatoes all cleaned and ready for the pot, while tiny Ida brought up the rear with a basket containing a dozen fresh eggs. Later came Mrs. Swift carrying the youngest child, and, though her English was limited, we managed to get along nicely and returned the call in the afternoon.

That pioneer's little house was very interesting. Thirteen years previously Swift, and his wife penetrated here to make a home. By degree, he had brought in his stock from Edmonton over three hundred miles of as bad a trail as can be imagined, — cows, horses and chickens. His wheat field was yellowing, the oats were still green and waving in the soft warm wind. His buildings were of logs, sound and solid, made entirely by himself, his residences composed of one large room. Here we were welcomed by our hostess who showed how comfortable a family of six could be in so small a space. ... Everything was as neat as a pin. The chairs were home manufacture and covered with skins, and it was all a lovely study of what may be done with next to nothing in the land of nowhere. But when they offered to take us in too, during our stay, we simply marvelled, and rolled our eyes discreetly around to see where even these hospitable people could possibly deposit us for the night seeing none and being rather attached to our own comfortable beds, we decided to decline their kind offer.

Then Mrs. Swift (oh we women are all alike!) unearthed a box from beneath her bed and showed us a half dozen gowns made by herself most of them her bridal finery, and as we looked on the carefully treasured garments, I realised—be it mansion or shack—there is sure to be stowed away just such a precious horde around which a woman's heart must always cling. Then came her fancy-work which she did in the short winter days and the long evenings by candle-light, and began taking a deep interest. She had quantities of silk embroidery on the softest buckskin I have yet seen. Her silks she dyed herself, and her patterns were her own designing. There was a most delicious odour to the skins which she said was through their being tanned by poplar smoke. Gloves,

moccasins, and beautiful coats, we took everything and wished she had more: it was a grand afternoon's shopping for us all, for the lonely Athabasca woman and the two white women who had seen none of their kind for many a long day. That night we had fresh eggs for supper, and Mr. Swift and the little Swifts came to spend the evening with us.

20: Bound for Mount Robson

To waken in the morning to the crowing of roosters, the lowing of cattle, and the distant chatter of children, were strange sounds indeed to us who had lived so long with the winds, water, and birds, that we had to think twice where we were when we first opened our eyes. Then in answer to the rattle of a pan at the kitchen fore, we dressed and hurried out to the creek for a hasty scrub before the big eyes of the three observers should light upon us. Everyone stood around interestedly at packing time and Mr. Swift paid Chief the compliment that, all the outfits he had seen pass through, his was in the best condition. As it was now fully two months we had been on the move, to see every horse round and fat, every hoof well shod, every back sound, and every coat sleek and glossy, we certainly did feel proud of our horses especially when we met other outfits. Leaving our kind host about 9 A.M., we headed for our last goal, Mount Robson. The day was lovely and the trail was good one.