

Willis David Johnston
October 18, 1921 – August 25, 1995

and Vivian Theresa (Nelson) Johnston
March 17, 1926 – September 2, 1974



Willis, youngest child of Charles and Marie (Laffinier) Johnston, was born on October 18, 1921 in Calgary. He had an older sister, Dorothy (Johnston) Doerkson and two older half-siblings, Irene (Steffen) Belieu and Julius Albert Steffen. The family moved to Bezanson in 1923 to the homestead that Charles had filed on in 1912. Shortly thereafter, Charles purchased a ¼ section of land from “Doc” Labadie to which the family moved as there was a larger house and several outbuildings. Willis received his education at the one-room Bezanson School that was located on their property. Willis enjoyed hunting and trapping as a youngster – trapping which supplemented the family income and with his hunting and his mother’s large garden there was always lots to eat. Willis also had the contract to clean the school barn as another source of income. A trip to Grande Prairie to sell hogs was a two-day affair with a stop over at Glen Leslie.

Willis joined the Army in May, 1941. He was promoted to Sergeant in 1942 at which time he disembarked for England. He was part of the Normandy invasion and remained in the war zone throughout the entire campaign. He also had volunteered for service in the Pacific Theatre. He received the 1939-45 Star, France and Germany Star, Defense Medal, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal & Clasp and the War Medal 1939-45.



Once the war was over he was discharged at Calgary on May 31, 1946 and subsequently returned to Bezanson/Grande Prairie.

Willis met Vivian Theresa Nelson at a dance in Grande Prairie. She was born March 17, 1926, the 3rd youngest of a family of nine born to Ole and Ellen Nelson of Burdett, Alberta. Vivian had moved to Grande Prairie to stay with her sister in order that she could attend St. Joe's Business College.

Vivian had received her elementary education at Browndale School and graduated from the Gershaw High School in Bow Island, Alberta. Vivian was very athletic and especially liked to play ball and was known for her excellent pitching arm. Once Vivian graduated from College, she was employed with the Alberta Government in the Department of Lands & Forests in Grande Prairie. While living in Grande Prairie, she played on their Ladies Fastball team.

They married on November 20, 1947 in the McQueens Presbyterian Church located on the banks of Bear Creek. They lived in Grande Prairie at 10002-105 avenue, where the Dairy Queen currently is located. When Willis returned from overseas, he had purchased his father's ½ section of land. Willis operated land-breaking equipment and opened up a lot of land in the Bezanson area for those that were living there. A daughter Wanda was born in 1950. Willis realized in order to farm full-time he would need to move his family to Bezanson. He moved part of the original house that he was raised in to what would become known as the home quarter. He poured the foundation by hand by mixing the concrete in 5 gallon pails. He built on to the existing structure and the family moved in 1952/53. Shortly thereafter, Willis purchased the original Bezanson School Barn and moved it to his building site. The barn is still located on the farm property.

Willis and Vivian began cattle-ranching with Willis working out most winters in the oilfield construction industry, building roads & leases while Vivian looked after the cattle. Willis and Vivian had land leases that were located on a hogs-back just north of the Smoky Bridge on the east side of the river. Every spring they would move the cattle there for the summer. Willis had made a trail from the bridge area to the hogs-back with a little 440 John Deere caterpillar. The trail is still known to this day as "The Johnston Trail".



Willis purchased two more quarters of land adjoining what he already owned. Life on the farm was a busy one, looking after the livestock, putting up the winter's supply of hay, planting & harvesting a large garden, picking and canning wild fruit, butchering chickens. Willis was the "landscaper" and enjoyed planting all the lilacs, caragana hedges, spruce and pine trees and poplars.

As Vivian was such an accomplished pianist, their house was always the site of “house parties” – the main source of entertainment in those days. She often played the mouth organ the same time as she played the piano by means of some sort of contraption she wore around her neck. She also played the accordion – upside down as she was left-handed and also was quite an accomplished trumpet player.

Willis was a very staunch Conservative and campaigned for John Diefenbaker in his bid to become Prime Minister of Canada. Willis & Vivian were very involved in the Community and Willis and several others volunteered their services to build the teacherage at the Bezanson School in 1955. As well, as a member of the West Smoky Legion, Willis donated many hours of volunteer service to assist in the building of the “Memorial Arena” in Grande Prairie. They were always at any functions that their daughter, Wanda was involved in which meant Vivian did a lot of driving – often in a vehicle that was not too road worthy. Vivian was the secretary of the fastball team that Wanda played on, the Bezanson Tigers.

Vivian loved to curl and passed the time in the winters by doing so. Vivian was diagnosed with cancer in 1971. She fought a valiant battle however passed away at the Grande Prairie Hospital on September 2, 1974. The Funeral was held at the Trinity Lutheran Church in Grande Prairie with interment in the Glen Leslie Cemetery. Willis had a memorial trophy made in her name to be given out once a year at the local Curling Rink.

Willis sold the herd of cattle shortly after Vivian passed away and continued to work in the oilfield construction industry in the winter time. In 1977, he sold all of his land except for the home quarter. Willis’ health started to fail as he was diagnosed with cancer for which he underwent radiation treatments in Edmonton. After years of living with a heart condition, he was scheduled for a valve replacement in Edmonton on August 25, 1995 however did not survive the surgery. The funeral was held at the Oliver’s Funeral Chapel and at his request; Willis was cremated with the ashes being interred in the Glen Leslie Cemetery alongside his wife Vivian.