

A Trip Through Time in Our Historic Festival

By John J.N. Chalmers

The 27th annual Historic Festival and Open Doors event in 2023, presented by the Edmonton and District Historical Society from July 2 to 9, provided an opportunity to visit or participate in over 30 sites and events to sample the history of our area. This year, the festival theme celebrated Prohibition, which came into effect in Alberta in 1916 and ended a hundred years ago when voters of a plebiscite in 1923 decided that our province had been dry long enough.

After studying the fine [festival program](#), published both in print and on the EDHS website, I made a list of sites for a concerted effort to participate in tours, visit locations, or places to stop and see. My first stop was to visit Government House, adjacent to the former Provincial Museum of Alberta, and a former residence of Alberta's lieutenant governor, which I have seen many times, but never from the inside. For info on tours, [click here](#).



I have always been intrigued by Government House, which began construction in 1912, and the festival gave me a chance to see the interior! During my visit the huge dining area was set for a government meeting the next day. Although the facility is not available to rent for private events, the house is still used for meetings and official occasions. John Bowen was the last lieutenant governor to live there. Although he was Alberta's longest-serving representative of the monarch (1937-1950), he vacated the home after only about a year, following a conflict with Premier William Aberhart when the premier turned off the water, electricity and telephone service, and Bowen was forced to relocate! Thus ended the home's days of official residency.



Although outwardly historic in appearance and appropriately furnished, the modern upper-level meeting room of Government House features a domed ceiling. A projector in the centre is aimed at a retractable ceiling-mounted screen. Like others in the building, the room displays many fine paintings by well-known Alberta and other Canadian artists, adding to the pleasure of a visit. Want to go on a tour of Government House yourself? [Click here](#).



Located in the heart of downtown Edmonton is McDougall United Church, named for pioneer Methodist minister Rev. George McDougall. The impressive brick structure dates from 1909. It is the third church to bear the McDougall name and can seat 1,600 people. In contrast, the first church was a wooden structure at the site, which accommodated only 40 worshippers. The second church could seat 150 people. As well as a home for Sunday services, the church is a venue for concerts and other events. An electronic organ now provides music as the huge pipe organ is not presently in service but remains an outstanding feature. The original 1873 church can be seen today, as it has been relocated to Fort Edmonton Park. You can see a video about the church and its history [here](#).

My next stop was the Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, also located in central Edmonton. The impressive brick building dates back to 1913 and was in service during the First World War. My purpose was to see the Loyal Edmonton Regiment Military Museum on the ground floor, and while I was making a personal tour of it, a Historic Festival tour was underway in the [City of Edmonton Archives](#) on the second level, a resource that has served me well many times.



Entrance at the Armouries provides access to both the Military Museum and the City Archives. The museum displays provide a fascinating look at memorabilia that includes uniforms, armaments, medals, photographs and various displays related to military service. On the ground floor, the open area features exhibits of various army uniforms used by Canada. More info [here](#).

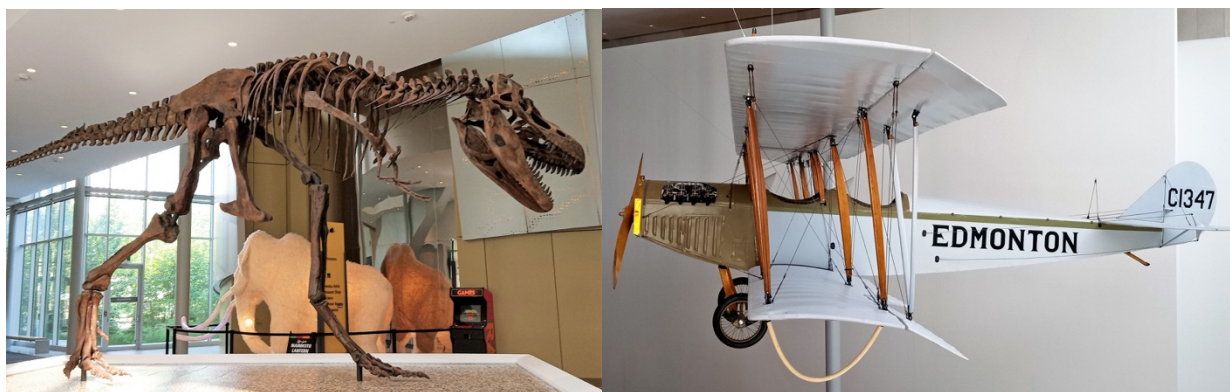
Another historic brick building in downtown Edmonton well worth visiting is the venerable McKay Avenue School. Built in 1904, it has the distinction of being Alberta's oldest standing brick school. It was the home of Alberta's first Provincial Parliament before our Legislature Building was erected. No longer functioning as a school, it is in daily use as the Edmonton Public Schools Archives and Museum and has facilities available to rent for special events. Although I didn't visit it during the Historic Festival, as I have been there a few times, it is a must-see location and can be visited for tours year-round.



McKay Avenue School is now nearly 120 years old, dating from the year before Alberta became a province. There is a historic classroom in the building, where school students can visit. The rest of the time, it is normally occupied by only one student, a mannikin representing famed Edmonton pilot Wop May, who attended elementary school there before going to Victoria High School in Edmonton.



On the grounds of McKay Avenue School is the oldest free public school in Edmonton. The 1881 one-room school has been relocated to its present site and is restored to show what a school looked like more than 140 years ago when a wood-burning stove was used to heat it.



[The Royal Alberta Museum](#) offered behind-the-scenes tours of the collection during the festival. Visitors are welcomed by Bertie the Albertosaurus, and, to be seen flying overhead, is the restored Curtis JN-4 biplane, once flown by Wop May more than a century ago.



The Edmonton branch of the Alberta Genealogical Society welcomes visitors to avail themselves of a great array of resources for research in family history. Thousands of books, magazines and historical records comprise a wealth of information available. Four computers with internet service are also available, as is assistance from volunteers on duty. Visitors are also welcome at monthly meetings with speakers on genealogical topics. www.abgenealogy.ca/edmonton Anyone in Alberta is familiar with the sight of huge grain elevators that once characterized the grain-growing areas of the prairies. Even though most of them are gone, it is fortunate a few are preserved for visitors to see. At St. Albert, two of those remain as monuments to history. I have always known the purpose of grain elevators and have now learned a lot about handling grain!



My tour began at the 2005 replica of the original 1909 St. Albert railway station. The original station is still in service, now at the [Alberta Railway Museum](http://www.albertarailwaymuseum.com). One magnificent elevator was built in 1906, the other in 1929. The complete operation of those wooden structures was explained from the arrival of grain in wagons or trucks, weighed, stored and ultimately poured into railway grain cars. Tractors and early farm implements displayed outdoors to add to the setting representative of our agricultural industry. See more info [here](#).



In the green Alberta Wheat Pool elevator, a 1938 Dodge truck adds to the authenticity of the elevator's operation. The vintage grain hauler is positioned on the scale for weighing and grain sampling before its front end is elevated for the truck to dump the grain into the bin below. Then, the vehicle is weighed again, the difference in weight providing the figure for grain delivered. At right is the pioneer 1890 Chevigny house on the same property as the elevators. A granary behind

the house was built by Edmond Brosseau, who established the tiny hamlet of Brosseau, which he named for himself! The house is one of three at the site, with one of them dating from the 1920s, where famed Brier and World Champion curler Hec Gervais was raised. The last owner of the house moved it to its present site in 1956. Several sites are operated by Arts and Heritage St. Albert.



St. Albert Place, the unique and large facility on St. Anne Street in St. Albert, is home to the Arden Theatre, the Library, and Musée Heritage Museum, the entrance of which is at the far right, my next stop in the Historic Festival. <https://stalbert.ca/exp/heritage/heritage-sites/>



In the Museum's feature gallery, displays were on the theme of Perpetual Motion, related to the early days of transportation, by such means as the horse-drawn cutter shown at left. At right is a lovely item from the exhibit, a beautiful beaded Cree saddle dating from the 1920s. Having driven from my home in southwest Edmonton to visit locations in St. Albert, I continued my drive to Westlock, where I wanted to see another museum named in the festival program. I was pleasantly surprised and captivated by the town's spacious [Westlock Pioneer Museum](#).

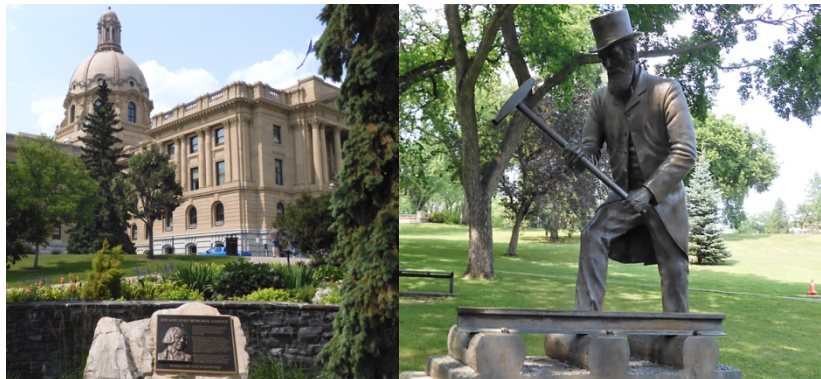


Among the featured exhibits are five major collections donated by individuals – a huge collection of rifles, an entire room of lamps, hundreds of dolls, an extensive collection of community history books, and some 200 phonographs and gramophones in the largest such collection you will ever see! Only a third of that amazing collection is shown here; some of those vintage items are in operating condition and can be played.

A kitchen exhibit includes hundreds of artifacts for domestic use in the home, and another exhibit creates a hospital scene that uses three mannikins, in which nurses are attending to a patient. Farm equipment, vehicles and agricultural implements in the museum help portray rural life.



An unusual vehicle in the museum is its ornate 1880 horse-drawn hearse that was donated by a local undertaker. It is one of the many unique items in this museum, which was such a treat to visit. Including locations outside Edmonton in our Historic Festival greatly added value to the event. Just a short distance away in Westlock is another museum, the [Canadian Tractor Museum](#). Although it was not on the schedule, I visited later and was glad I did! It houses more than 90 restored tractors, plus stationary engines, toy tractors and other artifacts related to our agricultural heritage. Two fine museums in one town!



A visit to the Legislature Building to take the Prohibition tour provided me with an opportunity to walk around the grounds of that great building, which began construction in 1907. Although I have been there a number of times, this was the first time in years, and a pleasant discovery was the Lois Hole Memorial Garden, created in honour of a well-known and well-loved lieutenant governor.

A commemorative plaque is placed in the garden, as seen above. Another famous Canadian, Donald Smith, known as Lord Strathcona, is remembered with a statue showing him driving the last spike on November 7, 1885, at Craigellachie, between Sicamous and Revelstoke in British Columbia, completing the Canadian Pacific Railway. A plaque on the Legislature grounds marks the last location of Fort Edmonton, located just below the Legislature Building.





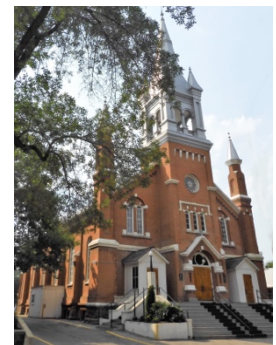
Inside the Legislature Building, the tour began at the capacious entrance of the home to Alberta's government with an opportunity to see and enjoy the magnificent architecture of the building at the start of our tour, which told the story of Prohibition in Alberta. At the same time, a free guided "regular" tour was in progress. The "Leg" (pronounced "ledge") is a location that every Albertan should visit! <https://www.assembly.ab.ca/visit/tours>



Besides providing the story of Prohibition in Alberta, the tour took our group to different levels of the building. We had the chance to see galleries of premiers, lieutenant governors, displays, and a look at the Chamber from an upper level where visitors are welcome to see the government in session when it is sitting.



To make your visit to the Legislature even more complete, other sites nearby within close walking distance can add to the experience. By the north end of the High Level Bridge is Ezio Faraone Park, named in honour of an Edmonton policeman who was killed in the line of duty and where he is commemorated with a statue. From the park is an excellent view of the High Level Bridge, the LRT bridge above our North Saskatchewan River. Nearby is the towering [Saint Joachim Catholic Church](#), completed in 1899, serving Edmonton's francophone community in Edmonton. Although I wasn't able to visit the church when it was open during the Historic Festival, it was still worth seeing, and interpretive plaques mounted beside its entrance, in both French and English, provided valuable information.





My visit to the Beverly district, where I have not been for many years, was a surprisingly rewarding and enjoyable experience. Once based on coal mining that continued until 1954, Beverly was originally incorporated as a village in 1913, eventually becoming part of the City of Edmonton with amalgamation in 1962. My first stop in this charming residential district was to see the Beverly cenotaph, erected in 1920 to remember Beverly citizens killed in the First World War. It was the first cenotaph to be built in Alberta. Remembrance Day services are still held at that monument. Now honoured are the losses of the Second World War, the Korean War, and Canada's military service in Afghanistan.



The coal scuttle and shovel seen at left below (Remember those?!) symbolize Beverly's days as a coal mining town, an important time in the district's early days. The Depression and the use of natural gas instead of coal for heating homes were difficult times for the coal industry and Beverly. A local history, *Built on Coal*, is a coil-bound history about the community that can be obtained by contacting the [Beverly Historical Society](#).



My final stop during the History Festival was to revisit the Provincial Archives of Alberta, intending to get a photo of the building and more pictures of the Dried Out exhibit, which is all about Prohibition in Alberta. It will remain until February 2024, giving visitors several months to see and learn about a colourful chapter in Alberta's history.



I arrived just in time to take a tour of the Archives, beginning with a stop at the Reading Room and an explanation of the research resources and services for visitors to use on-site. Next was a stop at one of the 20 huge climate-controlled vaults where our historical records are kept. Then we saw the audiovisual centre, where media such as reel-to-reel tapes, cassette tapes, and videotapes are digitally copied for preservation. Films are preserved by keeping them stored at a freezing temperature and can be copied from any format to a digital version, if necessary. The final stop in the tour was to the conservation lab where printed and paper documents and even glass negatives can be repaired, restored and preserved. We are fortunate in Edmonton to have both the City Archives and the massive collection of the [Provincial Archives of Alberta](#).

Sunday, July 9, was the last day of the Historic Festival and Open Doors 2023, but it didn't end in Edmonton for me. It did, however, conclude with another historic visit in the form of one more museum! For many years, I have wanted to see both the Gopher Hole Museum in Torrington and the spectacle of the Passion Play at the outdoor Badlands Amphitheatre in Drumheller. On July 9, my wife Linda and I left Edmonton to see both of them!



Called [The World Famous Gopher Hole Museum](#) because it has at least 10,000 visitors from around the world a year, the facility was built by joining two buildings together – a small century-old one-room school and the former office of a grain elevator. Coming into Torrington, visitors are welcomed by a statue of Clem T. GoFur. Once a village, Torrington is now unincorporated, governed by the Municipal District of Kneehill County and has a population of 300. Established in 1996, the museum is volunteer-supported, financed by donations, and operated by the Torrington Tourism Action Society. "A museum is more than a collection of old items and represents much more than that," says Laural Kurta, the volunteer director, "and our museum tells the story of our community." That's the appeal of local museums! Life in the community is clearly evident in the 49 dioramas with painted backdrops and 79 mounted Richardson's ground squirrels, better known as gophers, who portray life and history in Torrington. Of course, the gift shop offers many gopher-themed items!



A recent Torrington wedding is presented in the Community Hall diorama. At right, a rare black gopher prepares to make a purchase at a garage sale. Other scenes depict daily life in Torrington. After the drive to Drumheller on a sunny, hot, and perfect summer day, we attended the afternoon performance of the [Badlands Passion Play](#). This spectacular pageant tells the story of Christ in the setting of Alberta's badlands. Seating for the popular event, which runs on weekends in July, accommodates 2,500 spectators. Photography is not allowed during the Passion Play, so I hoped there would be no objection to taking a photo before the actual performance of life depicted 2,000 years ago. This was the 28th year of the production, with a cast of 70 players telling this great story. The play makes excellent use of the large versatile stage and surrounding badlands and hills for dramatic and memorable effects in Canada's largest outdoor theatre.



Drumheller is known for its location where dinosaurs roamed millions of years ago, and for the splendid [Royal Tyrrell Museum](#), located just a few kilometres from town. It was not on the schedule for this trip, but we have visited it in recent years. Like the Passion Play, a visit there provides a unique and rewarding experience in that marvelous museum.



The World's Largest Dinosaur, Tyra (as in Tyrannosaurus), lives in Drumheller at the downtown information centre. At 86 feet high, it towers over all who come and is big enough for tourists to go up the 106 stairs inside for the view from the jaws, where a visitor in its mouth appears about to be swallowed, as seen here. Drumheller has been recognized as the Dinosaur Capital of the World, where the creatures can be found abundantly throughout the downtown area and willingly pose for photographs.

Some dinosaurs appear to be domesticated, and even working in the community, such as one at the Fire Hall, but any should be approached with caution, especially when taking a selfie with one! [More photos here.](#)



The stark beauty of our badlands reminds me of the time when dinosaurs roamed Alberta, and driving through the badlands makes me think I am travelling back through time when the earth was younger. We came home to Edmonton via a different route with two more things to see. First was the [Bleriot Ferry](#) across the Red River; we hadn't used it for decades. The first ferry there began operation 110 years ago in 1913. The next stop was the town of Delburne. I wanted to see if the water tower for steam trains, which I photographed over 40 years ago, was still there, expecting it to be gone like so many of our grain elevators of the same era. To my delight, the water tower has been preserved, moved from its original location beside the tracks to a location in town beside the [Anthony Henday Museum](#) as part of a historical display that includes a CNR caboose.



There is [so much to see](#) as we travel through history in our beautiful province!

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