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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

of Medicine Hat and District Newsletter

Esplanade Archives 1061.0008

Aerial image, wing of plane visible, ca. 1930

President's Message

Medicine Hat and District Historical Society

Next Meeting:
Thursday March 20, @7pm
Monarch Theatre

I lost count of the number of American tourists to museums I was managing who asked: "Why is Canada was not part of the United States?" My answer evolved over the years, but one of the principle reasons was because after the American Revolution four colonies stayed loyal to Britain and that gave us a different heritage. From that viewpoint, our work in the Historical Society has become a small part of a vital, necessary, cross country effort which has too often been overlooked and underfunded. You, the Membership, and your Board of Directors, are helping to keep current, and spread to others, diverse memories, stories and physical features of what has been becoming a different way of living than that of our southern cousins.

One way we help has been by providing financial grants for projects brought to us by sister organizations. We are able to help due to the work some of you put into helping host a casino. There never seems to be enough though and one of the hardest letters to write was turning down a local group who needed more than we could provide. Other requests come from quite a distance and that has spurred us to better define our district boundaries. We now have a much better focus on where we want to concentrate our efforts.

Our presentations are a major part of our efforts to retain parts of our past. The last presentation brought us up to date, and pointed to the future of Medalta, one of our community's unique historic resources. Our next presentation will be on the McKenzie Sharland Grocery, one of our few remaining structures of what used to be neighborhood centres here and in communities across the country. By holding our meetings at the Monarch Theatre we are helping draw attention to what may well be the oldest purpose built movie theatre in the country. Not everyone has been comfortable in this new location, thus your Board will be consulting you shortly to gauge the pros & cons of continuing to meet at the Monarch.

The frugality of our forbearers continues to shape our outlook and our Society's finances are in good shape. As always, if you have any questions or concerns regarding any part of our operation, please do not hesitate to bring them to our attention as we continue our democratic tradition of being open and transparent.

Warm Regards,
Bruce Shepard
Historical Society President

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Programmes

The Rescue of the McKenzie Sharland Grocery *by R.B. Shepard*

Our next presentation will be by our current First Vice-President, Malcolm Sissons. He will be speaking on "The Rescue of the McKenzie Sharland Grocery" on Thursday, March 20th at the Monarch Theatre. A short Business Meeting, beginning at 7:00 PM, will precede the presentation.

Due to our experiment with a briefer meeting, concerns have been raised regarding the timing of the refreshment break. We now encourage you to pick up your coffee and cookies in the Lobby when you first enter the building and let the beverage cool during the Meeting. The break and socializing will follow the business summary, as is our custom, and then the presentation will begin, with a focus on the successful efforts to save the McKenzie Sharland Grocery. Credit grocery stores were once a feature of urban and life across the country. They were important parts of local economies as communities such as Medicine Hat and the Historic Clay District struggled through world wars and economic depressions. Ours was also the home of the McKenzie and Sharland families; Len Sharland having lived in the building for eighty-two years. The disastrous flood of 2013 and its impact will also be discussed as well as the historic designation, reconstruction and current use and setting in McKenzie Mews.

Sharland Building, ca.1981

Image Courtesy of www.mckenziemews.ca

Our presenter will be Malcolm Sissons who believes that his keen interest in history can be attributed to his father Jack and the family's long presence in our community. After attending public schools in Medicine Hat, Malcolm attended the University of Alberta's College Saint-Jean where he obtained a degree in Romance Languages and History.

He then spent a year at the University of Grenoble in France studying communications. After a brief stint working at the U.of A. he returned home to work in the family brick business, I-XL. Among his many interests, Malcolm was previously the Secretary of our Society for many years and more recently chaired the City's Heritage Resources Committee. After he retired from I-XL, he and his wife Jennifer took on a project which became bigger than originally planned and will be the topic of his presentation.

Please remember that our Annual General Meeting will be held at Holy Family Church on Thursday, May 22, 2025. Doors will be open at 5:00 PM; Dinner will be served at 6:00 PM, and the cost will be $20.00 per person.

Your Annual Membership can be renewed. Our popular Show and Tell event will be featured and tables will be available to those wishing to take part. Any Member wishing to stand for election to the Board is encouraged to contact the Past President, Judy Morris.

From Up, Up and Away

Aerial images from the Esplanade Archives *By J. Barrientos*

Aerial photographs offer a unique perspective on the past, capturing landscapes from above and revealing how communities evolve over time. The Esplanade Archives holds an extensive collection of over 650 historical aerial photographs, dating from ca.1915 to the early 2000s. These images provide an invaluable record of Medicine Hat and its surroundings, documenting changes in land use, urban development, and natural landscapes over nearly a century.

One of the greatest values of historical aerial photographs is their ability to show gradual transformations that might otherwise go unnoticed. They reveal shifts in agricultural practices, the expansion of city infrastructure, and even changes in river courses or vegetation patterns. For example, did you know Seven Persons Creek has been extensively rerouted since 1910? Aerials help date this gradual change from the top down. By comparing images from different decades, researchers, historians, and archivists like myself, can track how Medicine Hat has grown, identifying patterns of development and areas of historical significance.

Taking aerial photographs in the early 20th century was no simple task! Unlike today, when satellite imagery and drones make aerial photography widely accessible, early aerial photographs required significant effort. Airplanes were expensive to operate, and specialized camera equipment was cumbersome and designed primarily for still photography rather than motion capture.

Photographers had to carefully plan each flight, ensuring they captured clear and useful images while contending with weather conditions, fuel limitations, and the technical challenges of taking high-resolution photos from a moving aircraft. Many of our archival images are beautiful, but decidedly blurry (see example below). Despite these challenges, aerial photography became an essential tool for mapping and documentation. Governments, surveyors, and private industries used these images for purposes ranging from land assessment to military reconnaissance. The images I've used thus far are from the Panter fonds, a collection created by a civil engineer and Associate of the Royal Photographic Society, Richard A. Panter. The images, taken in the 1930s, were actually not developed from their negatives until 2015, and donated to Archives in 2020.

Blurry aerial photograph, Panter fonds, ca. 1930. 1061.0007

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Downtown Area, ca. 1987

The City of Medicine Hat took a set of aerial images in ca. 1987 to document the city's growth, and to use for promotional materials.

Image of the Downtown area. Note the 'new' City Hall building and the old Post Office still standing.

Recently, I had the opportunity to thoroughly search through our aerial photograph collection with the help of a dedicated volunteer. Our goal was to locate an unmarked area of Medicine Hat in Crescent Heights—something not easily done using traditional maps or addresses. Aerial photographs proved to be an essential tool in identifying the landscape and understanding its historical context. Without them, finding a location that lacks a street address can be like searching for a needle in a haystack! But with the help of an aerial view, we were able to match geographical features, roads, and landmarks to determine the site's location.

Beyond research and discovery, aerial photographs also hold personal and cultural significance. They provide a visual history of the places people have called home, offering a sense of connection to the past. Whether someone is looking to see how their neighborhood once appeared or how a particular piece of land has changed over time, these images tell a story that might otherwise be lost.

The Esplanade Archives' aerial photograph collection is a fascinating window into Medicine Hat's history. For anyone interested in understanding the city's transformation, these photographs offer an extraordinary way to explore the past from a perspective few get to see. You can browse our aerial images on our website at collections.esplanade.ca.

The Saamis Tepee

The Dedication of Medicine Hat's most well-known Monument *by J. Barrientos*

The Saamis Tepee is one of Medicine Hat's most iconic landmarks, standing as a tribute to Indigenous heritage and the region's deep cultural history. The project began in September 1989 with the formation of the Saamis Tepee Association, a group dedicated to creating a monumental structure overlooking the Saamis Archaeological Site. This location, considered one of the most significant Northern Plains archaeological sites, contains over 83 million artifacts, offering invaluable insights into the lives of Indigenous peoples who lived in the area for thousands of years.

A major boost to the project came from local entrepreneur Rick Filanti, who acquired the two massive entrance poles from the tepee originally built for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary. His purchase generated significant enthusiasm, allowing the Saamis Tepee to take shape as a lasting cultural symbol rather than a temporary Olympic structure. The 20-storey tepee was strategically placed along the Trans-Canada Highway, ensuring it would be seen by travellers passing through Medicine Hat, drawing attention to the region's Indigenous history and contributions.

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Tepee Dedication, 1993

From its inception, the Saamis Tepee site was designed to be more than just a landmark—it was meant to serve as a gathering space for cultural and educational activities. Over the years, it has hosted Indigenous round dances, powwows, and community events that celebrate and preserve the traditions of local First Nations. This commitment to cultural engagement has made the site a meaningful place for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors, fostering greater awareness and appreciation of Indigenous heritage.

One of the strongest supporters of the project was Dan Weasel Moccasin, a member of the Saamis Tepee Association. He worked to build community support, gathering signatures from members of the Blood Reserve, many of whom were encouraged by the renewed interest in Indigenous culture. His efforts helped ensure that the tepee would not only be a striking visual feature but also a place of cultural significance and connection.

The Saamis Tepee was officially dedicated in 1993, the event attended by dignitaries from the Kainai, Blood and Metis Nations. As one of the world's tallest tepees, it continues to stand as a testament to the resilience and rich history of Indigenous peoples in the region, welcoming visitors and serving as a reminder of the land's deep cultural roots.

Membership Dues & Upcoming AGM

Join the Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District

Did you know: Our Membership dates run from MAY (2024) to APRIL (2025)?
Not from January (2025) to December (2025)!

If you haven't bought your 2025 membership, you are unfortunately, *very past due*! Your $10 membership to the Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District allows you to cast your vote on deciding factors at our meetings, as well as receive 5 editions of our Historical Society Newsletter via email or printed copy. Not to worry, you can pay your $10 membership dues by cheque by mail to the address below. Please make cheques payable to: **The Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District,** 401 1 Street SE, Medicine Hat, AB, T1A 8W2.

Please join us for our Annual General Meeting on May 22nd for a dinner of pulled pork on a bun, beans and salad ($20), and Show and Tell Programme. To RSVP to the dinner portion, please contact Lynne Rance at 403-527-7914 or Sheila Tiegs at 403-580-8283.

In Memoriam: Sharon Clay

1943-2025

Long-time Historical Society member, Sharon Clay passed away in early February at the age of 81. Sharon was a member of the choir at Westminster United church, a teacher at Webster Niblock School, and later, a member of Medicine Hat and District Retired Teachers' Association. We send our deepest condolences to her family, and remember Sharon's special connection to Medicine Hat by sharing her love and joy to the community.

Image: Cook Southland

Word of Thanks

The Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District partners with the Esplanade Archives in preserving and promoting our rich heritage. The Archives are a valuable resource for family research and local historical information. To make an appointment at the Archives, please call 403-502-8582, or email Jenni Barrientos at jenbar@medicinehat.ca. The Archives are located at 401 1 Sttreet SE, Medicine Hat, AB T1A 8W2, and as always, are free for you to use.

The Historical Society of Medicine Hat and District website: ***www.histsocmedhat.ca***

Board of Directors

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