

THE VAL MARIE ELEVATOR

A LIVING HERITAGE PROJECT



A project by...

HERITAGE
SASKATCHEWAN

in collaboration with the
Val Marie Heritage, Culture and Youth Grain
Elevator Restoration Committee

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INTRODUCTION

Kristin Catherwood



When I was a child, there were three grain elevators in Ceylon which I could see from my bedroom window. I remember driving the eight miles to town in the grain truck with my dad. I remember going up the steep incline of the ramp into the maroon-coloured Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator, hoisting the truck box, and watching the golden stream of grain run into the pit below. I remember the smell of grain dust in the air, the noise of the elevator doing its work, the way the light looked as it streamed in the large open doors. My younger brother, born eight years after me, has no memory of a single grain elevator standing in Ceylon, much less hauling grain to one. Eight years difference between us and that much change. So goes the story, and the living heritage, of agriculture in this province. It is a story of almost constant change. And yet, people hold on to memories of what once was because it still means something to us now.

There is perhaps no building more symbolic of farming in Saskatchewan than the wooden grain elevator. Once so common a sight as to seem almost superfluous, the National Trust for Canada named wooden grain elevators to its Most Endangered Places list in 2015, and for good reason. Once numbering in the thousands, only a few hundred remain, and more are lost each year. And for those elevators that do still stand, most are not positioned for an enduring future, but face slow deterioration and neglect. This is not the case in Val Marie, where great efforts have been undertaken to ensure the continuity of this heritage.

My own experience with the Val Marie heritage elevator started when I brought a friend to visit Grasslands National Park. An easterner, she was just as fascinated by grain elevators as by some of the last remaining native prairie in Canada. We learned we could get a tour of the elevator by a local man, Maurice Lemire. He took us through the elevator, telling stories about his memories growing up as the son of the elevator agent. It was the first time I had been inside an elevator since hauling grain to one with my dad more than a decade earlier. I recognized that they have something very special in Val Marie - not only have they saved the structure, but they have created an opportunity for people to actually go inside and experience a grain elevator.

This living heritage project is intended to celebrate the work the community



has done so far, to document some of the stories that make this particular elevator unique, and to encourage the continuing efforts to maintain the structure and interpret its living heritage. Heritage Saskatchewan defines living heritage as: values, beliefs, and ways of knowing and living we have inherited from past generations that we still use to understand the present and make choices for the future. Living heritage forms our sense of identity as individuals and our relationships with others, thus shaping our communities and quality of life. This project's goal, in alignment with these principles of living heritage, is to celebrate the wooden grain elevator in Val Marie, not just as a physical structure, but to also recognize the importance of its intangible cultural heritage – in short, what the elevator actually means to the community. This meaning has changed and will continue to change throughout time. If the elevator is to remain standing for decades to come, it will be because new generations see value in its continuing existence.

The stories contained in this collection were written mostly by people living in the Val Marie district. It is a collection of narratives from a variety of perspectives, including those from locals with deep family roots in the area, and those from newcomers who came to this place in part because of its proximity to Canada's only national park devoted to the endangered native prairie. Interwoven throughout these mostly local stories from local people is an understanding of belonging to a larger living heritage – that of the agricultural settlement of the prairies. These stories come from *here* and make up the overarching narrative of the living heritage of *this* place, and yet I would be willing to bet that many of the sentiments and opinions expressed herein will be recognizable and relatable to other prairie persons.

That is one of the goals and the intent of Heritage Saskatchewan's living heritage projects: to gather narratives of local places in such a way as to speak to the province as a whole. Val Marie's elevator and its living heritage are unique, but there are common themes and threads that will no doubt echo the experiences of other Saskatchewan farming communities. In gathering and sharing these stories based on one common theme, we see the diversity of one community. Imagine, then, the diversity of our province, of the countless stories it contains and the many different ways that land has been conceived of, interacted with, and used throughout time, across cultures, and according to the external forces of economics and politics.

For as much as this booklet contains, it of course leaves out much more. No

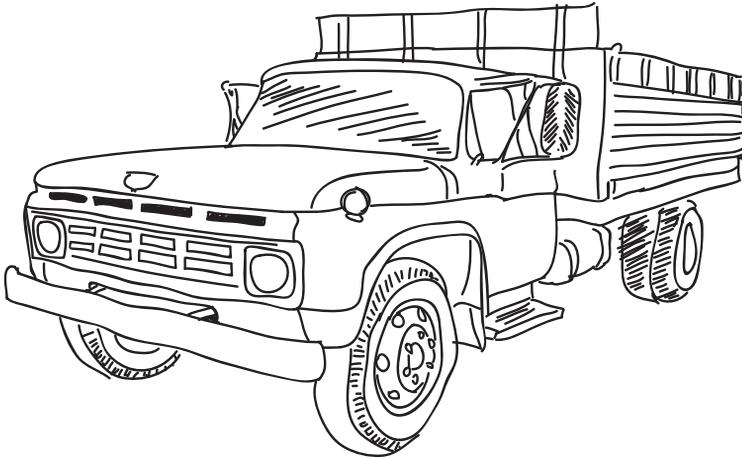
story is one-sided, and though there is much to celebrate about the elevator, there are other perspectives to consider as well. These are not given as much weight in the pieces presented here, for a few reasons. In a community project where we attempt to gather as many perspectives as possible, people often hesitate to write stories that may be perceived as negative or critical. Secondly, we often view the past through a lens of what folklorist/historian Ray Cashman termed “critical nostalgia.” We remember things more positively, and/or selectively choose which memories to share. Therefore, the “other side of the story” is not always told. However, I would be remiss to not acknowledge at least some of these differing perspectives here. One of them is the role of the elevator agent in town. In the hierarchy of rural life, the agent was sometimes viewed in a negative light – regardless of the individual’s character. Early on in the research for this project, I spoke to a local retired farmer (who has since passed away). When I told him about the project, he had hard words about the elevator, and about his experience farming in general. At one point he made a comment about taking in his grain quota book and a match and setting it on fire. He declined to be involved with the project. Another local farmer had this to say on the subject:

“The agents didn’t work for the farmers, they worked for the grain company. Bringing grain in on a wagon – if you didn’t like the price you got, you weren’t going to turn around and go home. There was usually more than one in town, but there wasn’t much competition. Farmers were at the whim of the grain companies. Measures like the Wheat Pool were created to help farmers, but still they had to haul within a designated area. So farmers were vulnerable, and yet they needed the elevators, and a town could not thrive without an elevator. There was never a great love affair between the farmer and the elevator agent.”

Conversely, there are stories of elevator agents sometimes mixing together different qualities of grain in order to average out the grade – giving those farmers with a lower quality of grain a better price. The fact of the matter is, the elevator as a building represents myriad human relationships and activities, and wherever humans interact, especially in a venue related to one’s livelihood, conflict is bound to occur. However, those community members who participated in this living heritage project chose not to speak to these attitudes. And almost everyone I’ve talked throughout this process would gladly have the elevator agent back in town, and a working elevator, and a

viable railroad. All of those things represent livelihoods and prosperity for the community. Their loss foretold hardships to come for both townspeople and those living and working on the land.

This booklet tells part of the story of a significant aspect of Val Marie's living heritage. I encourage you, the reader, to discover more. If you are physically in the Village of Val Marie, the Prairie Wind & Silver Sage Ecomuseum is a great place to start. The community history volumes *Val Echo: A History of Val Marie* (1955) and *Prairie Footprints Then & Now* (2008) are excellent resources. But any community's best resource is its people, and so now I turn to them, the people of Val Marie and district, to tell us something about the heritage grain elevator.



Kristin Catherwood is the Intangible Cultural Heritage Development Officer for Heritage Saskatchewan. For her Master's thesis in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland, she researched the barn as a symbol of the family farm in southern Saskatchewan. She has worked for SaskCulture, the National Film Board of Canada's Grasslands Project, and is a writer and filmmaker in addition to her work with Heritage Saskatchewan. She specializes in community engagement, and her love and respect for Saskatchewan's rural cultural landscape is at the heart of all her work.

THE WAY IT ONCE WAS...

Ervin Carlier Jr.



Travelling south of Cadillac on Highway 4 towards Val Marie, one passes farmland with residences scattered quietly amongst the fields and trails. It is not an uncommon sight in Saskatchewan. Then the view suddenly changes and the traveller is surrounded on both sides by an expanse of native prairie. One has passed from the way it is now into the way it once was.

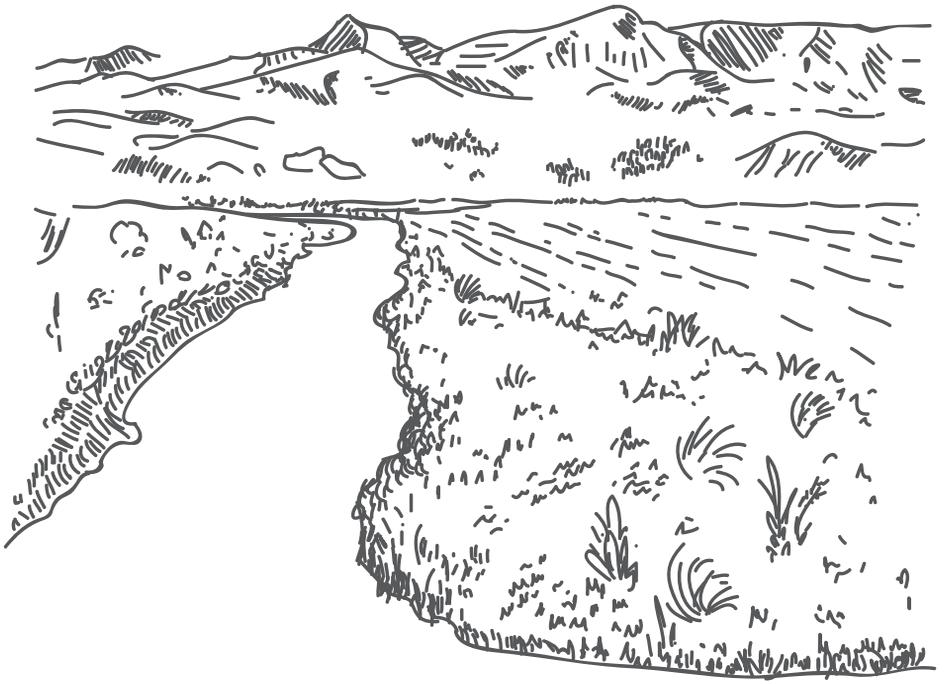
It is about 10,000 years since the end of the last ice age. The prairie reclaimed the land, licking at the roots of the melting ice as it retreated. The large herbivores – intermingled with a vast array of smaller species of birds, bugs and small mammals – soon followed. Over the decades and centuries a rich membrane of native prairie took hold and replenished itself, layer upon layer, to form the mixture of forbs, mosses, sedges, brushes and grasses that exist today.

The indigenous peoples moved onto this vastness and began a relationship with the land and the animals that lasted for a hundred centuries. They must have looked at this land with the same mixture of awe and wonder that we now experience. As we truly begin to appreciate the encompassing vastness of the prairie, we are aware that others have been here before us. They left, numbering among the thousands, the signs of their presence in stone teepee rings and vision sites and caches. A special place for us – such as a view or quietness – has signs of those who came before us.

Then they were gone. The plains were emptied of their original peoples, at first in slow increments then quickly as a result of European incursion, disease and starvation. Railways pushed into the prairies and settlers followed closely behind. Homesteads were “proven up,” the land was broken by the plough and the giant sentinels, the elevators, rose from their place by the tracks.

Ervin Carlier Jr. was born on New Year's Day in the Val Marie Hospital in 1953. He grew up on a farm just north of Val Marie where his parents Ervin Sr. and Jacqueline Carlier still live. He took most of his schooling in Val Marie but finished his final year of high school at Swift Current Comprehensive School. He attended the University of Saskatchewan for a couple of years and travelled in Europe and Africa. These travels especially were formative in his belief of our good fortune to live here in

Canada. He was married and helped raise three children on the farm. He now has five grandchildren – the sixth generation of Carliers in Val Marie. Ervin was the Asset Manager for Grasslands National Park for thirteen years. He was a member of the Board of Education for nine years and more recently was the chair of the Southwest Enterprise Region. He is currently the SK Co-chair of the Highway 4 lobby committee, and a member of the Val Marie Rural Municipality Council. He has served on numerous service clubs and committees. He continues to farm and ranch the Carlier family farm.



WOODEN CRIB GRAIN ELEVATORS IN SASKATCHEWAN

Ali Piwowar



Wooden crib grain elevators are important architectural icons within Saskatchewan's evolving culture. On a large scale, they are a product of the co-operative agricultural economy and national rail network that shaped the province of Saskatchewan and Canada as a nation. On a small scale, the elevators are an architecture that has evolved from functionality to monumentality, deeply rooted in the identities of prairie communities and their people. The wooden elevators are important because they – perhaps more than any other building, site, or artifact – illustrate tangible and intangible cultural heritage of agriculture in Saskatchewan for individuals, communities, and the entire province.

The grain elevators played – and continue to play – two distinct, yet equally important roles for prairie people. Originally, they were built to weigh, clean, and store grain from the farmers in the area. Out of this fundamentally functional characteristic, the metaphysical role of the grain elevators emerged. The sheer size and verticality of the wooden structure, and its siting within a village, town, or hamlet, fostered a sense of identity for the people living and working within its horizontal environs. It became a landmark for farmers, townspeople, travellers, railroad engineers, and pilots, thus contributing to its cultural influence and monumentality. However unintentional this monument was, it is impossible to deny the cultural significance of the rural elevators (Flaman).

Grain elevators are built forms that characterize the agricultural history of the prairies. Some have referred to the structures as the most Canadian of architectural forms as they have appeared on “dollar bills, postage stamps, and as Canada’s exhibits at world fairs.” (Vervoort.). The life and death of wooden elevators in Saskatchewan parallels the trend in the province’s agricultural economics and Canada’s railway system. There is an irony in the narrative of the elevators: the same progress that brought the elevators to the prairies is what is destroying them today. Still, grain elevators have reflected, and continue to reflect, the evolution of prairie society.

The tall rectangular structure with a pitched roof is a form derived from the

function of the grain elevating mechanism. The cribbed construction of stacked 2x4, 2x6, and 2x8 timbers spiked together proved to be a structural feat in its ability to withstand the fluid pressures of grain circulating through the structure and the environmental pressures of weather pressing in from the outside.

Between 1900 and 1950, wooden grain elevators were very common sights across the prairie provinces. The number of wooden grain elevators on the prairies peaked around 1930 at over 5,758, with a combined capacity of 190 million bushels (Vervoort; Butala). According to Jim Pearson, a grain elevator historian, only 432 wooden elevators remain standing in Saskatchewan, many in disrepair. As of 2004, only 361 wooden elevators were licensed in all of Canada, of which only a portion were located in Saskatchewan (Vervoort). Today, less than 100 country elevators are actually in use (Pearson). At least four more elevators have already been demolished in 2018.

“[Grain elevators] became a landmark for farmers, townspeople, travellers, railroad engineers, and pilots, thus contributing to its cultural influence and monumentality.”

The changing agricultural economy, reduction in rail transportation, and outdated mechanical functionality of the wooden grain elevators has led to their disappearance. Concrete “inland terminals” and steel silos have gradually been replacing the wooden elevators since the mid 1990s. Besides being constructed of different materials and inheriting a much different form from the wooden elevators, the concrete terminals differ in their capacity, efficiency, and location. Where the average capacity of a wooden elevator was 35,000 bushels, concrete terminals average 100,000 bushels. The amplified capacities in the concrete terminals led to an increased service range for farmers in the area who historically had access to a wooden elevator every 10 miles to trade their grain. Few wooden elevators received updating in their lifetime, as the structure was perceived as incapable of supporting new grain handling technologies.

The destruction of wooden elevators is often vicious and wasteful: “the now

redundant elevator was toppled over, crushed and burned,” wrote Flaman. The National Trust for Canada acknowledges one of its “worst losses” was the Fleming, AB, grain elevator destroyed by fire in 2010. Unfortunately, grain companies that own many of the remaining elevators prioritize financial and liability issues over heritage conservation and order their demolition.

However, there is evidence in several prairie communities of attempts to preserve their elevator(s). The majority of prairie communities that have managed to acquire their elevator have modified them into museums or historic sites. A unique example of an elevator adaptive reuse is in the town of Dawson Creek, Alberta, that converted its grain elevator and its annex into an art gallery (Dawson Creek Art Gallery).

Through architectural interventions, it is possible to transform the grain elevators from a place for grain to a place for people. There is a significant amount of opportunity to adapt grain elevators into community centres, office spaces, restaurants, businesses, hotels, residences – just to name a few. Imagine the incredible prairie views that could be seen from a coffee shop in the cupola! The elevator’s dramatic wooden atmosphere creates an unparalleled spatial character that can be experienced by the community.

The adaptive reuse of the elevator into community spaces does far more than simply save the elevator from demolition: new programming and resultant architecture generates interpersonal relationships and economic viability while establishing an important public space for the community and acting as a reminder of the past. The elevator’s living heritage, through change, memory, narrative, identity, and cultural value, will continue to connect prairie people to the land. Most importantly, the adapted architecture of the grain elevator will generate social interaction, promoting co-operation and strengthening community. The success of the adaptive reuse of wooden grain elevators is ultimately a collaborative effort on the part of politicians, public and private actors, architects, and prairie communities, and should cultivate and reflect the identity of its respective community.

A note from the author:

This essay was derived from my Master of Architecture thesis entitled, Living Heritage: Re-imagining Wooden Crib Grain Elevators in Saskatchewan, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, 2015.

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Ali Piwowar completed her professional Master of Architecture degree (2015) as well as her Bachelor of Architectural Studies (2013) at the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism, Carleton University in Ottawa. Ali worked as a researcher at Carleton Immersive Media Studio (CIMS) working on the Cultural Diversity and Material Imagination in Canadian Architecture (CDMICA) project under the direction of Dr. Stephen Fai. She has worked as a researcher for The National Trust for Canada and is currently working as an Intern Architect with the Heritage Conservation Services, at the Government of Canada. Ali’s MArch thesis research focused on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the wooden grain elevators in Saskatchewan – her home province. She has presented her research at various conferences and workshops. She was awarded the Henry Adam’s Medal from the American Institute of Architects, The Herb Stovel Scholarship from the National Trust for Canada, and the Carleton University nomination for the Canadian Architect Student Awards of Excellence.

WHY THE ELEVATORS STILL STAND: THE VILLAGE OF VAL MARIE'S ROLE

Kristin Catherwood, in conversation with former Val Marie mayor, Robert Ducan



Perhaps one of the most remarkable attributes of Val Marie's heritage elevator is that it still stands. Even more remarkable is that the village still has two standing elevators. What was once commonplace in prairie towns has become rare. It is no accident that some towns and villages retain their elevators while many do not. If an elevator still stands, it is because someone, or a group of people, made an effort to keep it. This was certainly the case in Val Marie, when, at the critical juncture where the elevators faced demolition, then mayor, Robert Ducan led efforts to keep the structures intact.

In 1999, the village council was interested in pursuing heritage designation for the 1927 elevator. A letter received from Glenn Fingler, Registrar of Heritage Property within the ministry of Saskatchewan Municipal Affairs, Culture and Housing dated April 21, 1999, advises Mayor Ducan that, "railway lands and operations and grain elevator operations are administered and controlled through federal legislation. In all cases, federal legislation has precedence over provincial legislation." As such, the letter concluded, Saskatchewan's Heritage Property Act "does not provide the authority for a municipality to designate a site currently operating under federal legislation, such a designation would be considered invalid."

Robert Ducan recalls, "We knew that they [Saskatchewan Wheat Pool] were getting rid of all their elevators. It was in the news at the time. My thought at the time was, these elevators are disappearing, and we ought to keep one." He continues, "I've seen so many places where they don't give a thought to their heritage, and then places where, because things didn't get torn down, these things later become assets to a community. People don't put enough value on heritage places, but at the time I thought we could be one of the few places that would still have an elevator down the road."

On May 10, 1999, the village council passed a motion "that the village will pursue the donation of the old elevator from Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, and that a letter of intent be sent to the local wheat board members for approval to do so." They were proactive in their efforts. Later that year, the village

received a letter from the Asset Management branch of the Country Services Division of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Dated November 29, 1999, the letter clearly states what Ducan and the councillors already suspected:

“It is the intention of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool to look at demolishing the elevator located in your town/rural municipality within the next year, if alternate solutions are not found for these facilities. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool is presently preparing budgets for the demolition costs of these particular facilities. I am asking for assistance to obtain the following necessary information in order to determine the cost of the demolition. Please note, this does not necessarily mean that the elevator(s) within your community will be demolished.”

“
...instead of always tearing everything down, I just thought that [the elevator] was something we should have in Val Marie, because there probably wouldn't be many, especially the older elevators, because those are pretty rare now...”

A special council meeting was called for the Village of Val Marie on February 28, 2000, with Mayor Robert Ducan in attendance along with councillors Roland Facette and Stella Glas and clerk Linda Acker, as well as Paul Jeanson and Lynn Grant representing the local Saskatchewan Wheat Pool committee. Roland Facette made the motion that “the Village of Val Marie place with the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, a bid of \$1,000.00 for the Val Marie A Elevator, and a bid of \$1.00 for the Val Marie B elevator...” The motion was carried and the paperwork put in place to begin the process of purchasing the elevators from the Wheat Pool. The sale was finalized in July, 2002.

Of these events, Ducan recalls:

“The Village bought both the old and new elevator – the old one for \$1, and the new one for \$1,000. The Pool planned to abandon them, meaning that they would be torn down. In the future, I thought someone would really appreciate that they were still standing. Why don't we just buy them, if nothing else, we'll just leave them standing for posterity. The new one was

sold for about \$7,000 to a group of farmers within about a year. It was just a thing of, instead of always tearing everything down, I just thought that this was something we should have in Val Marie, because there probably wouldn't be many, especially the older elevators, because those are pretty rare now, and they're special. At the time, I don't think there was a person in town who wanted to see them torn down. I didn't hear one word of complaint about us buying those. We got lucky – the elevators down the road sold for \$50,000 at Bracken. Just because we happened to be the first ones, we managed to get ours for almost nothing. At the time, the Pool saw them as liabilities. I'm sure happy we did buy them and that they're still around. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say it was a bad idea.”

Village documents refer to “Elevator A” and “Elevator B” – “A” being the Wheat Pool elevator built in 1967 and “Elevator B” the heritage elevator built in 1927. As Ducan mentioned, Elevator A was bought by a group of local farmers for weighing and storage. It is still being used for this purpose presently. As for Elevator B, the heritage elevator at the centre of this project, in 2000 the efforts were made to save it from demolition, even though there was no plan for its potential future. The Village acted quickly to make sure the building was kept, demonstrating great foresight. Ducan remembers:

“I didn't have the time to do anything about it [the elevator] then, but I knew that somebody would come along - it only takes one person. And that maybe in 20 years it would become something. And then Maurice Lemire came along and it's because of him that anything is happening with it.”

In 2003, the council created a bylaw designating the elevator as a municipal heritage building. With these protections in place, the Village of Val Marie demonstrated its commitment to preserving the elevator, thus enabling all the efforts that have followed.

Robert Ducan grew up in Halifax and was enjoying early retirement on Vancouver Island when, during a trip across Canada, he had a vehicle breakdown near Val Marie. While waiting for repairs, he learned that the former convent was due to be torn down. As someone who valued heritage structures, Robert decided to step in to help save it and then, as he says “got carried away.” He and his wife, Mette, relocated to Val Marie in 1996, restored the convent and turned it into an inn, which is now operated by his son. He served as mayor of Val Marie from 1999-2003. He and Mette continue to live in Val Marie.

Bylaw No. 6/03

A bylaw of the Village of Val Marie

To designate a site as Municipal Heritage Property.

WHEREAS Sections 11 and 12 of *The Heritage Property Act* authorize the Council of a Municipality to enact bylaws to designate real property, including all buildings, features and structures thereon, to be of heritage value; and

WHEREAS the Council of the Municipality has determined that the lands and premises known as: *The old Val Marie Elevator*, and located at: 110 Railway Ave. Val Marie, Sk. S0N 2T0 is a site of architectural, historical, cultural, environmental, archaeological, palaeontological, aesthetic and/or scientific value; and

WHEREAS the Council of the Municipality has caused, not less than (30) days prior to consideration of this bylaw, a Notice of Intention to Designate to be;

- a. Served on the owners of said property;
- b. Served on the Registrar of Heritage Property;
- c. Registered on the Certificate of Title for said property in the appropriate Land Titles Office; and
- d. Published in at least one issue of a newspaper with general circulation in the Municipality; and

WHEREAS no Notice of Objection to the proposed designation has been served on the Council of the Municipality;

THEREFORE, the Council of the Municipality enacts as follows:

- 1. There is designated as Municipality Heritage Property the real property legally described as:
 Lot 2, Block 14, Plan 02SC05736 as described on Certificate of Title 02SC08453B

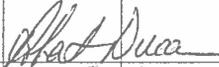
The reasons for the designation are as follows:

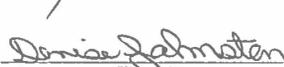
- a. The elevator was built in 1927 and is one of the few elevators of that era still standing.
- b. Council would like to preserve the architectural & Historical landmarks of the area.
- 2. The Municipal Administrator is hereby authorized to cause a Notice of Designation to be:
 - a. Registered on the Certificate of Title for said property at the appropriate Land Titles Office; and
 - b. served on the owners of said property.
- 3. The municipal Administrator is hereby authorized to cause a certified copy of this bylaw to be served on the Registrar of Heritage property.

Read a first time this 14 day of July, 2003.

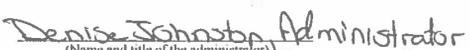
Read a second time this 14 day of July, 2003.

Read a third time this 14 day of July, 2003.


(Signature)


(Signature)


(Name and title of Mayor)


(Name and title of the administrator)

Statement of Significance

Site Name: The old Val Marie Elevator

FILE: MHP 2252

Designation Authority: Village of Val Marie

Description of Historic Place:

The old Val Marie Elevator is a Municipal Heritage Property occupying a .6 ha lot on a former Canadian Pacific Railway siding at the south end of Centre Street in the Village of Val Marie. The property features a wood-crib grain elevator built ca. 1924, a frame-type annex built in the early 1950s, and a detached one-storey office.

Heritage Value:

The heritage value of the old Val Marie Elevator lies in its association with Saskatchewan's evolving grain industry, and in its status as one of the last remaining grain elevators of its age in the Val Marie area. From the 1920s onward, the province's privately-owned "line elevator companies" underwent a series of amalgamations in response to growing competition from the farmer-owned Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Built around 1924, the old Val Marie elevator was owned by a succession of private grain companies, eventually becoming part of the Federal Grain Ltd. system. In 1972, Federal, then Canada's largest private grain company, was purchased by the prairie Wheat Pools. Saskatchewan Wheat Pool operated the Val Marie elevator until 2000, when, like many small prairie communities, the village lost its rail line.

There were once over 3,000 "country elevators" in Saskatchewan. With the evolution of transportation networks and changes in the grain handling system, however, the traditional wood elevators are rapidly being replaced by large, centralized terminals. It is estimated that fewer than 500 of the iconic wood elevators still exist province-wide, and their numbers continue to dwindle. The old Val Marie Elevator, still located on its original site, is a valued landmark that anchors the village's principal streetscape and commemorates the community's agricultural heritage.

There is further heritage value in the property's architectural and mechanical integrity. The elevator is a largely intact example of the sloped-shoulder, standard-plan elevators that were promoted by the Canadian Pacific Railway during the first half of the twentieth century. The elevator's cribbed construction, in which dimensional lumber was stacked and nailed on its wide side, created a strong and relatively fire-resistant structure for the storage of large amounts of grain. The elevator's weighing, elevating and cleaning equipment enabled the efficient receiving, sorting, storage and shipping of grain. The positioning of the elevator, annex and office on their original sites on the former railroad right-of-way illustrates the typical spatial configuration of a prairie elevator complex.

Source:

Village of Val Marie Bylaw No. 6/03.

Character-Defining Elements:

The heritage value of the Val Marie Elevator resides in the following character-defining elements:

- those elements that contribute to the property's landmark status and speak to the elevator's prominent role in the community, including the location of the elevator, annex and office on their original sites at the head of Centre Street on the former railway right-of-way;
- elements that reflect the typical grain elevator architecture of the period, including the elevator's tall vertical proportions with its sloped-shoulder gable roof and cupola; the attached drive shed with tall, double wood doors and earth approach ramps; the elevator's wood-crib construction; the annex's wood-frame construction with exterior wooden staircases; the windows and window patterning of the office and elevator; the wood and tin cladding and roofing materials of the elevator, annex and office; the catwalk connecting the elevator and office; and the original spatial relationships among the structures;
- mechanical elements related to the elevator's grain handling function, including the grated receiving pit and weigh scales, the elevating mechanism (the "leg"), distributor, cribbed storage bins, spouts, controls, drive mechanisms, man-lift, and grain cleaning apparatus.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VAL MARIE ELEVATOR COMMITTEE

Judith Wright, with contributions from Maurice Lemire, Diana Chabros, and other past and present elevator committee members



Saskatchewan grain elevators have been disappearing for decades, but thanks to the work of the Val Marie Heritage, Culture and Youth Grain Elevator Restoration Committee, the heritage elevator in Val Marie has new life.

Maurice Lemire, 78, and Past President of the elevator committee, remembers what inspired him to try to save the elevator: “Every day I walked past the old elevator and every day another piece of siding or a shingle had fallen off.” His reason for wanting to save the elevator was clear: his father, Arthur L. Lemire, was the elevator’s first agent and ran the elevator for 32 years. Arthur came from Quebec to the Coderre area, south of Gravelbourg, in the mid 1920s. He was one of the few bilingual speakers in the Alberta Pacific Grain Company.

Lemire remembers spending time at the elevator growing up: “We swept up the dust, and my brothers cooped the cars – closed the openings on the box cars with heavy planks and paper to prepare it for hauling grain.” His dad gave him and his five brothers haircuts at the elevator when business was slow. The straight-backed chair that served as their barber chair – with a board laid across the arms for added height – is still there in the elevator office.

After his father retired, the elevator continued to operate for another forty years. In 1967, Canada’s centennial year, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool constructed a second grain elevator in Val Marie, south of the original elevator. Around 2000, when the railroad stopped serving Val Marie and semi-trucks began hauling grain to the new concrete terminals at larger centres, the old grain elevator stood empty.

In the year 2000, the Village of Val Marie decided to purchase the derelict elevator from the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Then Mayor, Robert Ducan, was responsible for preserving the village’s heritage buildings. After some time passed, Lemire approached the village council about doing something to save the elevator, whose condition was deteriorating. He called together

some friends and neighbours. The first meeting occurred thanks to the efforts of Pat Stewart, who did much of the initial ground work getting people interested and to attend. “Catherine MacCaulay was there, Johane Janelle and Wes Olsen, Paulette Legault, Eugene Dumont, and Pat Stewart,” recalls Lemire. The meeting took place in 2009.

The exterior of the elevator was in dire need of attention and the roof shingles needed replacing. “We had different ideas to raise money,” said Lemire. “I made some miniature wooden grain elevators; we wrote on them: ‘Saving the Elevator a Penny at a Time.’ One was in the bar and one in the grocery store. One of them is in the elevator office now.”

The first big project undertaken was to dismantle the elevator annex, which had stood mostly empty since the ‘60s. During that work, Lemire was approached by a filmmaker from British Columbia, and the elevator became the subject of a short documentary, “The Prairie Sentinel: The Grain Elevator of Val Marie” (produced by Bill MacFarlane, 2010, and available on YouTube). The wood from the elevator annex (solid fir timbers) was used to build a log cabin – the second big committee project. Raffle tickets were sold on the cabin to raise money to refurbish the elevator exterior. The log cabin, now a private home, stands on Railway Avenue not far from the elevator.

In 2013, the committee received a sizeable grant from the Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation, and also received charitable status. At last the shingles and siding of the elevator were replaced, repairs made to the exterior, and the building was painted. Some of the roofing work was done by the Sand Lake Hutterite Colony. The painting was completed by a crew from Alberta with special equipment that allowed them to work 70-90 feet in the air!

Timber from the old annex continued to be sold. In 2016, the Committee hosted a supper/storytelling and music concert plus a live and silent auction. In 2018, Heritage Saskatchewan partnered with the committee on this living heritage project to produce a documentary and published booklet for public distribution. Lemire continues to show the elevator to interested tourists and explains how it worked. People usually find him through Prairie Wind & Silver Sage Ecomuseum, or by contacting one of the committee members.

The committee’s small projects have been diverse and numerous: making furniture and saddle stands for auction, catering evening meals for Parks Canada, erecting a stone with plaque in honour of Arthur Lemire, and

building flower boxes and benches to beautify the grounds of the elevator.

Of the long-term vision for the elevator, Lemire, now a lifetime advisor on the committee, says, “We’re not sure. The committee changes, new members come on, and there are different ideas.” In addition to the already budding museum housed within the elevator office, a recent brainstorming session of the committee produced several exciting options: a performance and film theatre space? An art gallery? A community radio station? A demonstration facility for tourists? A market square and garden hub? As with every large community project, the final outcome depends on time, money, and interest.

The committee remains an active part of village life. Its most immediate goal is to sell the remaining wood from the annex and clean the interior of the elevator, setting the stage for redevelopment of the space.

Val Marie Heritage, Culture and Youth Grain Elevator Restoration Committee Members Past and Present*

Maurice Lemire <i>President and Chair 2009 – 2017</i>	Pat Stewart
Wes Olson	Debbie Legault
Johane Janelle	Bob Harwood
Catherine Macaulay	Wolfgang Gaessler
Paulette Legault	Diana Chabros
Laureen Marchand	Don Brown
Karen Fargey	Madonna Hamel
Eugene Dumont	JulieAnne Coté

*All efforts have been made to identify those individuals who sat on the committee over the past decade. We sincerely regret any inadvertent omissions. Several other individuals not named here have assisted with the elevator restoration over the years. We sincerely thank them.

Judith Wright found her way to Val Marie through the usual attractions: the park, the people, the peace and quiet. She lives in the cabin built by the elevator committee. Although she is not a full-time resident, she hopes to retire here and picks up elevator committee work as it comes to her.

In 2012, Diana Chabros felt the call for change and relocated from Regina to the deep southwest near where her maternal grandparents homesteaded. A trained visual artist with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Master's in arts education, her work can be found in public and private collections. Diana is a consultant/manager for her busy life partner, interdisciplinary artist and Nehiyó/Cree knowledge keeper, Joseph Naytonwhom. She also operates a small bed & breakfast in Val Marie.

TWO ELEVATOR STORIES

Maurice Lemire

THE ELEVATOR



I would like to tell you a bit about myself. My journey started on the great slopes of the Rocky Mountains. My name is Douglas Fir. I'm standing here high and tall with my friends, the cedars and the larches. It is March, 1924, on a cold and calm morning. All of a sudden the silence is broken. People are coming with all their tools to cut us down. They are now dragging us around and piling us on the riverbank.

As spring came around, we were pushed into the water where we drifted downstream to what they called the mill. We lay around for a long time waiting for the next surprise that came when we were pushed through a large saw blade that sliced us into lumber. Then they moved us unto a large room where we did a lot of sweating. I heard one of the men say it was a kiln. Before we knew it we were being loaded onto large, flat cars all hooked together. There was smoke coming from one end.

Next morning, everything began moving slowly toward the rising sun. We were travelling through the mountain, valleys, and tunnels. We stopped at a town where people began loading a black rock into cars behind us. Some said it was coal from the collieries.

To our surprise, one morning we could see people with darker skin and hair than those who loaded us. We heard someone say the train was travelling through the Blood First Nation in Alberta. Apparently these lands were taken in 1898 and 1903 for the building of the railway. We saw many people, horses and dogs moving about. On the plains, animals could be seen for miles. Buffalo and antelope they are called. The grass is lush and tall, looking very beautiful as we slowly move towards the morning sun.

We slept for a few more days in rain and cold. Then suddenly we came to a halt. People began bustling around making all kinds of noise. They picked us up from the long car we were on and put us on the ground in different piles.

The next day, and for days after, men were laying us on top of each other in various directions. I heard one man say they were building a crib-style grain

elevator. We all wondered what that was. Pretty soon, we were going so high towards the clouds that we could see for miles. To our surprise, our cousins the cedars, who had already been cut into small, thin, oblong shapes, were brought to the top and laid side by side. They said they were covering the roof to keep out the rain. Then cedar siding was nailed over us, all the way down to the ground, and a maroon colour of paint was applied. Very smart did we look! Another small building was built right next to us. It was called the office.

Next morning, people starting coming with horses and wagons bringing what they called grain. A stout man was unloading the grain and putting it in our insides to keep it safe and dry.

Now, ninety-five years later, we are still standing at the end of the street hugging our little town of which we are so proud. People come to see us and want to know about our past. They take photographs, which makes us very proud.

A DAY TO REMEMBER

My day started in March, 1945, when I was five and my brother, Paul, was six. It was a very exciting day because we were allowed to follow our father over to the grain elevator where he was the agent as well as Jack-of-all-trades. Our home was about half a mile from the elevator. This was haircut day. Dad was a self-taught barber who cut our hair and also cut hair for many bachelors in the area.

First thing, we had to warm up the little office where the bookwork was done when customers came for different services. As the office was heating up, a gentleman came over to get a load of coal. Dad gave us each a piece of paper and a purple pencil that we had never seen before. We were to keep ourselves busy while he went out to weigh the customer's truck and show him where to load the coal. When Dad returned, he smiled when he saw our purple mouths. We had been sucking on the inedible pencils without knowing the results.

As the little building warmed up, Dad brought his big office chair to the middle of the floor and placed a wide board across the arms for us to sit on so he could start cutting our hair. Halfway through my haircut, we were interrupted by another customer. A lady came in and had a friendly chat with

Dad. She wanted a hundred pounds of flour delivered to her home by the drayman. She probably wanted the decorative, cotton flour bag as much as the contents.

Another exciting thing going on was the arrival of the train. It disconnected box cars at different locations on the track – six cars were left behind the elevator to be loaded with grain, and one car was full of coal. One more car placed farther down the track was loaded with freight boxes full of miscellaneous hardware, kegs of nails, groceries, and bags of flour to be unloaded and delivered to various stores in town.

By the time Dad finished our haircuts, a local bachelor showed up for his cut. We just finished cleaning up when another of our brothers came running in to tell Dad that one of the old milk cows was having her calf. We hurried home to make sure everything was good. That was the end of our excitement for the day.

The rest of our day was taken up with work such as feeding chickens, picking eggs, hauling water, bringing in wood and coal for the cook stove. We always had a great meal prepared by our sisters and our mother.

The old elevator has since been refurbished and looks like new today.

Maurice Lemire was born July 8, 1940, in Ponteix, the ninth of eleven children to Arthur and Arlene Lemire, who originally came from Quebec. Arthur started his career with Alberta Pacific doing “cutoffs” – weighing all the grain in an elevator to ensure the agents were honest. In 1927 he became the elevator agent at the new Alberta Pacific grain elevator in Val Marie. Maurice grew up across the track from the elevator on the banks of the Frenchman River. He started school at the little brick schoolhouse in Val Marie and finished his Grade Nine at the Convent. He grew up speaking French at home and he didn’t learn English until he started school. He worked on seismograph crews before returning to Val Marie in 1959 and married Noella Morin, a schoolteacher originally from Ferland, in 1963. They raised two children. Maurice worked for the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA) for 34 years on the West Val Marie and Val Marie irrigation projects. After retirement, Maurice raised and trained horses. Noella passed away in 2011. Maurice’s efforts to save the elevator resulted in the formation of the Val Marie Heritage Elevator committee. Maurice has five grandchildren. Maurice and his partner, Pat Stewart, live on an acreage just east of Val Marie. They spend much of their time travelling and pursuing various hobbies.

DELIVERING WHEAT TO THE VAL MARIE ELEVATOR

Jack Gunter



When I was seven or eight years old, I remember delivering wheat to the Val Marie elevator with my dad with a team or horses on a high-wheeled wagon. The tail gate was made in two pieces – the bottom part was about ten inches high with a hinge in the middle and a lever that locked across the back. When you got to the elevator, you could remove this part of the tail gate to let the wheat out. The wagon box held sixty bushels of wheat. Some farmers had what they called a tank wagon that held ninety bushels of wheat.

We lived in the Hillendale district – fifteen miles from the elevator – so my dad would get up early in the morning and go to the barn with the lantern to feed and harness his horses. It was usually fall when he was hauling wheat and the days would be short. Dad would have to have the wheat on the wagon the night before.

Some wagons had a spring seat on top of the box, but my dad's had a plank across the top of the box. You sat on that with your feet hanging in front of the box. The horses could walk four miles in an hour with a load, so it would take us three and three-quarter hours to reach the elevator.

I remember one day we were on the flat about two miles from town. There was a big farmer that lived about five miles from town and he had a big team of well-fed horses and a big tank wagon with ninety bushels of wheat on it. He caught up to us, his horses were trotting at a brisk pace. He pulled out, passed us, and went right on to the elevator. My dad said that he would probably make several trips to the elevator that day.

When we reached the elevator, the horses would drive right up the ramp and over the scale so that the wagon was on the scale but the horses were not. There was a place to put the front wheels of the wagon. After the wagon was weighed, there was a part that would come up to keep the wheels from rolling off as the hoist lifted the front wheels of the wagon up with cables run by the engine that popped a tune in a shed beside the elevator. Then the bottom part of the tail gate of the wagon was removed and the wheat was let out. It

went into the pit and from there was elevated to the right bin. The elevator agent would take a sample of the wheat as it ran out, put it through a sieve and weighed it for dockage and grade. Then he would make out the ticket and pay my dad with a cheque from the grain company.

They would have the weight of the wagon when it was empty, so Dad would go to the coal shed and put on a load of coal from the winter. He went back to the elevator to weight the coal and pay the agent for it. He would take the horses and tie them to the slab fence along the tracks and go to the restaurant for lunch. Then he would pick up some supplies that my mother had asked for and we would return home. It made for a long day for a boy.

We hauled some wheat with our new truck that we got in 1949, but by that time we were mostly into ranching. When I took over the ranch in 1960, that was the last year we sold any wheat. After that we put everything up for feed for the cows.

Jack Gunter was born June 18, 1935, in Ponteix and grew up in the Hillandale district. He grew up ranching with his father, Russell "Curly" Gunter, fifteen miles northeast of Val Marie. He took his schooling through correspondence until Grade Eight. In 1955 he married Irene Garella, who grew up in the Stove Lake District south of Ponteix. They started ranching on the West Flat in 1955, raised four children there, and continue to live and ranch alongside their son and grandson.



MEMORIES OF THE WOODEN GRAIN ELEVATOR

Doris Kornfeld



In the early 1900s, grain elevators in Saskatchewan numbered in the thousands. Today there are just a few hundred left across the province. The early designed elevators, like the heritage elevator in Val Marie, are few and far between now. These elevators have been fondly referred to as “prairie sentinels.”

When we try to imagine how these elevators were constructed without, power tools, electric lights, electronic gadgets, etc., we should be amazed at the engineering talent and the craftsmanship of the people who designed these structures, and the hard work of the men who sawed the boards and pounded the nails.

My brother and I were about six and seven years old when we accompanied our father to the elevator with a load of grain. What a thrilling and exciting trip! I remember driving up the ramp into the elevator and we had to get out of the truck and stand out of the way. After the truck was weighed, the elevator agent went to the office where he started a motor, which had a unique “popping sound” and this motor produced the power to lift the truck up on the hoist. My heart nearly stopped when the metal frame that the front wheels were parked on began coming up out of the floor and gradually raised the truck up in the air. The elevator agent then opened a small chute door at the end of the truck box and the grain emptied out and disappeared down into a big hole. I was mystified and scared to death that our truck would fall off the hoist.

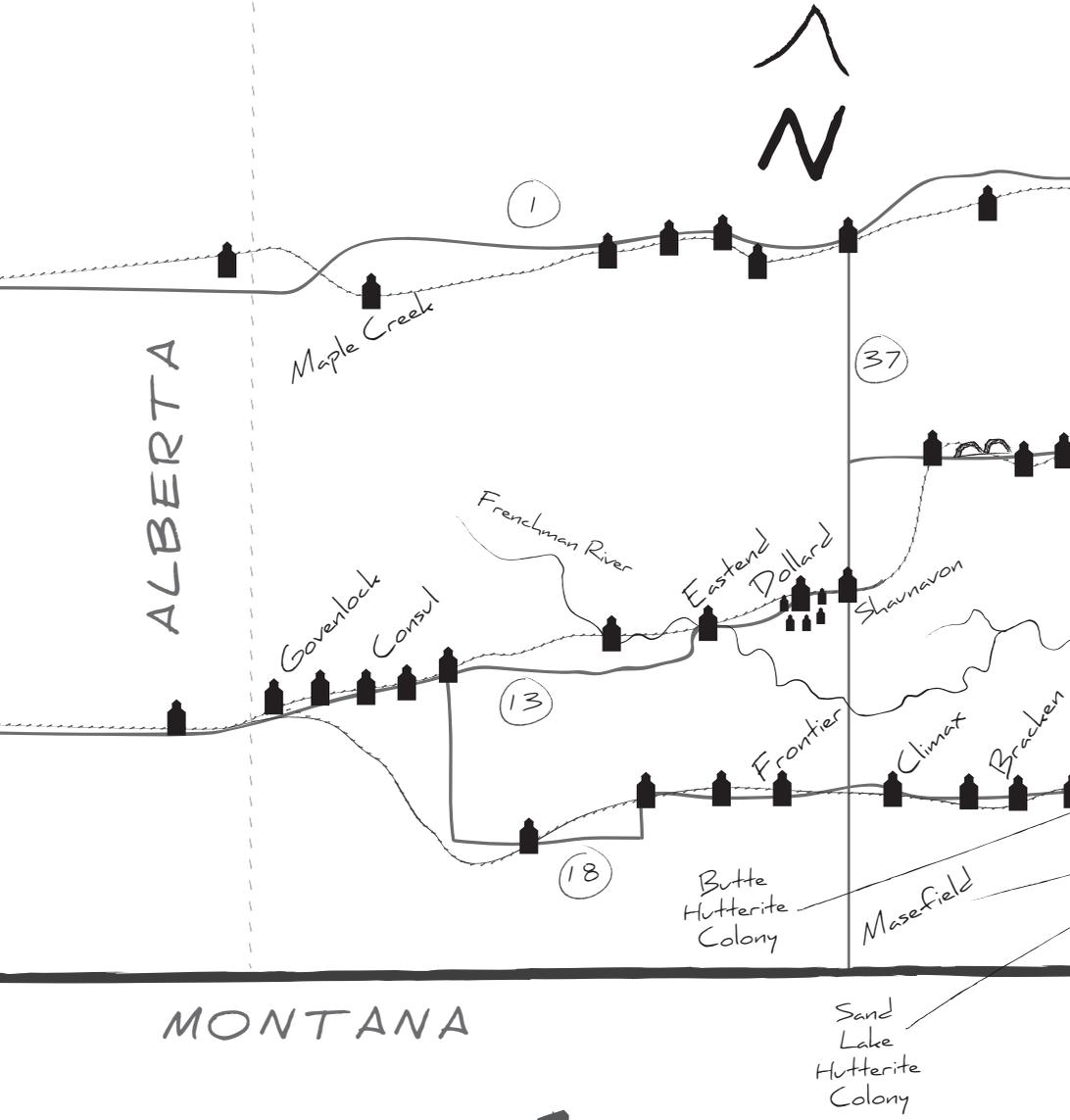
At this point, the agent magically lowered our truck down to the floor and I was very relieved that our truck was now safe and sound. The motor in the office basement kept popping along and waiting for another load of grain!

In my adult years, I had the privilege of hauling many loads of grain to these types of elevators and I never lost the thrill of driving into an elevator and unloading the grain. When electric power became available, many elevators phased out their “pop sounding motors,” but I shall never forget the sound that they produced.

Continued on page 27

This is a map drawn from memory and represents Val Marie in the context of the time when the railroad was still in use. Railroad operations ceased around the turn of the millennium, coinciding with the closure of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator. This map is not drawn to scale.

Map design based in part on drawings from Joy and Paul-Emile LeBel with Madonna Hamel. Final design by Marieke de Roos.



LEGEND



Town/Village with Elevator



Road



Community without Elevator



Railway



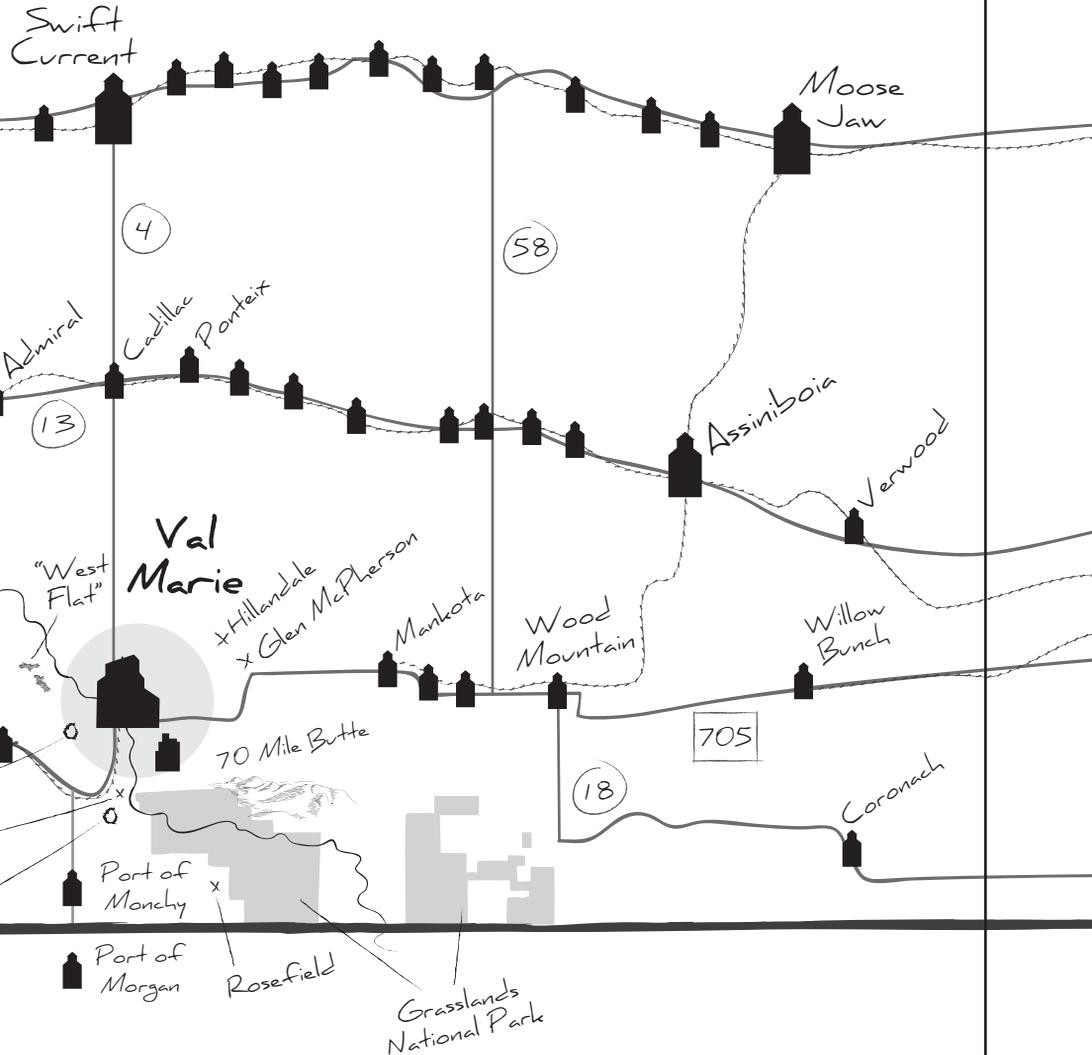
Old railway bridge (1912)



Grid Road



Highway



Continued from page 24

The grain elevator was an integral part in establishing agriculture on the prairies. We must always remember that it was men in overalls and work boots who made the West successful, and not the men in three piece suits and briefcases. Nearly every community was self-sufficient. Everything we needed was right there in town. Families were also self-sufficient. People sold cream, and also extra butter and eggs to the local stores. I knew a lot of families that rarely had to pay much money out of pocket for groceries at the store because of their cream, butter and egg money.

The country elevators were a great source of employment for many families, and their presence was missed in the communities when the elevators began closing their doors. As rail lines were disappearing, new massive inland terminals were becoming the new style of elevator. This led to the loss of many jobs in town, and all the families that went along with those jobs. These were the backbone of our communities and without them it was only a matter of time before we lost services in our towns – schools, hospitals, and businesses. Also, huge trucks and larger farm sizes have and are transforming the prairie grain handling system. As a result, the farmer has lost the personal touch of dealing with a friend and neighbour who was the local elevator agent. This didn't all happen at once. Our communities faced a gradual decline. You don't just notice it right away, but then you look around and realize what is gone.

This decline is a bit frightening to think of, because in a lot of areas, the only thing that will be left is mega farms. Small family farms are becoming few and far between. In my lifetime, I have seen how this leads to the loss of local services, meaning you must travel far distances for necessities. Even things like the disappearance of the mail order catalogue makes it more difficult for rural families. Swift Current, over 100 kilometers away, has now become the closest centre for some of the basic services. It isn't very encouraging for young people to set up an agricultural production knowing this reality. It takes a certain kind of person to handle life out here. There is a great deal of isolation.

It certainly isn't for everybody, but this lifestyle kind of grows on you after a while. For me personally, I have a feeling of comfort. It's the peace and the quiet and we're fortunate here that, even with all of the tourists, we've never had any issues with safety or crime. The animals are all around me, as well as

the landscape. It's home.

When the grain leaves the elevator, some of it is shipped to flour mills where it is ground into flour. In early times, this flour was packaged in 50 and 100 pound cloth bags. I believe it was in the 1960s when flour started to be packaged in paper bags. I still bake ten loaves of bread nearly every week, as well as a variety of buns.. The grain that is produced in our area of the province is often high in protein and as a result is high quality. The quality of our grain is known and sought after from all over the world. Wheat in Saskatchewan is classed as the "King of Crops" and therefore, we are the "Bread Basket of Canada."

DORIS KORNFELD'S BREAD RECIPE

“
Like a lot of things, making bread isn't something many people do anymore. But also, if I had to mix and knead by hand, I wouldn't be making as much bread as I do.

6 cups lukewarm water

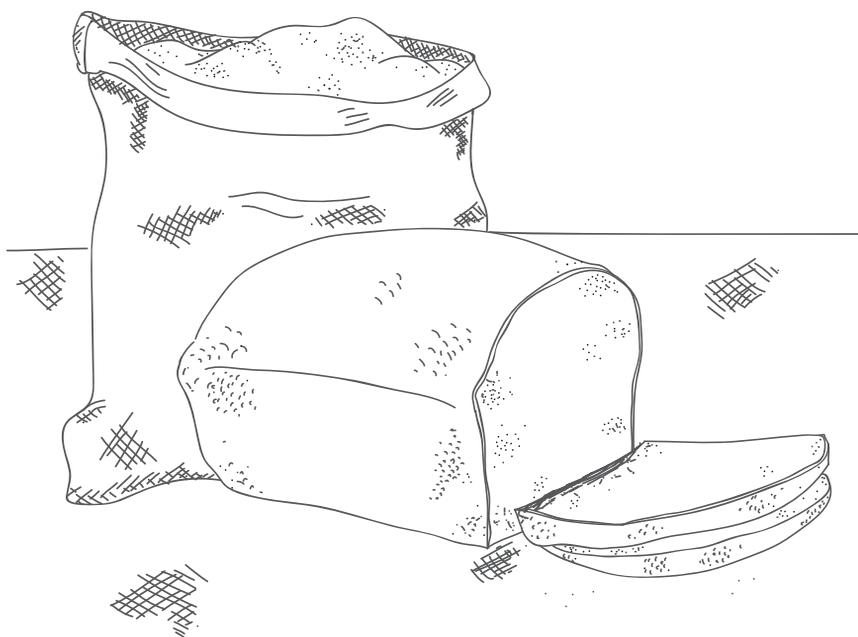
1/3 cup white sugar

1/3 cup canola oil – sometimes need a tad more

I never measure the flour, it just keeps getting dumped in until you get a batter – but not a stiff batter. I then add 2 tbsp. instant quick rising yeast. I turn the mixer on and gradually add more flour until I get a stiffer dough and then I add 2 tsp. salt. Then I continue to add flour until the dough has cleaned the sides of bowl and its bottom, and then let the mixer run for 14 or 15 minutes – that's the kneading process. I then turn it out and put it in a plastic bowl in the oven, which is heated to just over room temperature. I cover it with wax paper and generally leave it to rise for 25 minutes. I punch it down, then let it rise for another 15 minutes. Then I divide it into pans and bake it. I make smaller loaves, so I bake them 27 minutes at 350 degrees. But everyone's ovens vary a bit. That's what works for me, but you have to adjust your baking time according to what your oven tells you to do.

It's not a very difficult recipe – I never actually look at the recipe to be honest, I've just been doing it for so long. A lot of times you can just about tell if it's

the right consistency in the dough. Another secret for any kind of baking is the kind of pans you use – I always use aluminum pans. I find the new types of pans don't conduct heat very well and it's easy to overbake things. My daughter uses the same method, but she mixes the yeast in with the flour. We have a running battle that she makes better bread but I make better buns. I tell her it's all in her head – her buns are very good!



Doris Kornfeld (Dosch) was born on a farm southwest of Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan, in 1938, delivered at home by her grandmother. She married Norman Kornfeld in 1958 and they moved to a ranch nine miles south of Val Marie where they ranched and farmed together until they moved to an acreage south of Swift Current in the late 1990s. Norman passed away in 2002 and Doris returned to the Kornfeld ranch at Val Marie where she continues to live. She has two sons, who ranch at Val Marie, and a daughter in Aneroid. She has eleven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

VAL MARIE SCHOOL STUDENT PROJECT

An important part of the Val Marie Elevator Living Heritage project was engaging with youth. High school students from Val Marie School were invited to attend an Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage workshop at the Val Marie Community Centre on January 16, 2018. Nine students from Grades Ten and Eleven attended along with school secretary, January Legault. Along with about a dozen community members, the students spent the afternoon discussing the unique living heritage of Val Marie. A lot of enthusiasm was generated from the activity which paired youth with older community members. In discussion with Val Marie School principal, Angela Clement, and the online English Language Arts teacher, Sari Cloutier, a school project was developed for the Grades Ten and Eleven classes. The students spent a day with Kristin Catherwood from Heritage Saskatchewan learning the basics of making short video documentaries: developing a story, interview etiquette, and camera and microphone techniques. Students were split into groups and assigned the tasks of creating a short video about some aspect of the Val Marie Heritage elevator and an accompanying written essay documenting their experience. The students were encouraged to reach out to community members to learn about the elevator. Upon completion of their videos, the students were interviewed by Kristin about their experiences. The resulting video will be shown at the project launch event in Val Marie in September, 2018, and will thereafter be available online. The intent of the project was to connect youth to this iconic building in their community – a building which has always been a part of the townscape of their home community, but which faded from use before they were born. With the understanding that heritage lives on through younger generations, how will the elevator live on into the future?

THE END OF THE ELEVATOR KILLED THE TOWN

Cassidy Duquette and Colt Kornfeld

In our video we wanted to illustrate how the loss of the elevator killed our town. We interviewed our grandparents, Denis Duquette and Doris Kornfeld, who watched the whole process of the elevator take place during their time. With both of our interviews we got the memo that the loss of the elevator as well as the railway had a big impact on the community. Through the video, both Doris and Denis recall the past, and the impact the elevators had on it. Doris fondly recalls her childhood memories of elevators being the first thing that you noticed as you arrived in town. Denis remembers turning 16 years old and having the responsibility of selling grain for the family at the

local elevator. They also recall the effect that the loss of the elevator had on the farm families as well as those who worked in the elevator and on the railroad.

The elevators provided jobs and an opportunity for the farmers to market their grain, having no other costly way possible for them to sell grain and make a good profit. Our elevators are a trademark of the small towns that are quickly disappearing. For our grandparents, the elevators were a huge part of the community. A gathering place where the farmers had their morning coffee, and a place that they departed from to the bar after a long day. The loss of the use of this village centre created a hole in the community. If lost, that building that hosted all of these brilliant memories, the community itself would never be the same.

WHAT IS THE JOB OF THE ELEVATOR AGENT?

Mason Duquette, Jayne Hanson, and Beau Larson

Our town would look very plain if the elevator wasn't here. For our project, we did the job of the elevator agent. We talked about what the elevator agent does. Maurice Lemire and Arthur Facette gave us very good tips and made the elevator agent seem like a really fun job. Our town wouldn't be the same without our elevator.

Maurice Lemire's father was a grain elevator agent and he liked to work with his dad a lot. This is why he has so much knowledge about it. Growing up he spent a lot of his childhood in the elevator. He taught us how to run the elevator and how he helped his dad. He also recalls getting his shoes fixed and his hair cut there too. Some of his favorite memories include when his dad would trim his and his six siblings' hair. He has many memories in the elevator.

We also interviewed Arthur Facette. He has hauled to our elevator for a long time so he has a lot of experience with running it. He knows a lot about it. He also knows how much grain the elevator can hold. He knows how to weigh the grain and how to put grain in different parts of the elevator. They also planned who would be coming that day. There was also a lot of paperwork about when people were coming and how much money they made. They would often stay up late doing paperwork and schedule who was coming and when. They also graded the grain to see if it was good quality.

Our elevator is more than just an elevator. It holds so many memories. Our town wouldn't be the same without it.

HOW THE ELEVATOR WORKS

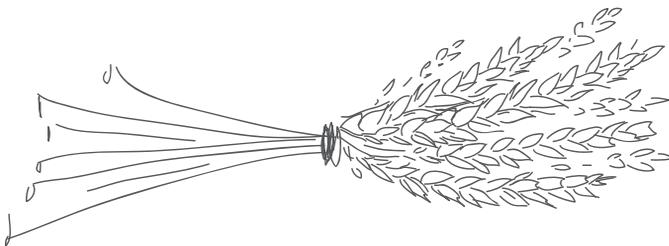
Jesse Christianson, Jacob Duquette, and Cameron Grant

The video we made was about how the elevator works. We will write about all of the system and what runs it. The elevator is a very neat thing because there are many different things about how they run and how you run them. We interviewed Arthur Facette and Maurice Lemire. Maurice Lemire's father was a grain elevator agent for the first elevator in Val Marie which was built in 1927.

The elevator had a big part in the community and still does. Before big trucks, everyone sold their grain at the elevator in Val Marie. Now it must be driven at least an hour away from town. People still use the newer elevator for storing grain and weighing their trucks. The elevator is also a very good landmark. Everyone would miss the elevator if it was gone.

The old elevator, which was built in 1927, was powered by a gas motor underneath the grain elevator agent's office. This powered all of the grain scoops which lifted the grain to the top of the elevator. The trucks would drive in and dump the grain in a grate in the floor, which was then picked up by the scoops and brought to the top. The elevator was beside the train tracks and would load train cars. These would then be shipped off to wherever the company that bought the grain wanted it.

The new elevator, which was made in 1967, runs on an electrical motor. The new elevator works just about the same as the old one, but is also able to clean seed. The seed cleaner can clean the seed so you can get weed seeds out of the seed grain. The main reason they built this newer elevator was because it stored a lot more grain. Now none of the grain elevators are in use other than for storage and weighing.



FARMING IN THE VAL MARIE DISTRICT: IN CONVERSATION WITH A FEW FARMERS

Kristin Catherwood, in conversation with: Ervin Carlier Sr., Jack Gunter, Irene Gunter, Leo Laternus, Viola Laternus, Paul-Emile LeBel, Maurice Lemire

As the project neared its end, I realized the booklet was still missing some contextual information about farming in Val Marie. I decided to gather the perspectives of a few farmers to provide at least the beginnings of a general picture of farming in the area. This was later in the process, in August, 2018, right in the middle of harvest operations. It was difficult to track down working farmers; they were busy farming! But with the help of Maurice Lemire, I met with some farmers at the weekly coffee chat at the Val Marie Community Centre on Wednesday, August 15, 2018. These farmers are mostly retired, but still very much “in the know” as to the current farming practices in the region. Their age and experience mean they have witnessed dramatic changes in farming over the past several decades. They can also speak to the experiences of their fathers and grandfathers, thus presenting a picture of farming the homestead era of the early 20th century through to the present day. I guided the conversation with some questions and sometimes asked a clarifying question or made a leading comment, but for the most part I simply listened. The following excerpts were gleaned from this conversation with a few farmers at the Val Marie Prairie Community Centre. It has been condensed for space and clarity, but left in its “Coffee Row” style. Sixteen people were present in total, but our conversation was mostly conducted by the eight mentioned above.

Ervin Carlier Sr. (EC): When farmers first started farming out here they grew Marquis wheat, which was susceptible to rust. They then developed a rust-resistant wheat in the early ‘30s. A lot of agricultural methods changed after the Depression. The first farmers [in this district] used a plough – many had walking ploughs where the farmer walked behind, with the reins around his neck. There was an eight bottom plough – eight ploughshares – lifting the plough – so that it laid the ground over – creating a furrow. Sometimes they used the kids to come along and make sure the earth was flipped the right way, grass side down.

EC: (Asks Leo Laternus) What ways did the ploughs throw the dirt?

A short discussion on this topic follows.

EC: A lot of the people who had come out here had never farmed – they'd come from cities back east or in Europe and they had to learn how to do things. Neighbours helped each other.

Maurice Lemire (ML): And different people from different countries used different methods – different equipment, different harnesses for their horses.

EC: Oxen were better – if they hit a big rock, they'd stop. Horses would lunge, which could throw the operator off and maybe bust the plough.

Paul-Emile LeBel (PL): In those days, the government wanted you to break so many acres a year.

Leo Larnus (LL): To prove up the quarter.

PL: So to qualify you had to keep up. And if you didn't? Say it rained or something happened. Would you lose it?

LL: I'm not sure. If they had anything up here (gestures to his head), they'd see those circumstances.

PL: She had to have been tough in them days. Man.

Jack and Irene Gunter arrive.

Kristin Catherwood (KC): We're talking about farming.

Jack Gunter (JG): Well, I'm not much of a farmer.

PL: He's from way out in the hills.

EC tells a story about a fellow who used to walk in to the pasture to feed his cattle in winter. Someone asked him why he didn't buy a snowmobile – everyone had one and it would make the job so much easier. The fellow replied, "Oh no, I read a book once about that, I can't buy one of those." Upon asking which book this was, he replied, "My bank book." Everyone laughs.

The discussion moves to dandelions and other weeds.

EC: When homesteaders first came in, there were no weeds. Settlers brought them in with seeds from Europe. I heard that homesteaders could seed flax right into the prairie without breaking it or anything.

JG: There were weeds when I was growing up, but that was pretty long after the homesteaders came. My dad had six horses he hitched on to a disk and they'd drive around ploughing them up. He had a thing you called a double disk.

EC: You had to be careful about how often you did that, because the next thing you knew, your field would be in the neighbours.

KC: Meaning the land would blow?

EC: Oh absolutely. It just pulverized the soil and it would blow.

JG: That was until the Noble blade came in.

Irene Gunter (IG): A great big blade.

LL: Like in a V shape (he spreads his arms in a “V” to indicate the shape and size of the blade).

JG: About eight - ten feet?

EC: Some of them had two or three blades on them. That’s what they broke all that prairie at Hayes and Vauxhall, Alberta with. The government broke it up. A lot of people from Rosefield district moved out there and did really well.

KC: When did they first start spraying?

EC: Early 1950s. I was the first one in the country with a sprayer. Thirty feet.

KC: How many times a year did you spray your field?

EC: About once.

KC: How’s that different from now? (People chuckle).

PL: Ask the people who grow lentils. (He addresses the rest of the people in the room) How many times do you spray lentils? Seven times?

Various responses; one of the women at the other end of the table says: Oh that’d be a lot for this country. Further discussion follows.

PL: Too bad Mike Waldner isn’t here.

KC: He’s a good farmer?

EC: Oh, yes.

KC: What makes a good farmer?

EC: He knows what the hell he’s doing.

LL: He spends his life in the tractor.

PL: He isn't afraid to spend some hours working.

JG: Nowadays if you have the money to buy the big equipment, that makes a big difference.

EC: Things didn't progress as fast in the old days because no one had any money to buy anything

The conversation continues regarding the large size and efficiency of modern farming equipment.

EC: Back then you were exposed to the elements.

KC: How has farming gotten better?

EC: When people started getting paid for what they produced, that made it better. They could buy machinery.

KC: What changed?

JG: Pulses were a big part of it.

EC: Yes, pulses. Of course as soon as they started making money, the price of machinery went way up.

JG: Who grows the wheat for bread anymore? Most people are growing pulses.

PL: Things have really changed.

EC: Oh, there's still some barley and durum being grown.

The conversation then turns towards combine harvesters.

JG: A guy once told me that when harvesting wheat you'll never wear a combine out. But you'll never pay for it either. But combining pulses really wears the inside out, and you're combining so close to the ground.

The conversation turns to the size of combine headers. When JG first got into farming, he used a six foot header. Now, they are 35-45 feet wide.

LL: (Gestures with his hands) From six feet to forty feet – that's a big difference.

PL: It used to take my dad a week to combine 160 acres. Now Mike does it in about six hours. He says he does what, thirty acres an hour now? But don't forget, that's two combines. It goes pretty quick.

The conversation about combining continues. They go into detail about the sizes and

capabilities of modern machinery.

KC: What are some downsides to modern farming?

EC: Long hours.

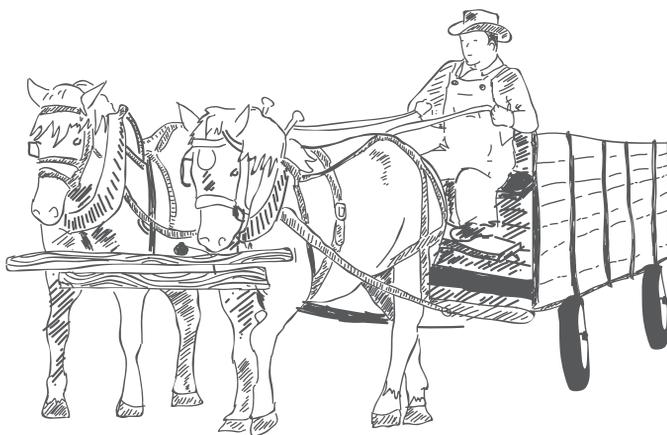
KC: Oh, it's always been that way, hasn't it?

EC: (Nods emphatically) Absolutely. Maybe even longer hours, then.

JG: The machinery's too expensive.

EC: Lots of stress, in farming. Always was, still is. Bigger equipment and everything, but the stress is still there.

The discussion changes to talk about a large farmer close to Swift Current who owns multiple combines.



JG: How do you even find men to work on those? And trust them to run the equipment properly?

PL describes the job of the foreman of this large Swift Current farm and the four crews he manages.

EC: Where do these men come from? How can he hire that many people? No one can hire anyone around here.

PL: You can't miss his place, he's got the combines lined up.

EC: And you gotta remember, those are half a million dollars each. You gotta be trained to read the computer on those things. They tell you everything.

JG: I'd mess it all up.

KC: So the knowledge needed to farm has changed.

EC: It's all computerized.

PL: And the marketing, nowadays. I wouldn't have a clue where to begin. They do it all online.

KC: What is the stress of farming?

JG: Probably knowing what chemicals to buy.

EC: And when.

PL: When to put it on so you don't damage your crop.

JG: No, you don't just go to the granary and get some wheat, plant it, and hope it grows anymore.

PL: Now, a guy could be in Mexico and check his phone to see the moisture content in his stored crop.

EC: Same thing with calving. You can be in Swift Current, check your phone to see how your cow is doing.

JG: I don't see how that helps the cow if you're in Swift Current.

PL: (Laughs) No, it doesn't, but you can see it happening.

IG: Someone who knows something still has to be there in person to check things out.

KC: How has daily life for a farmer changed?

IG exclaims and shakes her head with a smile to indicate that it has changed dramatically.

EC: Well you don't have to milk cows anymore and slop pigs. (Everyone laughs).

VT: A farmer works longer hours now because they have all the lights on their machinery – they can go all night.

PL: I think the wives do more work nowadays on the farm.

KC: Oh, how is that?

Discussion ensues about how women do more farm work now, in ways such as driving machinery,

hauling grain, etc., whereas in the past, there was so much domestic labour to be done: cooking, baking, raising children, growing gardens, etc.

JG: I think they [women] worked harder in the old days, but they probably do more actual farm work now.

KC: What's the difference between a farmer and a rancher?

IG: Quite a bit.

JG: Some of them are both, but...

EC: They used to be both, but not so much anymore.

KC: Over time would you say people have mostly gone one way or another?

PL: In this country, I'd say it's stayed pretty mixed. Don't get me wrong, there's lots of big ranchers, but a lot of them farmed a bit, too.

JG: Unless you've got good equipment, it's hard to farm alongside a guy like Mike.

PL: You can't.

JG: There's a few people that don't have any grain at all.

EC: (Asks LL) If you could do it all over again, would you?

LL: I'm not sure. (Chuckles).

EC: I wouldn't. I'd stay on the oil rigs.

KC: Why?

EC: It's [farming] the slowest way in the world to get rich.

JG: One thing about farming, you can always have a big crop. With ranching, you can only have so many cattle. You're never going to have a bonanza. But if you ever did get rich farming, income tax will figure out a way to get it back.

EC: I made more money working on one construction job than I ever did my whole time farming.

KC: Leo, would you go back farming again?

LL: It's a hard decision (Chuckles).

Viola Laturnus (VL): One thing, he always says – all the old things he can fix. The new things he can't because it's all metric.

KC: What did you like about farming?

VL: Being your own boss.

LL: (Laughs) Yes, that.

VL: I think farming is an interesting life, in a way. Because every season brings out something different. You're seeding in the spring. Harvest in the fall. Same thing with animals – there's a time when animals are born, a time for branding, for shipping them. And winter time when you've got to feed them.

JG: You asked which was most fun, farming or ranching? I think that depends on who you ask. If you asked Mike, he'd say farming.

EC: Oh, yes, and he's good at it, too.

JG: If you asked me, it'd be ranching.

IG: A little bit of both and not a whole bunch of either one.

Discussion turns to cattle markets, then gas prices.

KC: Are you glad these two elevators are standing here?

EC: Oh sure! Why not?

LL: We could still be using them.

EC: Too bad they took the railway out. We wouldn't have to be hauling to Swift Current.

JG: They're a good landmark. They're a marker of time.

Ervin Carlier Sr.'s father homesteaded just north of town in 1923. He farmed and ranched until retiring in 1960 and went into construction. He sold his farm to his son, Ervin Jr.

Jack and Irene Gunter's biography is found on page 23.

Paul-Emile LeBel was born and raised on a third-generation family farm. His grandfather homesteaded just north of Val Marie in 1913.

Maurice Lemire's biography is found on page 21.

Leo Laturnus grew up on a farm at Rosefield about 18 miles southeast of Val Marie. His father bought it in 1951. He continues to farm and ranch. Viola (Geiger) Laturnus was born on a farm in the Rosefield district. She was raised on the farm. She and Leo were married in 1958 and have farmed and ranched in the Rosefield district ever since.

“WE SURVIVED OFF THE LAND:” MÉTIS IN VAL MARIE

Gayle Legault



I was born in St. Albert, Alberta. My folks, in the Dirty Thirties and forties, tried moving from Saskatchewan to St. Albert from southwestern Saskatchewan to carve out a life farming, but found it was just the opposite of our Frenchman River Valley here. It's dry here, but it was too wet in St. Albert and fortunately, my father didn't sell his ranch but chose instead to rent it out [while they were gone], and he came back to it!

We survived off the land. My father taught me how to skin an antelope and a mule deer, beaver, muskrats, and then prairie chickens, and pheasants. I started hunting at eight or nine years old, and everything was harvested with a gun or a trap. My father told me, “You got to clean it and eat.” Times were tough so we lived off of wildlife. My mother, Diane Legault, was a natural herbalist. She knew her roots. She would make some kind of a broth out of asparagus roots and mix that up with alfalfa tea. She'd pull the leaves off and it had to be second-cut alfalfa. We kids, when we were sick she had some kind of goulash. Boy, I tell you, it'd either kill you or cure you!

She would make tea out of turkey weed – a big brush and tumble weed, with white flowers on the end. It was for anxiety. Cactus berries were another thing. These cactus grew in little mounds with the cactus berries on them and we used to eat them. They were fairly sour but mom made lots of healing remedies with that, plus of course the aloe vera plant.

My father's name was Rhéal Legault and his father was Daniel Legault. His grandpa was a Scatland, of Iroquois descent. They emigrated out of Escanadga, Michigan. My mother had relatives in Meota, close to Jackfish Lake near Canoe Lake, and was born in Ste. Anne. My grandparents spoke very fluent Michif.

Some of the Métis were plainly mistreated here. The children would throw rocks at the Métis on their way to school. But the artistic and musical talent of them (the Trottier family in particular) was phenomenal! They could draw and were extremely talented musicians.

On the family ranch, there's so much history. For example, there's Sitting Bull's

camp, and a buffalo jump. And there's one area of land that was relatively flat and never broke. We were growing wheat and we seeded alfalfa and my father said, "Don't you ever put a plough through there!" There were about ten acres. And when I said, "Why Dad?" He said, "Because there's 27 or 28 tipi rings there." And then he said, "That's when Sitting Bull fled from the US."

There was a halfway house from way down to the Rosefield district on the Montana border to the south and they would go to Ponteix to get their coal. They'd bring a load of wheat in on the wagon, sell their wheat, then bring a load of coal back to get ready for winter. So when the RCMP enforced the law on horseback, they patrolled from Wood Mountain to Fort Walsh. The RCMP would stay at Grandpa's place to sleep and get a supply of food.

There are cairns there which went right through my dad's ranch. So the RCMP would overnight at halfway houses from Wood Mountain to Cypress Hills. Maybe a dozen men would pop in at all hours of the day and night. Grandpa and Grandma grew a hell of a garden and they would feed those RCMP and their horses who would rest there for two days. They would pack them all up with gunny sacks full of food and send them on their way. Uncle Orphil would be out in the hills making his home brew and when Grandpa winked at my father, that meant to go out and tell Uncle Orphil not to come home because you could smell the mash on his clothes. Uncle never drank the stuff, but he made it. He had these holes cut into the hillsides and he'd put the wolf willow and sod right back on top (to camouflage). He had a floor out of wood and it would look so natural. It was two bits a bottle (25 cents); straight home brew and that stuff would light! It was the real stuff.

Gayle Legault, a born storyteller, spent the first part of his life in St. Albert, Alberta, later relocating with his family to Val Marie, Saskatchewan. Proud of his Métis heritage, Gayle is a retired farmer/rancher turned entrepreneur. Having raised three children (Cody, Karson and Carmen) with his former wife, Debbie Legault (Olson) (1952-2014), he is now a grandfather. Humble, down to earth and honest, he generously shares his extensive knowledge about Val Marie and area.

A note from the editor:

This piece was compiled by Diana Chabros from excerpts of Gayle Legault's recorded interview with Darren Prefontaine and Karon Schmon in 2012.

MOTHER'S APRON ARCHIVES

Madonna Hamel

The following vignettes are excerpts from a one-woman play, "Mother's Apron." Written by Val Marie resident Madonna Hamel, the work is inspired by the women of Val Marie and surrounds. It is a response to rancher Jack Gunter's challenge to tell the stories of the "mothers of the land, for without them these men would not have been worth a damn!" Madonna continues to mine the territory for stories, using archives, letters, self-published stories, and the anecdotes of locals who are generous with their recollections. Versions of the play have been performed in Val Marie, Regina, Maple Creek and Swift Current. These pieces are particularly relevant for this collection because aprons were often sewn from the material of flour sacks – also known as "chicken linen," since chicken feed was also packaged in cotton and/or linen sacks. Aprons, underwear, tea towels, pillowcases, handkerchiefs were all made up from salvaged flour bags and represented the thrift and skill of women's domestic labour. Flour companies would release floral patterns knowing that women used the material for sewing. Following WWII flour was packaged in paper rather than fabric, but memories, and sometimes materials themselves, survive from this practice.



APRON 1



eticulously in the beginning I went looking for sticks to burn.

I would. I would break them up in

small pieces and stuff them in my apron pockets.

‘Til, slowly, it would dawn on me: “I don’t know where I am.”

I would look up and around me, baffled.

It’s hard to know where you’re going,

when you don’t know where you are.

And I am no good with a compass. How a man wanders into

that for ten days and suddenly announces: well here we are; we’re home!

Home?! Home is a roof! Home is a stove! Home is candle on a table!

Home is a baby in a cradle! Home is not an idea! People don’t live in ideas!

They live in furniture! People live in houses. In homes!

Don’t come here if you have no imagination. You have to see it in here,

in your head, first. In the beginning I came looking:

out there, but I soon learned to see it all in here.

That’s a fear that’s hard to stay ahead of:

When you can’t imagine what could be.

On the other hand: There’s always something to be

afraid of. Your imagination can drive you headlong

into a whole new crop of fears. Before you know it

you devise your own demise. So...you must parcel it.

Rein it in, like wild horses. You need it, but

don’t get caught up in tales of catastrophe and

destruction. Just as often: wonder takes over...

fills the space...so...always leave room for grace.

And bake bread, as soon as you can because

You can’t break bread together without bread, now can you?

Nothing says “home” like the scent of baking bread.

It fills the heart with kindness, allays fears as well as hunger, says:

we are here and we aren’t leaving: sure, it takes a whole day to

raise loaves, a skill as sacrosanct as raising children,

In a home!

APRON 5

The war ended and Thom and I returned home.

But the branch line closed so Thom drove an extra thirty miles, both ways, to get the grain to a working elevator. But we got the farm back and all new machines, thanks to the war initiative.

And in the kitchen too: new matching appliances in Harvest Gold and Avocado Green. Bread came ready sliced, in plastic bags, and flour came in paper sacks, so no more flour-sack aprons.

I can't bring myself to wear these frilly new things.

They call them "cocktail aprons!" There's nowhere to put anything!

"Don't I know it!" said Dell, sitting in my new kitchen.

She flew down from her new job as bush pilot in the North West Territories.

"They aren't fit replacements for my coveralls and your old heavy-duty aprons with their pockets and bibs. And those advertisements, with women, supposedly us, not us at all—"

"Not us."

"Holding a mixing spoon or a turkey baster, in pencil-thin dresses and high heels and bouffant hairdos and red, red lips, as if they're off to the bedroom or the bar. I see you've taken to the lipstick yourself, honey?"

"D'you like it? It's called Sultry Siren."

"Don't get me wrong, Annie, the modern conveniences are top-notch. Just the ticket.

But I can't help feeling they're consolation prizes.

Like the boys are trying to remind us: It was never meant to be a permanent thing – you on the tractor. Me in the air. Rosie on the line."

APRON 3

I wrote letters for them, too. And took down their stories.

Paper was hard to come by, so I would write between the lines in newspapers, or in the back pages of hymnals. If you wrote vertically over a printed page it was possible to have two stories, at once.

When the boxes of a bride's dowry arrived – I was there, watching her unwrap the delicate dishware, cups and saucers, bread and butter plates and we cried with delight – her for the china, me for the paper.

When you consider the lifespan of a long-held truth or a genetic strain, some stories are worth keeping and telling over again.

I stash them away in my marsupial pocket with the
chicks and eggs and strange plants and their roots,
with the near frozen, the lost and fallen broken sparrows, the last of the
grain. Once, an arrow, a lovely pebble or two, something
needing mending or homemade glue.

And his letters. “Yours as ever.” But never a clue.

My apron was my shield: keeping splashes, grease, and ashes
and the hard, hard world at bay. It was my warming oven, cooling breeze,
sacramental cloth, witness to the sweat of children and the muddied faces
of men.

I held it to their faces, drew back a portrait of a prophet or a man of will,
Drew it back, like Veronica lifting away the blood and the tears.
One afternoon one of the bachelors from the hills came down for a funeral.
He used to break horses, until his hand got tangled and mangled and
eventually had to be amputated. He washes for dinner, “but there’s nothing
to be done about that black hand,” whispered Mrs P. How do I wash one
hand? I offered to scrub it clean. And then the back of his neck. And then,
from there, I washed his hair.

“Thank-you,” he whispered.

“For such a big place,” I whispered back, “where voices get lost in the
wind and the space, why do we whisper so much?”

And he laughed and he shrugged

and I felt it then, a sense of unearned shame.

It wasn’t meant to end this way, as if, as far as this place was concerned,
he ever had a say.

Madonna Hamel is a writer, researcher, singer/songwriter, and performer based in Val Marie. She was born in Dawson Creek, British Columbia – Mile 0 of the Alaska Highway – and was raised in Dawson Creek, Prince George, and Kelowna. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English from University of Victoria and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr Institute. She has worked throughout North America as a journalist for CBC and the Globe and Mail. Her mother, Aurore Laprise, was born and raised in Val Marie, and in 2013 Madonna returned to her prairie roots, taking up residence in Val Marie where she continues to live, work, and volunteer.

WORKING ON ELEVATOR CREWS

Eugene Dumont



Hi everyone, my name is Eugene Dumont. I am from Val Marie, Saskatchewan, which is located in the corner of southwest Saskatchewan, about 75 miles south of Swift Current. I was asked to write about my personal working history on wooden elevators and concrete elevator construction, which I did for twenty years.

At the end of Grade Eleven, I got a job at the local Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator here in Val Marie. My position was as a helper. My job as a helper was to get box cars ready to receive grain, to ship by rail to the grain terminals on the coasts. I also got to weigh incoming grain trucks and send the grain to different bins throughout the elevator's storage. I swept the elevator down, from top to bottom, cleaning up the grain dust which was always present. I also got to clean out the boot pan for grain dust. The boot pan was where the bottom part of the elevating leg was located, in the grain elevator. I was stationed in Val Marie for about three weeks, then I was sent to the town of Climax to work and help them out. I guess that's what they did with the helpers, if the other town's grain elevators needed help. Climax's elevator took in a million bushels of grain almost every year.

That summer job seemed to me a good one, and the money was good! I think that's many a young lad's dream, to take lots of money, to buy fancy cars/trucks and other little toys.

Summer time moved on and time came closer for school to start up again. I thought of not going back to school for Grade Twelve and staying on the job with the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, but in the end I did go back to school for Grade Twelve in Val Marie.

At the end of Grade Twelve I was seeking employment. In 1975, just fresh out of high school, I got a job at the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool grain elevator being built in the town of Bracken, just down the road from Val Marie. From there I followed the construction crew to other locations in the province of Saskatchewan, building wooden grain elevators. My mother once suggested that I should write down the different places where I was building grain elevators. That didn't happen, but I can still remember most of the places I was: Bracken, Cupar, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, Maidstone,

Lashburn, Zenon Park, Frontier, Crane Valley, St. Brieux, Morse, Wadena, Hoey/St. Louis, Spiritwood, Bjorkdale, Claire, Tramping Lake, Glaslyn. Some of those elevators I helped build are no longer standing – I know that Morse’s, Prince Albert’s and Tramping Lake’s are gone now.

Later on, the Sask Wheat Pool decided to shut down some of the wooden grain elevators and instead construct concrete inland grain terminals at more centralized areas throughout the province. These elevators held a million bushels of grain. That was a big change for me: bigger, higher heights, and more hard work to be done – also, more heavy grain moving equipment was used. I worked on these inland concrete grain terminals in different places in Saskatchewan: Martensville, North Star, Melfort, Eyebrow, Weyburn, Davidson, Hodegville, and Unity.

I traveled lots of miles on Saskatchewan highways and grid roads working on concrete and wooden elevators. I got to meet lots of people who were always friendly and kind to our construction crews. During our time in these places, we became part of the community and we got to join in on town sports days, play volleyball, floor hockey, ice hockey, softball, take in beer gardens, hall dances, and in one town we even got to play Bingo once a week with the local people who were raising money for their hall upkeep. The construction crew hired local people, used their food stores, lumber yards, welding shops, and other retail stores. The grain elevator construction crews were good for the smaller and larger towns/cities in that they created jobs and supported their retail places. Usually a wooden elevator had a crew of twenty guys and a concrete elevator had crews of about forty so that could be a big population boost to a small town.

Over the years I did many different jobs on the elevator crews – from assisting the welders to finishing interiors, to working my way up to ground supervisor. Wearing the white hard hat (of a ground supervisor) meant that you were one of the bosses. There were all kinds of tasks to be done and things to look over. There was always something new to learn.

Even during my time working on wooden elevator crews, we knew their days were numbered. We heard of other companies replacing wooden elevators with concrete terminals and knew it was just a matter of time. You’d also hear talk of the railroads starting to close down lines, and we could see that things were being centralized and that the writing was on the wall for the smaller communities.

In November 1993, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool decided to contract out the construction on these inland concrete grain terminals. We were done building elevators.

The crew wasn't very happy with that. Oh well, there was nothing we could do about it. I guess I was hoping to get more years in of employment. At the time, our wages were getting better and more money was going into the pension retirement plan.

A lesson learned from my years of working on elevator crews was the importance of how closely connected these things were. Grain elevators, along with schools, were the core of communities. Once the track goes, and the elevator with it, families leave, schools close, stores close. It might not seem like a big deal when one closes – the effects took some time to become obvious – but we can see now the impact that losing elevators has on small communities like Val Marie.

Throughout the years I travelled many of miles to work on grain elevator construction, but I always maintained Val Marie as my home base. I guess you can compare me to migrating birds – always coming back to Val Marie PFRA as a home base. Here are some words of wisdom I learned from my years of working elevator crews and beyond: enjoy life, take care of your body, take pride in your work and family life, and remember people are your friends.

Throughout the years when travelling through Saskatchewan to work on grain elevator construction, I found each town and village had somewhat different cultures, each place was unique. People were kind and also interested to learn about the area of the province that I came from. In fact, over the years when people were passing through, they would make a point to look me up for a visit and talk about old times when I was working in their areas. In closing, a few years ago a group of people formed an elevator committee here in Val Marie. They worked on trying to get this old 1927 wooden grain elevator at the end of Main Street to be declared a historic site, and this goal was achieved. I joined the Val Marie Heritage Elevator Committee and am presently still part of it.

Eugene Dumont was born October 15, 1955, at Val Marie Hospital. He grew up in Val Marie, graduated from high school, and then went to work on elevator crews until 1993. He returned to Val Marie where he worked construction for the Village of Val Marie, and he has worked for Parks Canada since 2007.

...THE WAY IT IS NOW

Ervin Carlier Jr.



levators were placed on the prairies following a simple pattern. Every ten or twelve miles the railroad would designate a spot on the railway where elevators would be built. The subsequent communities would follow, built to support the elevators and the railways. These became the iconic pictures so familiar to us on the prairies – the image of long stretches of cultivation and farms broken up by the giant grain sentinels.

But every now and then, a picture would arise of a community and of an elevator that wasn't quite like the rest, where the giants would still rise but would be enveloped by what was already there. The hills and the prairie would continue to exist beside the newcomers. The new didn't take over the old but instead, became part of it.

This is the way it is with Val Marie. The ancient valley and ageless prairie still exist up to the base of the elevator. Some land is cultivated but the prairie dogs and rattlesnakes and antelope still live on land left untouched by the plough. In Val Marie, there is the mix of the old and the new as it was almost 100 years ago and how it is today. It is a place that works its way into the soul of the resident and of the visitor. It is a place that one never quite forgets (or ever quite leaves, for that matter).

It must have signalled a place of permanence for the early settlers. People were everywhere. Schools dotted the landscape wherever there were enough children. Built in the most inhospitable places, really. The communities had their stores, streets and churches.

But “this great and strange and savage land” had the final say. Droughts, the Great Depression and terrible poverty took its toll. The schools, and the churches and the communities lost their people and thereby lost themselves.

The last to go were the giants – the grain elevators. More than ever they came to resemble lonely sentinels latched onto the railway with only a few outbuildings. Some even survived the abandonment of the railroads – at least for a while.

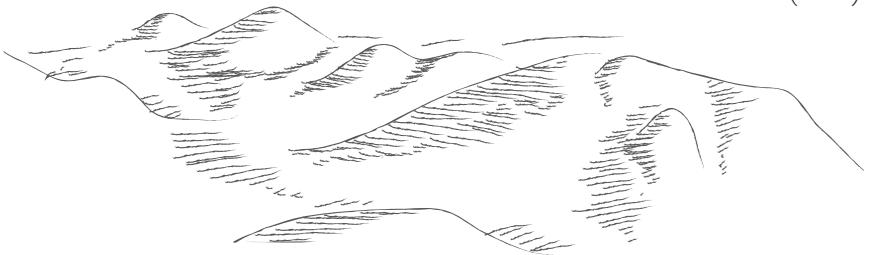
Most old elevators, in the thousands, are gone now. Farms remain, but on

a vast scale with neighbours no longer “just down the road.” Grain is hauled to centralized terminals.

The Val Marie elevator remains. Protected and preserved, it is a magnet for visitors. A symbol of the quick revolution of time that overtakes humankind, it continues to draw the traveller in wonder.

*But when a Saskatchewan man
shakes the dust of the province from his person
and departs for far-off places where the air is warm
and the wind
is quiet and there are hills and trees and water
on every side
he finds himself, more often than not,
still bound in spirit
to the great and strange and savage land
that shaped him.*

Edward McCourt
Saskatchewan (1968)



A note from the author:

I have always tried to learn more about the ebb and flow of history. As a student, if I was ever to get a complete recommend in any subject in school, it was History. In my later years I've been struggling to put a perspective on it all. As a rancher in care of native prairie, I often come across the signs of the First Peoples. I am becoming more in awe of what must have been heroic struggles for them to survive. The settlers would have felt this too. In short, I have tried to come to see myself as others see me. This can be unsettling but revealing. I truly believe that if you can see yourself, or at least make the attempt, then you can better see around you.

DEDICATION

The Val Marie Heritage, Culture and Youth Grain Elevator Restoration Committee dedicates this work to the memory of Noella Lemire, and to the memory of its former member, Debbie Legault.

Heritage Saskatchewan dedicates this work to the people of Val Marie and district.

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