

Look Behind You, Neighbor

A Play Celebrating
Edson's 50th
Anniversary

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In 1961, the Town of Edson celebrated its 50th anniversary. To commemorate this achievement, a committee was formed and three major events took place.¹ The most memorable of these was a musical originally referred to as 'The Pageant', but later given the title of 'Look Behind You, Neighbor'.² This specially commissioned play gave Edsonites an opportunity to share the successes and hardships of their past with others. This production brought pride and respect to the small community by changing many negative opinions into lasting memories of a town that had accomplished so much in just fifty years.

The custom-written play was a collaboration between a few talented individuals; all of the necessary historical research was carried out by Marguerite Ahlf, of Edson, Alberta, Mrs. Gwen Pharis Ringwood, of Williams Lake, British Columbia, used Ahlf's information to create the script, while Chet Lambertson, of Victoria, British Columbia, created the songs and music that would transform their contributions into the musical it became.³ However, this made-to-order play would not be possible without adequate funding. An anniversary committee grant of \$1, 000; ticket and booklet sales, and donations helped make this idea a reality.⁴

Although the program for "Look Behind You, Neighbor" carried a disclaimer stating it was not intended to be historically accurate, many of the events in the script contain fully accurate details.⁵ Edson's 50th anniversary play told many stories of the community in its first ten years. The clever dialogue gives the audience a firsthand perspective at the perils faced by Edson's early pioneers, as they are introduced to the Freeman's; a small family of three. They moved to Edson after Mr. Arthur Freeman, a Boer War veteran, obtained a quarter section of land in this district.⁶ Cold weather, scarce supplies and wild animals were only some of the difficulties these brave individuals faced. One night, at their small cabin north of Edson, black bears were wandering around outside. As they only had canvas for a door, the cabin was not entirely safe. Arthur located the larger bear directly outside the window, staring back at them, and shot the gun through the window, taking down the bear.⁷ This story is featured in the musical, with all of the details accurately recounted.

Ringwood's script skips ahead to mention the relocation of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway divisional point, from Wolf Creek to Edson. This change affected everyone in the area. Land that had been purchased in Wolf Creek, only to turn for profit, was no longer worth much. The outlook for the community of Wolf Creek was diminishing; however, Edson now had a promising future.

A Chinese immigrant, by the name of Johnny Boniface, had purchased a hotel in Edson prior to the Grand Trunk Pacific's decision to move the divisional point. The song from the musical – "Johnny

¹ Marguerite Ahlf, *Edson 75 Years: A History of the Town*, (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Jostens Publications, 1986), 103.

² Ahlf, *Edson 75 Years*, 102.

³ Ahlf, *Edson 75 Years*, 103.

⁴ Statement of Revenue and Expenditure for the Pageant Committee, 1961, 87.8.1, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection, Edson Archives, Edson AB.

⁵ "Look Behind You, Neighbor" Program Book by Marguerite Ahlf, 1961, 76.33.1, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection, Edson Archives, Edson AB.

⁶ Edson Flashback 60th Anniversary Book by Marguerite Ahlf, 1971, 76.10.300, Town of Edson Collection, Edson Archives, Edson AB.

⁷ Edson Flashback 60th Anniversary Book, 1971, 76.10.300, Town of Edson Collection

Boniface” – demonstrates how this change turned his business into a booming success overnight. The following musical number “Here’s a Half a Dollar” shows the workers piling into Edson looking for a place to stay and a meal to eat. They are offering their half dollars to Boniface, as his prices were fifty cents for a room and fifty cents for a meal.⁸ This point in the play is the turning point for Edson as the community began to grow rapidly.

As the town’s population increases, more people relocate to Edson. Mrs. Freeman’s cousin in the musical, Melissa Carson, is a schoolteacher and comes to the community at this time. Upon her arrival in Edson, Melissa meets a freight-train driver, Lance Delaney. Mr. Delaney shows immediate interest in Melissa, who is not comfortable with his courting attempts. As the script progresses, the pair share more encounters in which it becomes evident that they have developed feelings for one another. Unfortunately social convention at the time in Edson suggests that Melissa, as a school teacher, should hold herself composed in all situations and avoid any connections to a man such as Lance Delaney. This ideal is enforced by the religious Ladies Aid group.⁹

It is not long before the First World War hits the pages of the Edson newspapers. Many men from the area leave town to contribute to Canada’s war effort.¹⁰ This unexpected occurrence leaves numerous women without fathers, husbands and brothers. As a result, the women needed to take on more responsibilities; at home and in the community. These events contribute to changing the social norms that people were accustomed to up until this point. Women showed that they were capable of the same things, and this power led to women gaining more responsibility in politics; such as the ability to vote. This opened many minds in Edson up to new ideas and possibilities. No longer was it so impractical for a school teacher to associate with a freight train driver. Lance and Melissa’s love story reaches its climax upon the men’s return from war. The pair is able to compromise under the transforming social convention and envision a new life together.¹¹

“Look Behind You, Neighbor” was performed in Edson on November 2nd, 3rd and 4th of 1961. The cost for an adult to attend one of the shows was \$1.00. Program booklets for the musical were also sold at a price of \$1.00.¹² Between ticket sales, booklet sales and donations, “Look Behind You, Neighbor” brought in \$2, 064.47 in revenue.¹³ In 2015 this would be equal to about \$16, 000.¹⁴ Everyone that attended the show had nothing but positive comments.

⁸ “Look Behind You, Neighbor” Script by Gwen Pharis Ringwood, 1961, 76.33.37, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection, Edson Archives, Edson AB.

⁹ “Look Behind You, Neighbor” Script, 1961, 76.33.37, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection

¹⁰ “Look Behind You, Neighbor” Script, 1961, 76.33.37, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection

¹¹ “Look Behind You, Neighbor” Script, 1961, 76.33.37, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection

¹² “Look Behind You, Neighbor” Program Book, 1961, 76.33.1, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection

¹³ Statement of Revenue and Expenditure for the Pageant Committee, 1961, 87.8.1, Edson 50th Anniversary Collection

¹⁴ “Bank of Canada Inflation Calculator,” Bank of Canada, accessed August 16th, 2015, <http://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator>

The musical was so successful that in April of 1962, Mrs. Jardine was contacted with an invitation for the cast to perform at the Duke of Edinburgh's Second Commonwealth Conference, to be held on May 31st. The cast of 75 was brought together once again to revive the play. Although His Royal Highness was not present at the final show, over 300 delegates from around the world were highly impressed by "Look Behind You, Neighbor". The theme of the conference regarded the changing industrial environment and its consequences on the human race.¹⁵ Edson's well written story supplemented the theme of the conference while it discussed the early, difficult years followed by the boom of the railway industry in the area and how it affected Edsonites. The happy ending to the love story in the final act of "Look Behind You, Neighbor" served as a theme for the promising future of young Edson.

Edson's 50th anniversary musical played an important role in shaping the town's identity. It united Edsonites and provided them with a platform from which they could share their early history with others. The specially-commissioned play mesmerized its audience with tales of the community's achievements and struggles. As the curtain fell, a newfound respect for the town of Edson was created. Members of the community felt pride in their history, and even more pride in what their hometown had come together to accomplish.

¹⁵ Ahlf, *Edson 75 Years*, 104.

Bibliography

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