

The curtain rises on Canada Day celebrations



Many Canadians attend outdoor ceremonies celebrating the country's birthday.

Imagine a theatre with a stage 5 000 kilometers wide and crowded with thousands, even millions of actors and actresses celebrating together and singing the same songs. Every year on Canada Day, July 1, Canada becomes just such a theatre as Canadians participate in a nation-wide extravaganza in celebration of the country's birthday.

Canada is celebrating its one hundred and eighteenth birthday this year and throughout the day, Canadians of every age in all parts of the country will take part in the festivities.

Canada was born with the union of four of Britain's North American colonies — Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia — in 1867. And on July 1, celebrations were held across the country.

In the cities they began at midnight with the pealing of church bells; in the country bonfires were lit and serenaders paraded, singing anthems. In military centres there were 21-gun salutes to the Union Jack at dawn. And in Toronto, an immense ox was roasted on a main street to provide food for the poor. Celebrations continued throughout the day with speeches, prayer meetings, concerts and fireworks.

Over the first 50 years, the holiday was observed, but in most years the country was too busy with survival and growth to allow much energy for festive celebrating of the past. Very quickly the nation was widened with the entrance into the union of three more colonies — Manitoba (1870), British Columbia (1871) and Prince Edward Island (1873).

Continued growth, including the addition of the prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, contributed to a

general desire for a large celebration in 1917, on the country's fiftieth birthday. Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier observed that the anniversary should see "jubilation prevalent in every corner of the land, with the exuberance of overflowing hearts". As Canada was at war, however, in place of the anticipated scenes of gaiety, there were quiet hours of sermons, speeches and prayers.

In 1927, with peace and prosperity, Canada's sixtieth anniversary was celebrated with unprecedented colour and vitality. In Ottawa, some 50 000 people gathered on Parliament Hill for national ceremonies. There they heard messages from the prime minister and the governor general, as well as a carillon concert, the first from the new bells installed

in the Peace Tower above the Parliament buildings. Equally important, the messages and concert were also heard by millions of other Canadians in distant parts of the country owing to the recent invention of radio.

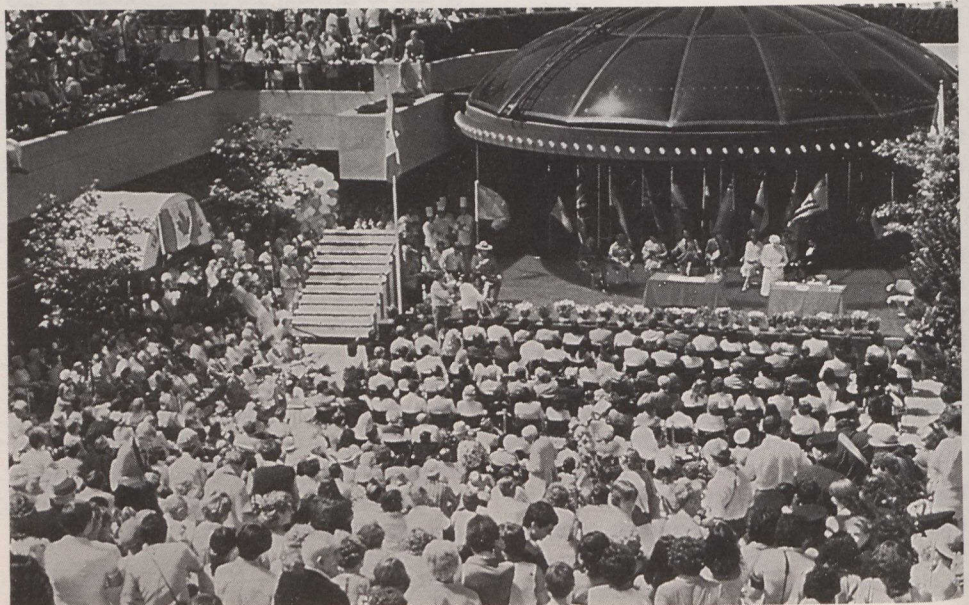
Over the next four decades the holiday continued and minor tributes were paid to the birthday, but for most Canadians the day was what it had normally been for generations: a time for private pleasure rather than general celebration.

Centennial brought change

The year 1967 changed the manner of celebration. Marking the country's centennial, some 100 000 spectators crowded onto Parliament Hill for a full day of elaborate entertainment and displays. Attendance at events in other cities, towns and villages across the land was just as large and enthusiastic. Also with the medium of television, separate ceremonies were presented to a national audience in broadcasts from 13 centres, ranging from Newfoundland to British Columbia.

And the celebrations of July 1, 1967 did not end with the last fireworks at midnight. Many long-term projects, including civic centres, sports halls, schools, libraries and parks, were begun as part of the centennial celebrations.

In 1977, Canada Day took on a new egalitarian look as the government began to encourage and co-ordinate ideas from individuals and private groups across the country. Inventiveness and innovation flourished. The dances and bonfires and fireworks central to earlier festivities were continued, but now they were augmented with cultural exchanges, historical pageants and other enriching activities. These activities remain the heart of the birthday celebrations today.



Canada Day programs include citizenship ceremonies like this one held in Vancouver, B.C.