

A piece of Alberta's past - still standing



Rutherford House, located on Saskatchewan Drive just north of HUB Mall.

by Cathy Hrynchyshyn

As Western Canadians, we have long been subjected to the criticism that we have 'no history.' Most of the physical remnants of our short-term existence have been savagely and unthinkingly destroyed in the name of progress, only to make way for impersonal creations of concrete and steel. 'No roots' we are told by those who consider Westerners to be insolent and arrogant, with little respect for the legacy left us by our forefathers.

Slowly, however, we Westerners are beginning to see the errors of our ways. We have stopped tearing down and begun to revitalize those buildings which provide a link to the past. Ironically, the last 15 years, perhaps Alberta's greatest period of growth and development, have also witnessed a substantial increase in the restoration and reconstruction of historic sites in the province and especially here in Edmonton.

The University of Alberta is not without its own share of such historical structures. Among its other stately old buildings, the U of A boasts a unique historic site—Rutherford House. Built in 1911, the red-brick house, situated on Saskatchewan Drive just north of HUB Mall, served as the residence for the family of Alexander Cameron Rutherford, Alberta's first premier (1905-1910) and Chancellor of the U of A from 1927-1941. Presently, the house, entirely restored (with the exception of the kitchen now under reconstruction) is maintained under the auspices of the Historic Sites Service of Alberta Culture. It was declared an historic site in 1973, and operates in conjunction with the Provincial Museum.

Visiting Rutherford House is an experience in itself. When you step through the doorway and are greeted by a guide dressed in clothing of the period, you are immediately transported seventy years into the past. The large

vestibule, where, each year, the graduating class would congregate to hear Rutherford's address, issues a warm welcome. The oak-panelled walls and grand staircase of the entrance are magnificent examples of fine craftsmanship.

The remainder of the house is just as spectacular. On the left, the vestibule opens into a library, featuring Rutherford's vast collection of rare Canadiana, carefully arranged in rich oak shelving. A portrait of the former premier hangs over a stone fireplace. The room to the right of the entrance provides an interesting contrast to the serious and studious nature of the library. The delicate drawing room of Mrs. Rutherford, where numerous guests were entertained, contains the family piano and several pieces of fine furniture. The room also features a working Victrola record player, of which the volume is regulated by the positioning of two small doors—a far cry from today's

complex stereo systems. The main floor dining room boasts an exquisite silver tea set and displays Mrs. Rutherford's fragile fine china.

A tour of the house's second floor provides an interesting glimpse into the daily life of those who lived 70 years ago. A sewing machine, articles of clothing and furniture are but a few of the items one can compare to today's counterparts.

Not only does a visit to Rutherford House afford an opportunity to view examples of household furnishings of the early 1900's, it also reveals colourful facts about the Rutherfords themselves. The family, for example, did not believe in cutting down evergreens to decorate at Christmas and instead exchanged gifts in front of a Christmas cactus.

The problems accompanying the restoration and maintenance of such an accurate historical record are indeed numerous. Cost is always a major factor, but through government funding and private donations, Rutherford House has managed to survive, albeit with some minor difficulties. The current conversion of the kitchen to one circa 1913 comes only after a 10 year delay, due in part to a lack of funding.

The other hindrance, also contributing to this delay, is the difficulty in obtaining both authentic articles and appropriate decorating materials. To ensure accuracy, a rule stipulating that such items as furniture and

household objects must be from the correct time period and something the family would have owned is strictly adhered to.

In their quest for accuracy, the staff of Rutherford House have had to overcome a unique difficulty. The Rutherford family did not own a camera, and thus few photographs of the house exist. The solution is more interesting than the problem however. Hazel, the only surviving member of the original Rutherford family, has contributed immensely to the restoration of her former home, donating family possessions and providing vivid descriptions of the building's interior. It's not often that historians can draw upon such first-hand information.

With the completion of current renovations early this summer, several new programs will be instituted at Rutherford House. These will include several educational programs oriented to elementary and secondary students, one featuring an opportunity for visitors to speak with staff portraying the members of the Rutherford family.

Perhaps the greatest feature of Rutherford House is that one does not have to be a history fanatic or even an avid museum-goer to enjoy it. It does not require a vast amount of knowledge to appreciate its appeal lies in its simplicity. But, if ever a building was said to have character, then Rutherford House most certainly fits that description.



The original occupants of Rutherford House, the first Premier of Alberta himself, A.C. Rutherford, his Missus and the little Rutherfords.

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