

Edmonton's past: history as

It is easy to believe Edmonton has no heritage. At first, the city looks like another boomtown. Often, Edmonton is such an empty place people cannot wait to leave for Hawaii, or when they retire, to the West coast. Still, Edmonton has more to offer, and really, its fresh concrete image gives a false impression.

For example the city has extensive archives. In fact, the collection amounts to 50 times the number of items housed by the provincial museum. In total, 110,000 pieces have been catalogued and stored. For the most part items are stored at Fort Edmonton or the Archives center, now in the old Bohemian Maid brewery.

The volume and range of material there is amazing. The job of finding, storing and displaying 110,000 items is also extraordinary. The job belongs to Bob McClure and his staff at the Archives center. McClure and his staff do the work and preparation responsible for Edmonton's historical image. McClure, besides maintaining the collection, is also involved in educating Edmontonians, especially the young ones.

In total it is clear Edmonton has an exciting history. Also, it is clear that whether history is important or not depends as much on Edmontonians as on the Archives. In other words if no one wants to learn, what use is the best collection?

For McClure and his staff finding artifacts is the start or the end of a process. The process may start, according to McClure, if the center has specific objects to acquire. McClure has several methods to find them, and is busy in the spring "sniffing around . . . wheeling and dealing" out of town. In addition, McClure mentions the center "leases with other museums" as well as

checking publications. Often, if a part is missing from an artifact, McClure can use the center's workshop to make a new one.

Still, McClure has other means. The center staff surveys any city owned building slated for demolition. In particular, McClure is fond of flop houses because "there is good hardware, good old dressers" inside. Office buildings too supply fixtures, desks, and counters. Although McClure does much of the hunting, he states "people are always writing or phoning" about material they have.

Often, the search ends with an artifact donated to the center. More rare is the turning over of material already recognized to have real historical value. In particular, McClure states there is a shortage of "items directly related to a facet of Edmonton's history". In spite of this the center has collected several pieces in this category. For example, the Oldtimers' association turned over the original Edmonton-Calgary stagecoach as well as the original NWMP cannon used in the 1885 rebellion, and is the only one fired near Edmonton.

Because important items are donated it appears the center has become a respected restoration and storage site. The Oldtimers are not the only ones to have donated material. One restoration group supplied a WW II wooden Mosquito bomber, one of only 26 remaining in the world. McClure has a special interest in the craft because he taxied the plane during his earlier career as a pilot. McClure says the bomber, 95% wood, "sat outside Namao for a couple of years" before the "group that had it originally became concerned about deterioration" of the wood machine. At the center, McClure "keeps an eye on the environment" to prevent further damage and can begin restoration. It is possible, McClure mentions, that the craft may become "suitable for

flying". There are some problems with finding parts for the 1945 bomber, but McClure believes he can track them down. Generally though, the machine is complete down to the huge V-12 Merlin engines.

Storage is one of the center's purposes. The old brewery's smell, McClure notes, lived up to its past, but as an archives center the building is adequate. The center is roomy with high ceilings and an opening in the between storey floor that allows easy movement of large items. However, McClure admits they "run into problems with big things" like fire engines. Instead, large vehicles are housed at the Industrial airport.

The center's upper floor contains multi-tiered shelves that hold what McClure terms "raw" artifacts. Toys, helmets, utensils, a fine collection of china, furniture and a collection of photographic equipment are housed there. Each item is catalogued, photographed, and becomes the city's property. McClure notes they have a surplus of sewing machines and organs. In fact, in the basement, where many are stored, the instruments are filed in several rows.

However, for some artifacts storage is not enough. For example, wooden items, like the Mosquito are vulnerable to decay. Of course rot can be prevented, but many items have deteriorated to the point where restoration is necessary. Restoration, McClure points out, costs "\$30 an hour" and is "not a matter of throwing on paint thinner". Consequently, McClure and his staff decide if the object is economically repairable. Restoration, McClure adds, can "take a couple of hours, or for larger things, a couple of years".

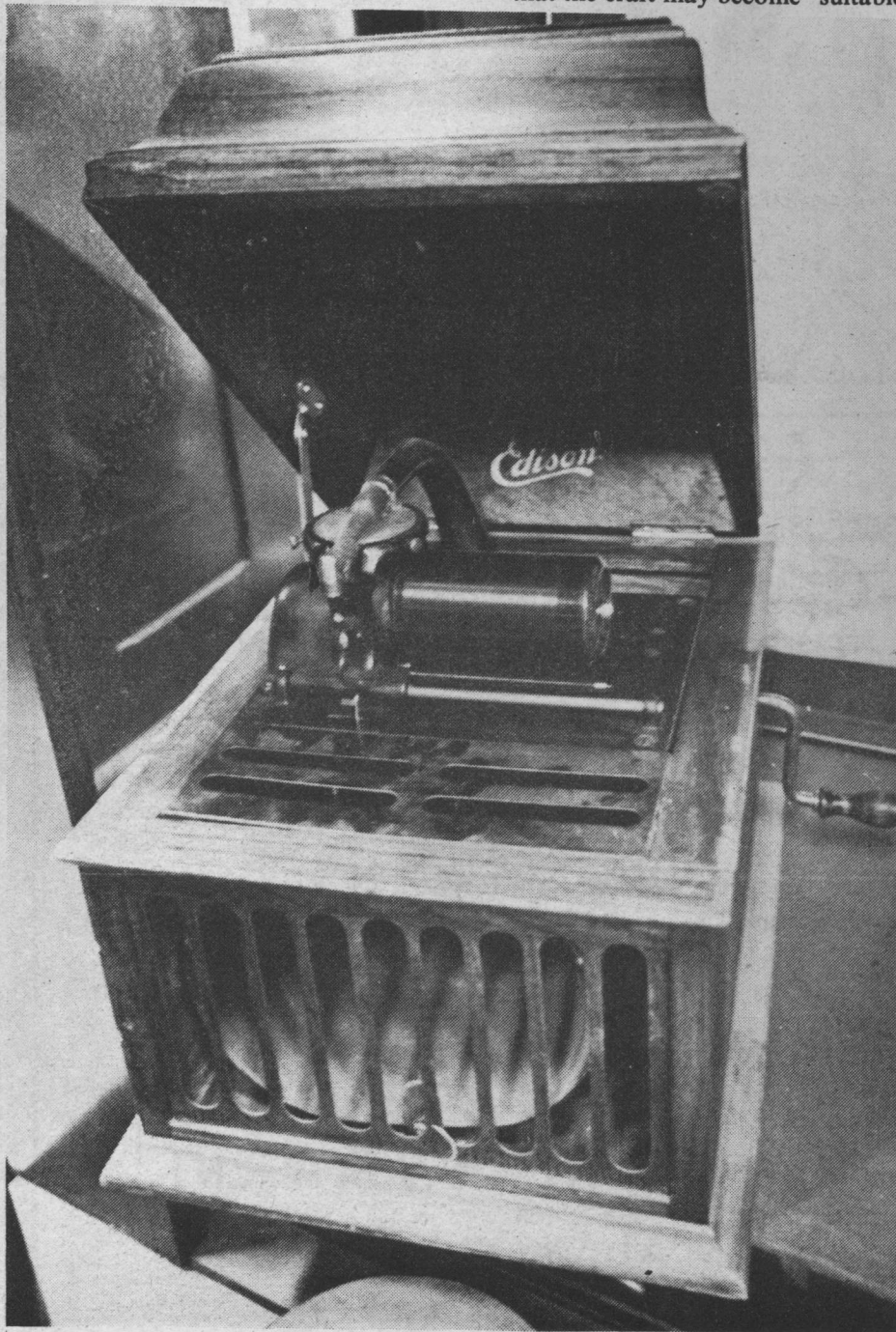
The restoration process is as varied as the type of artifact to be repaired. Wooden objects can be injected with

alcohol based plastics that soak in the wood-grain. The center also has good wood and metal working facilities. According to McClure the aim is to "restore the original finish and only if everything else fails to remove the finish". The results are impressive and the policy seems logical.

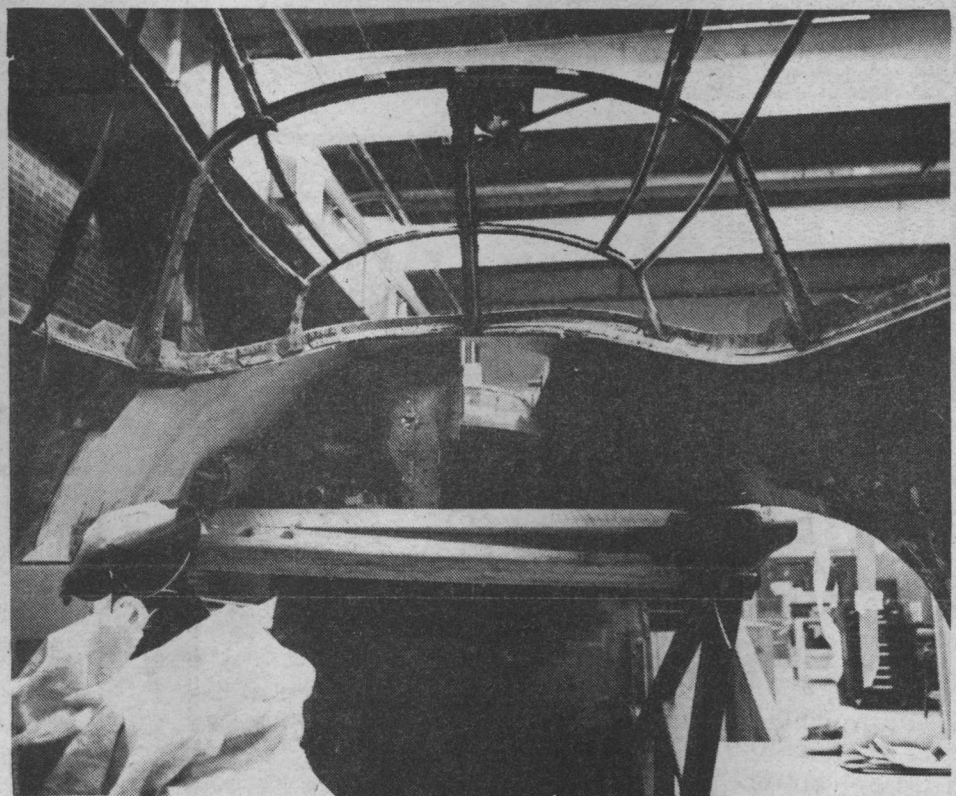
Because so many skills are necessary for the conservationist's job, it is easy to believe McClure when he says the occupation is "difficult to get into". He mentions the "U of T and Royal Ontario Museum run a training course and Queens offers a conservation degree . . . but that's it".

McClure himself has long been interested in the preservation of history, and has held his present job for eight years. Not surprisingly he likes the good variety of work at the center. However, a lack of recognition for the center or awareness by the public seems to bother McClure. In particular, displays shown at city buildings like the Library and Ft. Edmonton sometimes are taken for granted. McClure states people "never stop and think how this happened" and mentions some seem to believe "the Good Fairy walks in and things appear". To help counter this attitude the center is working to improve school children's knowledge of the center and Edmonton's history.

Teaching children is a start and in a few years people may have a better sense of their environment. Complaints about Edmonton and its shallow heritage can be avoided. There is here a historical depth equal to most other North American cities. Also, Edmonton is fortunate enough to have extensive collections and displays made possible by well run archives. Consequently, Edmonton is a city with a heart and a recognizable heritage. At one time a concern for the past's preservation was lacking. Fortunately that's changed because of efforts like the center and the past's future has never been brighter.



CJSR reportedly considered purchasing Edison phonographs. However, cylindrical records did not fit their files.



Obviously, the Mosquito's wings are clipped, but Bob McClure believes it could fly again.