

Community Celebrates Colourful Past

- by Douglas Stinson

Bridgeland-Riverside, a unique inner-city community nestled between a protective, crescent-shaped escarpment and the Bow River, has a long and colourful history.

A "working man's" district, the community was the first home in Canada for a predominantly immigrant population intent upon establishing a new life in an often challenging land. Although within sight of Calgary's downtown core, the region remained quite separate from the bustling new city during the three decades before the annexation of Bridgeland in 1907 and Riverside in 1910.

Riverside, on the banks of the Bow River, was home to native encampments long before the 19th century began. Russian-German immigrants arrived in the area during Calgary's first population boom in the 1880s, and Riverside soon became known as Germantown. Even back then, it was a close-knit community. Gypsy caravans were a common sight along the river. One exemplary instance of neighbourhood compassion occurred in 1927, when a gypsy boy was lost in the river. The whole community helped locate the body, and sadly commiserated with the grieving parents.

In the century's first decade, Calgary's population skyrocketed from 4,000 to 40,000 people. During this population influx Italian and Ukrainian immigrants seeking inexpensive places to live began flocking to the terrace above Riverside, where Bridgeland is now. Within a few years, the first of the neighbourhood's many churches were built. Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints, Ukrainian Catholic Church, St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Our Lady Queen of Poland, St. Vladimir's Ukrainian Orthodox Church and many others stand as past and present testimonials to faith and community.

Numerous brothels also operated in Riverside before the community's 1910 annexation to Calgary. Before this jurisdictional change, the area was the responsibility of the Mounties, not the city police. Following the annexation "the women from across Langevin Bridge" relocated to the Nose Creek valley, outside city boundaries. This Red Light District remained sheltered by the escarpment's eastern slope until World War I, when the houses were either torn down or destroyed by fire.

Another focus for the community was the "Grand Old Sandstone Lady," Riverside School, which later became known as the Langevin Community School. Built in 1910, the same year in which the Calgary General Hospital opened and the wooden Langevin Bridge was replaced by one of steel, it served the area until it burned down in 1966. "The school, and the community itself, became and remained a stimulating example of people of different backgrounds working together for common goals and openly sharing their lives, hopes and aspirations," according to the authors of Communities Six. Other notable schools in the early period were Stanley Jones School (built in 1913) and Riverside Bungalow School No. 2. Its counterpart, Riverside Bungalow No. 1, was built in 1914 and was located just south of it, where the Langevin School parking lot is now. The classic-red brick Bridgeland Elementary School was built in 1921. For a time the school was known as Rundle College before coming a charter school in the 1990s.

Fogg's Ferry had traversed the Bow River at Centre Street since 1882, and a wooden Langevin Bridge was built eight years later, further connecting the community to the city. Located within walking distance were a number of industries in the Nose Hill area (Golden West Brewing, Dr. Ballard's and Union Packing) and a number of others located in the southeast, such as the Canadian Pacific Railway's Ogden shops. However, life became easier for Riverside workers

after construction of a streetcar link to the existing city system began in 1912, enhancing the connection between the prospering Edmonton Trail and First Avenue commercial districts and the recently opened Calgary General Hospital.

Without doubt, the community's tradition of caring was established when the third manifestation of the Calgary General Hospital opened south of First Avenue 90 years ago. The first Calgary General Hospital had opened in 1890 in a rented house at the corner of 7 Street and 7 Avenue SW; the second hospital was opened in 1895 at 12 Avenue and 6 Street SE. The cornerstone for the third hospital, in Bridgeland, was laid in 1908. The four-storey brick building with sandstone trim held 160 beds. Serving a city population of over 40,000, the building was Alberta's best medical facility until it was demolished in 1959.

With the Dominion Bridge Company operating nearby, it was not long before the name "Bridgeland" was coined. Organized community activity commenced in 1908, when the Bridgeland-Riverside Community Association was founded. The BRCA started as informal get-togethers at homes to organize community recreational activities.

Thoroughly treasuring its "fertile crescent," Bridgeland-Riverside has enjoyed bountiful gardens and fruit trees that thrived on the rich soil of glacial origin. In the early years, gardens and even dairy operations exemplified the need for self-sufficiency. During the Depression, some residents rented vacant lots from the city to grow their own food. Early inhabitants kept livestock until a grazing prohibition within city limits was passed by City Council in 1939. Even today, pride in gardens can be seen during the neighbourhood's annual garden tour.

Nose Creek was converted to a garbage dump after World War II, but is currently undergoing a more edifying transformation into a regional parkway system. Nose Creek Bottomlands park is located immediately east of Tom Campbell's Hill, a protected natural area. Named after an early hat maker whose "Tom Campbell's Hats" sign was a prominent landmark for many years, the hill offers a panoramic view of the city.

For 45 years the YMCA was also a formidable presence -- its gymnastics team repeatedly won Western Canadian championships. Two professionals produced by the area's enthusiasm for sports were Sweeney Schriener, a hockey hall of fame inductee, and Normie Kwong, former Edmonton Eskimo fullback great.

Due to increasing demand, numerous new buildings were constructed on the site over the decades, and the facility was subsequently renamed the Bow Valley Centre of the Calgary General Hospital. Following a provincial government decision, the hospital was closed in 1997 and imploded on October 4, 1998. After the demolition of the General Hospital in 1998, the Bridgeland Riverside community has been presented with a unique opportunity. With its view overlooking downtown Calgary, its historical significance and its potential value in Calgary's strong real estate market, the Old General site is of great importance to many interested groups.

The decision to develop a unique inner city community, called "The Bridges" will have a great impact on the BRCA's future, as any development on this site will become the showpiece of the community. Planning is well-advanced for an extensive transformation that will see an additional 2,500 residents move into the community within a short period of time. The transplanted community centre officially opened in Fall 2005.

From a working class district to a bustling inner-city neighbourhood, Bridgeland-Riverside is proud of its past and anticipating its future.