

The founding of the Strathcona County Museum

From interview with Harvey and Isabel Hanlan

Interview conducted by Zanne Cameron, November 2010, for Strathcona County

The keys to a cold, dusty, derelict jailhouse wouldn't represent much to most of us. But to a steadfast group of Strathcona County volunteers and long-time residents, those keys were a dream come true. Finally they had a place to build a museum dedicated to representing Strathcona County's distinctive heritage. A place that Harvey Hanlan, and Strathcona County Heritage Foundation founder, Reg Gray and a steadfast group of community members had been hoping for, for a long time. The abandoned jailhouse was a place to stop "the disappearing."

It was the middle of the 1980s—Alberta's worst economic downturn since the depression. Harvey Hanlan was retiring from 40 years of construction work in the oil patch and running the three-generation old family farm.

"I farmed nights, weekends, holidays," recalls Harvey. "And eventually my knees got so bad I couldn't do it any more."

When Harvey and his second wife, Isabel, moved off the farm to Sherwood Park, they tried to place some of the family's cherished heirlooms in regional museums—items dating back to 1889, when Harvey's family first came to the County. No one was interested. The Hanlans had no choice but to put things up for sale. Blacksmithing and sawmill equipment dating back to the turn of the 20th century, hand tools, wood-crafting tools, old copper washing machines, butter churns and furniture too small for current generations all sold in a snap.

"It broke my heart," says Isabel. "So much was just disappearing," recalls Harvey.

To the Hanlans these cherished artifacts represented a way of life that was fading beyond current memory. All of those no longer useful "things," sold off to be used as country-chic décor and lawn ornaments; represented knowledge and traditions that accompanied a way of life, now vanishing before their eyes. A time when people used their hands for everything from fixing farm equipment to making butter; when the food you ate used to come from your own garden or that of someone you knew; when old socks were darned, not simply tossed and replaced with new ones; a time when school and work schedules were altered to accommodate the harvest season.

By the 1980s technology and rapid change had become a way of life. Family farms were falling fast due to the recession and changing nature of the food supply chain. Corporations consumed each other in the drive to control a global market. In the new context, darning socks or preserving vegetables from home gardens took more time than people had. In homes and business, throwing away old items and buying new was affordable, faster and better.

In this context the Hanlans sold their family heirlooms and neighbors were going through the same experience. Harvey Hanlan recalls a story of an elderly family friend, a woman, who could no longer manage the farm alone after the death of her husband.

“Harvey,” she told him, “there’s nothing left.”

Her children didn’t want the heirlooms and artifacts from the farm. Other than what she could take to the seniors’ facility, all of her possessions—generations of items--had literally been piled in a heap on her property, by a trustee, and burned to the ground. It was 1986, and his own experience and the stories of his friends motivated Harvey to attend meetings held by the fledgling Strathcona County Heritage Foundation, founded by Reg Gray. It wasn’t until almost a decade later that the keys to the RCMP jailhouse were turned over to the foundation.

One might say, be careful what you wish for. The jailhouse had been empty for more than two years, and when the County turned over the keys to the Heritage Foundation, the building needed a lot more than a good cleaning and a coat of paint. To transform a concrete structure dedicated to keeping criminals in, and the public out, into a friendly community museum was not a task for the faint of heart.

But Harvey was not the sort of man to sit around in his retirement. And 40 years of construction and farming had taught him a thing or two about fixing things, building things and making do. So, with budget limitations matched only by the opposite in elbow grease and determination, Harvey, Reg Gray and a multitude of determined Heritage Foundation volunteers set to work.

“People probably thought we were kind of crazy, but we did it anyway,” recalls Harvey.

“It took two months just to clean the place,” recalls Isabel. “It had been abandoned for more than two years.”

While the women cleaned and painted, the men hauled out junk, and began the daunting task of removing bullet-proof glass, paneling walls, office partitions, old desks and steel-barred jail doors.

“Reg Gray knew someone at Superior Lumber,” recalls Harvey. “So, he gave them a call.” Superior Lumber gave the foundation free access to a huge junk-pile of lumber in the back of the lot. “It had been piled up with a front loader. There was discarded cedar siding, flooring, boards and whatnot. So Reg and I cut out everything we could salvage, and loaded up—oh, I don’t know how many truck loads.” A lot.

Over the next two-and-a-half years, a steady stream of Heritage Foundation volunteers and many others, contributed their time and expertise to everything from wiring to cataloguing. As anyone who works with volunteers knows, it isn’t always easy managing expectations and fluctuating dedication.

“Some people stayed for a few days, others longer,” recalls Harvey. “But every bit that each person did was so valuable.”

Some of the more challenging aspects were getting the building up to safety code for a public facility: fire exits, wiring, doors, plumbing—everything had to be replaced or drastically upgraded. The windows had to have special coverings to make sure sunlight didn’t damage the artifacts. And while Harvey and the Foundation’s many volunteers managed the amazing physical transformation, artifacts began to trickle and then flood in. Interested local historians and teachers began the work of cataloguing items and establishing displays.

Isabel recalls a day when a young First Nations man showed up to drop off an altered Canadian flag that had the face of an Indian Chief stamped on the white maple leaf and gave it to the museum to put in the First Nations Exhibit.

“I don’t even know how he knew about us, but the flag is still there in the First Nations room,” she remembers.

The flag may have come from the Native Friendship Centre. Perhaps recognizing that the value of a museum is not that we know every detail, but rather that we have a sense that we belong to an ongoing story, she adds, “there’s a story in that flag but I don’t know what it is.”

In the mid-1990s, there was still little grant money available in Alberta, and so resources were incredibly slim. “We did what we could from our own pockets,” says Harvey, who personally logged over 4,000 hours of labor in those two-and-a-half years of reconstruction.

The society was also fortunate to have a renter—the Sherard Theatre Group, who set up their sewing machines (for costume-making) and office where the museum’s library is located now.

“They were our first rental income,” recalls Isabel. “Anytime we needed help, they did whatever they could.”

Fortunately, through Reg Gray’s community connections, the Colchester Agriculture Society provided a series of grants to help fund the museum through the final stages of restoring the building and onward.

“They raised money from dances and community fundraising activities and gave us whatever they could,” recalls Isabel .

The first grant was \$4,500.00. It wasn’t a fortune, but it was a real boost for the museum and, on July 12 of 1997, with treats and coffee supplied by the Colchester Hall Ladies, the Strathcona County Museum opened its doors.

Then a new set of challenges arose. With an extremely limited and uncertain operating budget, the dedicated volunteers, who had figured out how to turn a jailhouse into a public museum, now had to figure out how to staff and run it.

It was a bumpy road at the start. “We were naïve and we didn’t know how to run a museum,” says Isabel. And, after a difficult time establishing stable funds with which to hire a permanent director, the museum closed its doors in September of 2001.

Joni Mitchell was right. Sometimes you “don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone.” The museum had become an important resource to the community for Strathcona County.

On October 16, 2001 with some temporary funds from the County, a new director, Starr Hanson was hired and the museum reopened its doors. Recognizing the value and the contribution the museum made to the community, the County approved yearly funding for the museum in its budget beginning in 2003. With over 20,000 artifacts in its collection, the Strathcona County Museum is now a well-used community asset, providing curriculum support for elementary school children, and community programming for all ages.

Isabel still looks after the flower boxes that ring the outside of the museum, filling them with wave petunias, dusty miller, and other annuals donated by Salisbury Greenhouses. Harvey, is happy to leave the work of running the museum and the Heritage Foundation to others. With so many thousands of hours of work put into the paneling, shelving, displays, wiring, doors and windows, and subsequently into the Foundation’s activities, he has done his time in the old county jailhouse. But he is still an invested Heritage Foundation member.

“Having a place to learn about heritage is the only way that younger generations can realize what took place in the earlier days,” comments Harvey. “It may give them some incentive to continue on and maintain their heritage as well.”

Isabel remarks that “when people visit our museum, they realize that they can be proud of their heritage—and Strathcona is a county that should be proud.”

At the very least it should be proud of the many volunteers, past and present, who did so much to stop the disappearing of the artifacts, and who have established a living connection to the memories and traditions that are the heritage of Strathcona County.

- Were you a volunteer at the museum? If so, let us know your story, and we’ll post it here. Contact us at info@strathcona.ca
- What is your family’s connection to Strathcona County? We welcome stories about your family traditions, and heritage.