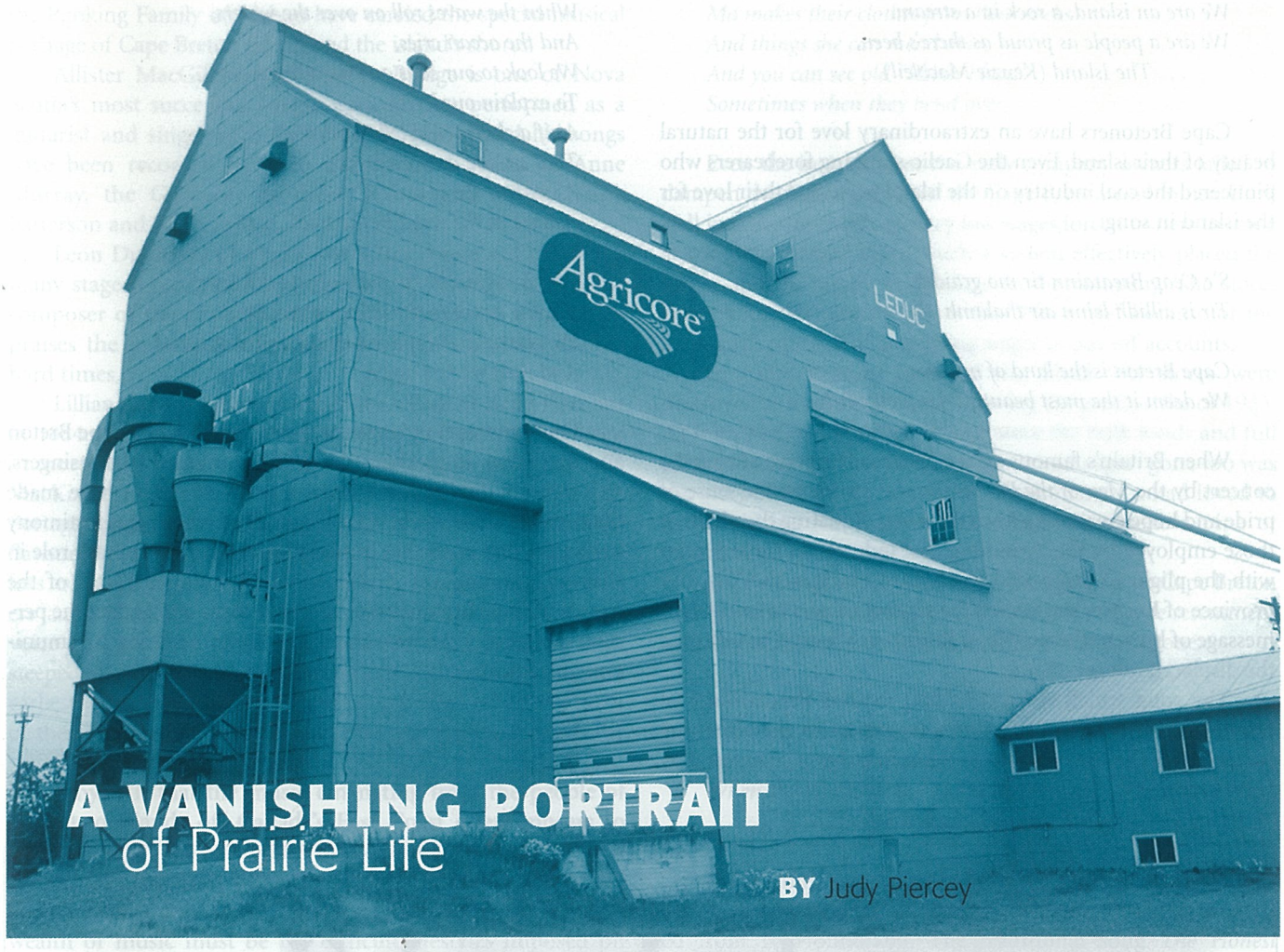

A VANISHING PORTRAIT of Prairie Life

BY Judy Piercey

Photo by Diana MacLeod

A FRIEND, PRAIRIE BORN AND BRED, WAS SITTING IN A GOVERNMENT WAITING ROOM, ADMIRING THE WINNING ENTRY IN A POSTER CONTEST. CANADIAN CHILDREN HAD BEEN ASKED TO SUBMIT THE IMAGES THAT REPRESENT CANADA TO THEM. THE WINNER WAS A GIRL FROM EDMONTON. SHE'D DRAWN PICTURES OF THE CN TOWER, A TOTEM POLE AND PARLIAMENT HILL. MY FRIEND THOUGHT SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THE PICTURE. THERE WAS NO GRAIN ELEVATOR. HOW COULD A PICTURE, ESPECIALLY ONE DRAWN BY A PRAIRIE KID, NOT INCLUDE A GRAIN ELEVATOR?

Bob Caine is not surprised. He's been watching it happen. He was born in 1929 – around the time grain elevators were springing up all over the Prairies. When he was growing up, every town had at least one grain elevator, maybe two or three. "A grain elevator is the greatest single symbol of our western Canadian heritage," says Caine. "There is nothing that portrays western Canada like a grain elevator. Where do you ever see a calendar or a picture that doesn't have a picture of a grain elevator on it?"

At least that's the way it used to be. Every few miles, you would see at least one. To be exact, it was every eight miles. The elevators were spaced that way to allow farmers to deliver their grain by horse and wagon in one day. Just how prosperous those farmers were, along with the towns they supported, could be judged instantly by counting the grain elevators. The more elevators, the greater the wealth. The grain elevator was the place to meet, to share news and gossip.

Today, Tim Horton's is where Bob Caine and his buddies meet to shoot the breeze. It's also the unofficial 'world headquarters' for the Save the Elevator Committee in Leduc, Alberta. They are a grey-haired group of people who love to remember the days when grain elevators dominated the landscape. Bob Caine, like other Prairie travellers, counted on grain elevators to be his roadmap.

"As you went along," he says, "they were kind of a checkpoint on your trip. When you got to North Battleford, you'd know you were halfway to Saskatoon. And when you got to Davidson, there'd be seven or eight elevators, that was halfway between Saskatoon and Regina. And when you got to Weyburn, you knew you only had 54 miles left to go on your journey to Estevan."

The grain elevator was the tallest building in every Prairie town. The name of the town was written boldly at the top. When Calvin Stienley was flying small planes, he relied on those tall, bold letters as a backup navigational aid. "I can remember getting lost in a storm. My radio went out. I had no idea where I was. And then I got down to 400 or 500 feet above, I could still see the ground and I passed the elevator at Richmond and I knew where I was." But more importantly, he thinks the grain elevator was a part of the town's identity. "It was almost as if you were a somebody by that identification mark."

The grain elevator was part of Helen Atkinson's own identity. Even though she didn't even see them while she was growing up. Mrs. Atkinson was born in the west in 1930, but moved to Ontario when she was eight years old. Her mother instilled in her children a strong sense of Prairie pride: The strength of the people, the land and the big sky. All of it was symbolized by the grain elevators. Her mother would point to pictures and say, "See those? You're a westerner. Those grain elevators are part of your heritage." When Helen Atkinson moved back to Alberta with her own growing family 20 years ago, she was moved by the beauty of the silhouette of the grain elevator against the Prairie sky. And for the life of her, she can't figure out why people are so blasé about allowing them to be torn down. "I suppose they've gotten used to the elevators being there." She pauses, emotion shining in her face, and smiles. "To me, they're special."

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It started two years ago when Agricore decided to shut down the Leduc Elevator. Like most of the old-fashioned wooden structures, the elevator was too small and too inefficient to compete in the modern world of agriculture. Grain companies are ripping down the old elevators as fast as they can to replace them with giant, computerized concrete structures that can do 10, or even 20, times the work of one. The Leduc elevator is one of 200 left standing across the Prairie provinces. But just 30 years ago, it was part of a much larger group: 6,000 grain elevators stood against the big Prairie sky from Manitoba to Alberta.

From Agricore's point of view, closing the Leduc elevator was a simple business decision. Once the decision was made, the company wanted to demolish it as quickly as possible. An elevator left standing is a liability, explains Phil Hyde, Agricore's regional manager. There are taxes to be paid, huge insurance bills and rent to the railway. It costs $50,000 to demolish an elevator. Maintaining one after it's been closed quickly adds up to even more than that. Which is why Agricore demands $20,000 up front before it will even entertain the notion of selling a grain elevator to conservation-minded groups. That way, if the group fails, Agricore isn't on the hook for the taxes or the rent.

Phil Hyde doesn't mince words. "How many museums can you have?" he asks. He's learned to be skeptical. Over the years, he's lost count of the number of inquiries he's received from people who want to save their elevators. But he can count on his fingers the ones that have succeeded. He knows it takes more than good intentions to save an elevator. "The ones that succeed have a tremendous commitment from within the group," he says.

When Bob Caine's group asked for a deadline extension, they also offered to pay the taxes on the elevator to give them time to raise the money. Hyde was impressed enough to grant them two extensions over the next seven months. Caine was jubilant. "I'm sure they had the bulldozers idling," he says, his eyes sparkling with the look of a man who relishes a good fight.

Caine is a cattle rancher and businessman. In a lifetime on the Prairies, he's had his share of triumphs and disappointments. His group is made up of like-minded people: people with faith that they will triumph; people who concentrate on remembering the triumphs and putting the failures behind them. They set out to raise the $20,000. Up against a tight deadline and public apathy, they started chipping in their own money. One farmer put in $1,000. Later on, he added another thousand. Two days before the May 31 deadline, they went to Agricore and handed Phil Hyde a certified cheque for $20,000.

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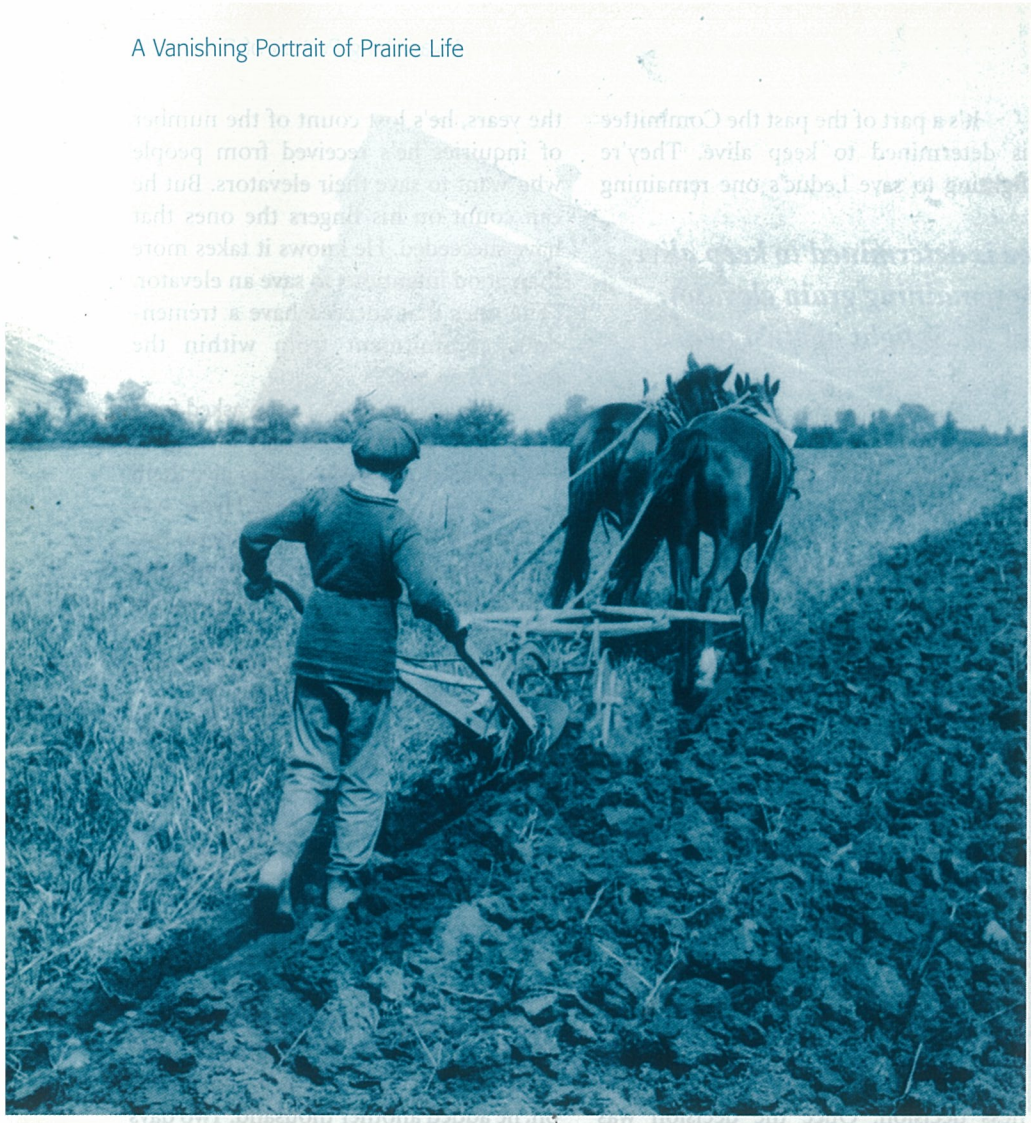
The group was in high spirits. But the work was just beginning. They had to move fast; saving a grain elevator is a complicated job. There are lots of hassles and many elements out of their control. Part of the complication is dealing with two landlords. Agricore owns the grain elevator, but the land on which it sits belongs to Canadian Pacific Railway. The group had to act fast to buy the land. The longer it took, the greater the chance that their $20,000 would be lost, gone to pay Agricore's rent to CPR. And buying the land turned out to be far more difficult than anyone had imagined.



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Eventually, Caine met personally with CPR's real estate manager in Calgary. "His name is Cole Crook, if you can imagine that," says Caine. "And he's an earnest young man, who really turned things around for us." Things started to happen. CPR had started out asking $168,000 for the land. The group knew it was too much. Cole Crook settled the matter quickly by calling in an appraiser. He valued the land at $98,000. That was good enough for CPR.

But now, the group had a different kind of struggle to contend with: internal discord. The cost of the land would actually be more than $98,000. There would be GST on top of that. Nearly $7,000 extra in taxes. Some people in the group were rankled at the very idea of turning that kind of money over the CPR. The way they figured it, the railway had made plenty of profit from western farmers for the past 100 years. And furthermore, the railway got the land for nothing in the first place. So it seemed a bit much to knock themselves out raising $105,000 to hand over the CPR and the federal government.

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For the people in the group, working to save the grain elevator was a labour of love. And Bob Caine is the first to wear his heart on his sleeve. But at the same time, he understood that for both Agricore and CPR, this was just business. "The truth is these are two big corporations, thoroughly decent in every thing they do, but they're business people. There's no giveaways. Every move has to be negotiated. They expect a fair deal, just as we expect a fair deal."

The matter came to head at a meeting in June. The group's volunteer lawyer, Len Zalapski, urged them not to drag out negotiations, dithering over the price of the land. Zalapski had dealt with CPR before. He told the gathered that the company could take longer to make a decision than 'even the government.'

He put it to them directly. "They almost have, in a sense, because of history and legislation, a godlike feeling about their presence in terms of the Canadian business environment. So, just keep in mind that your tools of negotiation with them are not normal. The leverage isn't there, there's nothing compelling them to do anything. They do it at their own pace. Realistically if things move at any kind of pace, you should give yourselves a pat on the back."

At the end of the night, the group voted 30-3 to pay CPR's asking price, plus GST. Bob Caine couldn't have been more pleased. He's got his eye on the big picture. "I believe once we show them what we can do, both Agricore and CPR will give us a substantial donation. I'm thinking five, ten, maybe twenty thousand. Yep, I bet they do."

The group will need every penny it can get. Caine figures it will cost $2 million to turn the grain elevator into a museum. "It's a daunting amount of money, especially when you're raising it with chicken dinners and bake sales and raffles." That's assuming people will come out and support the project. Not everyone agrees the grain elevator should be saved. Caine has tried to assure Leduc's mayor that his group will stick to the project. "The mayor is afraid that we'll go flat and council will be stuck with this old building that they'll have to demolish. He's afraid it

will be a liability. And some people are afraid council is going to put a big chunk of money into this museum project and all of a sudden, their taxes will go up. And even in my own family, we don't talk about the elevator. I think my kids are afraid I'm going to sell the farm to help save this thing."

He promises he won't do anything rash. But there's no question that saving this elevator is the last big fight of his life. He thinks it will take 10 years to get the museum up and running. He wonders if he'll live long enough to see that day. Still, he's dreaming of that day. And he's trying to infect everyone he meets with that dream.

Overcoming public apathy will be the biggest job of all. In just one generation, he's seen grain elevators disappear from public consciousness. So much so, that elementary kids don't even think of drawing them at all. It seems as if it took no time to go from using grain elevators as visual roadmaps to being lucky to even see one at all. Caine has no illusions, or even a desire, to turn back the clock. He just wants to people to wake up before it's too late. He believes the way to beat public apathy is by persuading every single person in Leduc that it's a personal responsibility to get involved.

"The other day I ran into one of my neighbours. I passed him in the truck and we rolled our windows down. He says 'What are you doing Bob, I don't see you around very much?'

I said 'I'm up to my shoulders trying to save the elevator.'

'Elevator? What elevator?' he says.

I said 'the Leduc elevator, Jerry. It needs to be saved. It's going to be demolished. There won't be an elevator left in the country.'

He shrugs and says 'well....'

I said 'Jerry, you should step up and put a nice bit of money into that elevator. Let me tell you why. You've got a houseful of girls in your family and when they start having babies, what a privilege it will be for you to take those kids by the hand and lead them through that elevator and show them where Great-Great-Great Grampa first came and sold his wheat. You should help preserve it so that you'll be able to show your grandkids how their ancestors made this country as great as it is.'

He nodded and says, 'Yeah, I guess so.'

"But he was glad to get rid of me. And this is the fact. This is the awesome task, the almost impossible task. To get to enough people, to talk to them that way. To keep the money coming. That's the responsibility this community has. Whether they know it or not."

Back at Tim Horton's, the group is planning its next move. There's an environmental assessment to be done. They're trying to get Agricore and CPR to foot the bill. Once that hurdle is out of the way, the fund-raising will begin in earnest. They've already approached the federal and provincial governments for financial help. They've got an architect ready to go. Every day, they're working out details. When they meet formally once a week, there's always progress to build upon.

Everyone in this group has persevered through one kind or another of business or farming trial. They're not to be daunted.

"You've just got to make up your mind that it's going to happen," says Bob Caine. "And stick with it. Just don't give up. Don't ever give up."

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