

The Stunning History Behind 5 Objects in Calgary Museums

BY SILVIA PIKAL



IF THESE ARTIFACTS COULD TALK

There's hundreds of thousands of artifacts in Calgary museums, many of them stored where you can't see them, biding their time to be on display whether as part of a new exhibit or to commemorate an occasion. They have histories just waiting to be discovered by the public.

And the ones you do see under glass in Calgary's museums have stories you could never imagine — from a cigarette tin discovered recently in France that belonged to a soldier who travelled from Calgary to Europe to fight in the First World War, to a 35-foot-long theatre organ that was squished into a basement with its pipes bent to fit — we give you a backstage look at the stories behind five artifacts from Calgary museums.

THE JOURNEY OF THE KIMBALL THEATRE ORGAN

On a Tuesday afternoon in March, Jason Barnsley, the National Music Centre's collections and exhibitions technician, is playing some movie jazz on the Kimball Theatre Organ.

Barnsley is a trained organist who plays and tunes the assemblage of pipes, valves, cables and instruments that make up the instrument, which lives on the third level of Studio Bell, home of the National Music Centre.

Using both hands and feet to control the keys and levers, he can play the pipe organ, snare drum, xylophone, glockenspiel and several other instruments to give the audience the feel of an orchestra.

While the popular theatre organ is admired and played daily at the NMC, it hasn't always lived a dignified life. For years it lived in a basement with its pipes bent to accommodate an eight-foot ceiling.

The theatre organ was manufactured in 1924 by the Kimball Piano and Organ Company to accompany silent films, and was first installed in St. Helens Theatre in Chehalis, Washington.

Barnsley says playing a theatre organ requires some serious dexterity, along with a great deal of improvisation and focus. Theatre organists during the silent

film era had to follow closely along with the movie and in many cases improvise a score to set the mood and tone, as well as provide the sound effects on top of that.

"There's stories about organists playing and becoming so engrossed in the film they're watching that their playing starts to trail off, and the audience — who were great hecklers — would throw popcorn and yell at them to play again."

After the theatre flooded in 1952, the Kimball Theatre Organ sat in six inches of water, losing its finish and leaving the ivory keys worn through to the wood.

Luckily for the Kimball, Glenn D. White Jr., a 23-year-old guided-missile engineer for Boeing, bought the organ for only \$1,000 (less than one tenth of its original value), and in seven trips, transported the theatre organ and its various parts to his parent's house. He set it up in the basement, chipped out a section of the basement concrete wall to get it to fit, and bent the taller pipes of the organ so it could stand upright in the basement.

White Jr. happened to enjoy installing and repairing pipe organs in his spare time, and helped restore it to its former glory. But when he got married and moved out, his parents were stuck with it. It changed ownership a few times before eventually being donated to the NMC by Alberta-based organist Carol Otto.

Today it has a happy home in the NMC where it's a treasured artifact. Some components like the chime stands and legs were rebuilt, but most of it is in its original condition. The pipes are still bent because it doesn't really affect the tone — and are part of the provenance of the instrument.



THE BELL THAT RANG WHEN GEORGE CHUVALO FOUGHT MUHAMMAD ALI

The year was 1966. The place was Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. And the fight was between George Chuvalo and Muhammad Ali.

While Ali won the world title, Chuvalo became a legend — he was still on his feet when the bell ended their fight after 15 rounds. That bell now lives in Canada's Sports Hall of Fame. "There's so much history attached to it," says Helena Deng, manager of exhibits and collections for Canada's Sports Hall of

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HIDDEN

RELIQUARY



UNCOVERING HIDDEN TREASURE

Fame. “This is the same bell that rang 15 times when Chuvalo and Ali fought. No one has ever stood that long against Ali.”

Frank Shillolo was the official bell man for the Ontario Athletics Commission. During a fight night in 1980, Shillolo noticed a crack in the bell and took it home to find someone to repair it.

“By the time he found someone, Maple Leaf Gardens had gotten another bell, so it becomes one of those things where someone goes, ‘This is a piece of garbage’ and it sits in a basement.”

Many years later, Frank’s son Michael Shillolo asked if the Sports Hall wanted the bell for their collection, and they jumped at the chance. At a celebration in Toronto honouring 2014 inductees to Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame, Deng says Chuvalo, who at the time was 77 years old, proved he’s still fight ready.

“Someone decided to ding it when George was standing right beside it — and automatically the fists came up. George is conditioned — when that bell goes, he’s ready. George is a history maker because no one stood like George.”

Deng says artifacts aren’t artifacts until you have a story attached to them, and many stories are lost in history, with the artifact seeming to be just another piece of junk sitting in someone’s garage.

“So much is lost to time. When we do have those stories, it makes it really special. There’s so many stories that can be told if only the objects actually had a voice. If this little bell could say, ‘This is what I witnessed.’”

On the seventh floor of Glenbow, one of the floors containing the museum’s collections materials, Travis Lutley slips on a pair of archival gloves and picks up a slender cigarette tin. Its exterior is dotted with rust, but it’s in pretty good shape considering it’s been buried in dirt for almost a century.

Lutley is a collections technician in the Military History Department for Glenbow, and he’s very excited about this particular donation.

“I was contacted by a self-described relic hunter in the UK who had come across this object in Europe,” Lutley says.

The relic hunter found it a few years ago — likely somewhere in France — and didn’t keep track of where he found it, since at first glance it was just a rusty cigarette tin.

When he got around to cleaning it in an acid bath, he discovered this was no ordinary relic from the past. He unearthed a stamped inscription: 808887. J.G. PATTISON. 50 BTL. C.E.F.

That might not mean much if you’re not familiar with military history. What the relic hunter knew is this inscription reveals the name of a Canadian soldier — John George Pattison — along with his service number, battalion number and that he was a part of Canada’s overseas infantry forces, the Canadian Expeditionary Force, during World War I.

A Google search of the soldier’s name alerted him to the fact that Pattison’s Victoria Cross lives at the Glenbow (the Victoria Cross is the highest decoration for bravery possible to receive in Commonwealth countries with only 94 being awarded to Canadians). He then got in touch with Lutley and asked if they wanted the tin.

“That was a really wild thing and totally unexpected,” Lutley says.

“Typically we get family members donating material to us that belonged to someone in their family.”

The donor mailed the tin on its way, and after sitting in customs for a few agonizing months, the package was finally in Lutley’s hands.

“Part of the significance of this item is the fact there are still material objects buried in the ground that talk about our history and are still being uncovered,” Lutley says. “It’s an interesting link, and it’s bringing the past back to life.”

According to the book *VCs of the First World War: Arras & Messines 1917* by Gerald Gliddon, Pattison enlisted in May 1916 at the age of 40. He was sent to France, and in April 1917 his battalion was involved in an attack. The Germans had a clear field of fire for their machine guns. Pattison made his way from shell hole to shell hole, ducking fire, until he was able to fling grenades at the German position, killing or wounding several of the crew. He overcame the remaining defenders, and 20 minutes later all the enemy objectives had been taken and the Canadians consolidated the captured line.

Pattison was killed in a shell blast in June 1917 before he could receive his Victoria Cross. His wife, Sophia Pattison, received the medal in Calgary in a public ceremony.

Lutley says it’s unknown if the cigarette tin was on him when he died or if he lost it earlier. Since it was recently acquired the cigarette tin is not ready to be displayed yet, but Glenbow houses Pattison’s Victoria Cross, British War Medal and Victory Medal in the Warriors gallery on the fourth floor.



THE LAST ARTIFACTS OF THE BEACHCOMBER RESTAURANT

Rick Choppe never imagined that a few napkins and a pack of matches from his wedding would likely be the last remaining artifacts of Calgary's Beachcomber Restaurant.

Choppe, a retired Calgary Fire Department fire captain, married his wife Trudy at the Beachcomber Restaurant on July 17, 1971.

"Being young people, our wedding plans weren't big or extravagant, so we booked a table at the Beachcomber for close family friends and relatives," Choppe says.

His sister Donna saved some napkins and Trudy saved a pack of matches for keepsakes. Only eight months later, in April 1972, the restaurant burned to the ground, trapping 24-year-old Calgary firefighter Jerald (Jerry) Walter — who sadly became the sixth Calgary firefighter to die in the line of duty.

Six months later in October 1972, Choppe was accepted to the Calgary fire department and the napkins and matches took on a whole new significance.

"I thought, is that a coincidence or some kind of an omen?"

Choppe says he's had some close calls over the years, including a time when his heavy-duty helmet saved his head from being crushed by a smoke ejector in a dog cage.

"You gotta be a half wit to do this job because everyone's running out, and you're running in, happier than hell," Choppe says with a grin, reflecting on his time with the fire department.

After more than 30 years with the fire department, Choppe retired in 2006, much to Trudy's relief. When the Firefighters Museum of Calgary opened in its own dedicated space in 2017, Choppe thought they might want the Beachcomber items.

"They're probably the only Beachcomber artifacts around because that place burnt to nothing. There will never be anymore. There was nothing left." 

SCRUFFY THE CAR

There's a Nash 450 sedan sitting in Heritage Park's Gasoline Alley, and her name is Scruffy.

She first rolled off the assembly line in 1930 with a shiny coat of paint. Only a few years later she was covered in dents, repairs and rust due to the travels of a Saskatchewan family searching for a better life on the open road.

Like many prairie families in Canada during the Great Depression, they were forced to pack up their belongings, load up the car and leave their devastated farm behind to find work.

Scruffy has room for five people. With no trunk, any extra luggage would be strapped on the roof. The family headed north to Peace River Country, but somewhere in Alberta the worn-out car kicked the bucket.

Sylvia Harnden, the curator at Heritage Park, says the family would have had no choice but to set out on foot while Scruffy was left to fend for herself. Scruffy eventually settled in a barn in Balzac.

About 50 years later, in 1985, a man named Brian McKay showed up looking for Scruffy. The Calgary-born car enthusiast was living in Victoria, restoring antique Nash roasters, and looking for parts, when he heard about the old girl.

"He picked it up for parts, but once he had it in his possession, he started to look at it and fell in love with what it represented — all those thousands of thousands of people who struggled during the depression," Harnden says. "The Dust Bowl, drought, hail, grasshoppers — it was a terrible time for a lot of people — and to him it represented those hardships."

In 2004, McKay mechanically restored the car and drove 2,000 miles down Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles, recreating the journey of many Dust Bowl refugees who headed west hoping to find work. He shipped Scruffy by flatbed truck to Chicago and travelled by train to meet up with her for the epic, 2000-mile, seven-week journey. After McKay's death, Scruffy was donated to Heritage Park in 2010 with the stipulation they could not restore her.

"I think the story of this car is one thing — the indomitable human spirit," Harnden says. "Brian McKay had it, people who survived the Great Depression had it — they just had to keep on, keepin' on — and somehow they did."



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