

# Stalwart Sentinels of the Prairie

Of thousands of distinctive wooden grain elevators that once dotted Canada's western plains, a few hundred still stand, a testimony to the persevering spirit of small-town farmers

by Judy Waytiuk





When Marcia Rowat looks through the window over her kitchen sink in Inglis, Manitoba, she sees the row of five wooden grain elevators off to the right, several feet south of the poplar bluff where the abandoned railway branch line ends and Rowat's backyard begins. Ranging from sixty-five to eighty feet in height, leaning a little tiredly beside the abandoned track, the elevators have been pushed slightly off plumb over their sixty to eighty years of working life. Each has sagged in a different direction, shifted by the tons of grain that settled unevenly in the elevators' storage bins over decades of hard use. Inside, bare wooden walls still carry the dull, dusky smell of ripe grain, mixed with whiffs of pigeon and barn swallow droppings. The wood planks that line the interiors of the

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grain storage bins have weathered into the smooth, sculpted relief of frozen rippled sand, gently carved out by pounding from the billions of grain kernels that poured into storage. Occasionally, the old buildings groan and creak, protesting gusts of prairie summer wind.

Once—in the early 1930s—there were more than fifty-seven hundred wooden grain elevators strung out along rail lines that criss-crossed Canada's prairies. Four years ago, perhaps eight hundred wooden elevators still stood, their blocky silhouettes sharp against the otherwise unrelentingly flat horizon line, identifying from miles away the presence of villages where the elevators still stood. Today, perhaps two or three hundred of the old elevators remain. With their railway lines and elevators gone, hundreds of small prairie towns have withered. But the Inglis elevators have survived, thanks to Rowat and a small

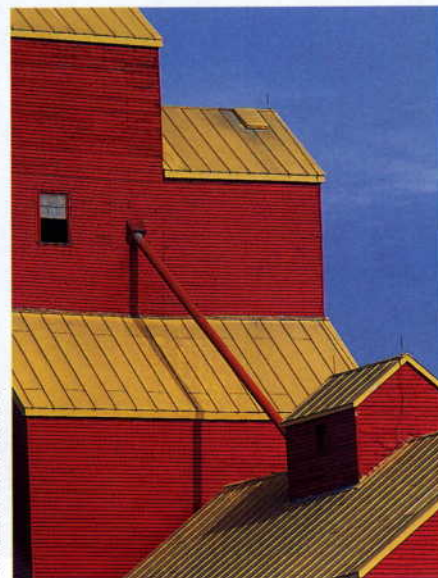
band of determined history buffs who refuse to let them fall.

About two hundred people live beside the elevators in Inglis, twelve miles north of the town of Russell, which sits on Highway 16 almost at the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border in the center of Canada, at the northeastern edge of the Canadian grain-growing prairies. Out here, doors are seldom locked. The combined-grade school scrapes up about fifty kids to teach each year. There's a seldom-used, small stone church, the Inglis Hotel, and the Rose Bowl Cafe, where the coffee is made in a carafe that's marked to serve twelve cups, but doles out just eight farm-size mugs. Hardly anyone ever stays in the Inglis Hotel's five upstairs rooms. There's cold beer in the main floor beer parlor.

Rowat, husband Dave, and their two daughters live on Ploeg Street, a block over and down from the hotel. There are just



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when the nearly twelve-mile-long stretch of Canadian Pacific Railway branch line from Inglis to Russell was abandoned. The branch line was torn out. Only the bit of rail running past the elevators themselves was left behind.

Their original purpose taken from them, the five Inglis elevators became empty, weathered, creaking fire hazards. They hadn't been painted for decades; faded logos showed their histories. On one, the name Reliance was obscured by remnants of a pale blue UGG, symbol of United Grain Growers. On another, a giant letter N for National Grain was a blurred smear of white against faded brown-red—the dried-blood color prairie people call CPR red, the color most elevators were painted just because it was

## The color most elevators were painted just because it was the easiest paint to obtain

four streets in Inglis: Blighty, Main, Ploeg, and the gravel road called Railway Avenue that runs past the elevators and then quits in a gravel turnaround a couple of houses shy of the Rowats' yard. Almost every prairie town or village has its Railway Avenue running alongside the rail tracks where the elevators stood, and where farmers gathered at harvest time, lined up along the gravel or dirt road with grain trucks full of ripe wheat, oats, or barley.

Few towns have elevators still standing. Over the past four decades, they have been torn down, either singly or in rows that collapse like falling dominoes beside abandoned, weedy railway branch lines. The closing of the branch lines and the accompanying deaths of these wooden elevators have been the price paid for more economical, faster grain handling and shipping systems. Larger, more centralized, concrete monsters, strategically located, can hold

massive amounts of grain. They off-load golden streams of would-be bread, pasta, oatmeal, beer, or animal feed by the ton into dozens of hopper cars in grain trains that can be two city blocks long.

Watching the elevators fall, many westerners have become fiercely protective of their fading symbols of prairie fortitude. When one is slated for demolition these days, local people often try to save it. Mostly, they fail. The last elevator in Regina, Saskatchewan, which once boasted a row of ten, toppled in May 1996 after efforts failed to turn it into a museum. In Melville, Saskatchewan, Wheat Pool Elevator No.100 fell in the 1970s, eventually to be resurrected in partial replica thirty years later, inside the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec.

But in Inglis, Rowat and her committee are winning. Rumors had simmered since the fifties that this little-used elevator "delivery point" would close. It finally did in 1995,

the easiest, cheapest paint to obtain. Four of them were built right after the Canadian Pacific Railway opened the line to Inglis in 1922. The fifth came along in 1941. Their blocky, tall frames have stood along the eastern edge of the village of Inglis ever since.

Architects admire the clean design lines of wooden elevators and the simple dignity

*Of the more than five thousand grain elevators that once rose above Canada's prairies, this group in Mossleigh, Alberta, center, is among the few hundred still operating. Most are meeting the fate of this brightly painted elevator in Lajord, Saskatchewan, above, which was in operation almost until its demolition last year*

*Overleaf: On a summer evening in Inglis, Manitoba, sunlight falls on Canada's longest remaining row of standing grain elevators*



“When people heard the diesel fire up in the morning, they knew everything

of the forms that so earnestly follow function, but to prairie people, elevators are monuments to the stubborn integrity and courage of the dryland grain farmer who never gives up. To those born and bred on the prairies, that, above all else, is what makes them beautiful.

John Everitt, a prairie geography professor at Manitoba’s Brandon University, has been studying grain elevators for more than two decades. “Geographers talk about central place functions, and that can be anywhere from a coffee shop to a grain elevator. And many people think they were the most important place functions,” he explains. “Every farmer had to come into town to the elevator. So the elevator brought people into town for other things as well—for social and economic reasons.”

To lonely townspeople and isolated farm families, elevators served as economic lifelines and social gathering

points. To flatland children, grain elevators made magic. When a father or grandfather took you up narrow, steep wooden stairs inside to look through the dusty little window at the top, you saw the world—and it was a vast, restless sea of wind-blown grain fields, green or gold depending on the season.

“Another thing that’s made them so important emotionally is that you used to be able to drive down the highway and see them,” observes Everitt. “You could see a town coming miles away, by its elevator. It’s important landscape symbolism—you could see you were getting closer to a town. And apparently, during the Second World War, there were a lot of flight training schools on the prairies. The story goes that if trainee pilots got lost, they’d fly along a railway line until they saw one of the elevators, and they’d look up the elevator name on the map to know where they were.”



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as right with the world. The agent was up. The elevator was working”

Prairie child Marcia Rowat couldn't bring herself to let the Inglis elevators fall. Raised on a farm east of town, she remembered coming to town with her father, sitting in the cab of the family's two-ton grain truck while he delivered grain. She knew what happened to towns that lost their elevators. She feared the same would happen to tiny Inglis. And in the mid-1990s, Rowat happened on information from a paper written by Everitt, which mentioned that the five Inglis elevators—three “singles” and two more joined together to make what was called a “double”—made up the longest remaining row of standing grain elevators in Canada. Rowat pounced on that thought, and has never let go of it. “I just got stubborn,” she says.

Latching onto the idea of saving the elevators and using their historic importance to save the village, she scrounged up a committee, funding, and support. It was uphill all the way for the Inglis Area Heritage

*Prairie geography professor John Everitt, right, points out the elevators' economic and social significance to their small towns, which has led to private leasing arrangements to keep elevators such as this one in Ste. Agathe, Manitoba, above, operating, as well as some public mural making in Boissevain, Manitoba, depicting life-size wagons going up the ramp to the cleaning bin, opposite*

Committee. “People feared being stuck for the costs if the project failed,” she says. “But that was good—it made the committee work smarter.”

Retired grain company presidents and university professors from Winnipeg joined her crusade. The group incorporated, sweet-talked grain companies into handing over the elevators along with cash donations to seed an endowment fund, and persuaded Canadian Pacific Railway to give over the land underneath the old buildings and abandoned rail line. Finally, they had



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*The grain elevator's classic tall style and clean angles, seen in the town of Isabella, Manitoba's, opposite, evolved over time; great height enabled both ample storage capacity and ease of movement by gravity for large amounts of grain, below*



The wood planks lining the grain storage bins have weathered into the smooth, sculpted relief of frozen, rippled sand. Occasionally, the old buildings groan and creak

the whole ramshackle collection declared a National Historic Site.

Rowat's group took heart from the fact that grain elevators have become a romantic Canadian symbol, recognized around the world for what they represent of prairie history. Yet, critical though they have been to farm and town life, most prairie people gave them little conscious thought until they began disappearing. Grain elevators had been nothing more than background bits of life's landscape, as automatic and apparently permanent as were meadowlarks, Canada geese, poplar trees, wide skies, and fall harvests.

But the elevators did not come about in the first place without considerable failed experimentation. In the late 1800s, the Canadian prairies, a few decades behind settlement in the United States to the south, were just beginning to be settled and broken to the plow. Farming was the only logical choice of occupation for most immigrants to Canada's west, but transportation of the grain they grew was a problematic challenge. The Canadian Pacific Railway, busily shipping settlers and consumer goods westward, saw the wisdom of doubling profits by hauling grain back to eastern Canada's port cities, instead of empty rail cars. Instead of build-

ing its own grain-storage facilities along its rail network, the railway encouraged private companies to build them, promising never to accept grain from anyone but company agents.

Canadian grain companies and farmer cooperatives toyed for some years with prototypes to try and develop the most cost-efficient, effective way to gather and store grain for shipping. Single-story bins called flat warehouses couldn't store enough grain and were awkward to fill and empty. A circular silo-style design was tried, the first one built by one William Hespeler in Niverville, Manitoba, in 1878. The first angular Canadian elevator—a short, squat cube—sprouted in 1881 beside the Canadian Pacific Railway spur in Gretna, Manitoba, built by the Ogilvie Milling Company. The silo-shaped or cubic structures were popular with flour-milling companies that used them mostly for storage, but they were inefficient as shipping facilities.

Decades earlier, in 1842, American businessman Joseph Dart had come up with the concept of a system of belts as vertical

pulleys with buckets attached to them, to move grain from his warehouse to waiting ships. Eventually, that design idea made its way north, where it eventually was shaped into the pure, angularly pragmatic Canadian-style wooden elevator.

Design niceties were irrelevant; grain companies wasted neither effort nor money on cosmetic frippery or aesthetic considerations. The characteristic clean-angled peak sensibly housed the top of the distributor for the bin spout. Height enabled more storage, and made loading rail cars easier than had been possible with the flat warehouses. Since wood needed to be painted to protect it from weathering, coats of rust-red paint were slapped onto the wooden planks covering the elevators' bulky frames. Most easily at hand was the inexpensive, ubiquitous CPR red, the paint the railway used for its wooden grain-carrying boxcars.

By the turn of the last century, hundreds of tall elevators dotted CPR rail sidings throughout western Canada. By the 1930s, 5,758 elevators sat beside railway branch lines flung across the region, owned by some three hundred grain companies. Where an elevator was built, a town sprang up, or vice-versa. Townspeople provided farmers with seed, animal feed, food staples, yard goods, a little entertainment,

pharmacies, cooperages, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and schools. Some larger towns or cities eventually boasted rows of eight or ten elevators, each owned by a different company.

At harvest time, farmers wielded shovels in the light of early dawn to fill wagons with forty-five or fifty bushels of grain. They drove their horses along dirt roads to the nearest elevator, never more than a morning's ride distant. By noon, wagons had lined up, waiting to pull into the raised driveway inside the covered garage, snug against the elevator's broad flank. The driveway floor was a giant weigh scale, used by the agent to weigh the wagon full, then empty, and then figure how much grain the farmer had delivered.

The farmer shoveled his grain through a floor grate into the pit below, watching anxiously while the agent scooped a sample to decide the grade, based on purely visual inspection that took into account quality, dirt, and estimated dockage—the percentage of weed seed, straw bits, and the like. Called "screenings," the dockage was sifted out by a grain-cleaning machine and

returned to the farmer as free animal feed, if he so desired.

Eric Nernberg remembers that ritual well. Rowat's Inglis Area Heritage Committee project manager for its first few years, he has now retired in Inglis and lives in the shadows of the elevators he visited as a boy. He grew up about five miles east of the village in the post-war 1940s, and regularly rode on the farm wagon with his father, hauling grain to the elevators he would one day help to save.

Unscrupulous agents sometimes shorted farmers by downgrading grain, he remembers. If the farmer disagreed with the agent's estimate of the quality of the grain, "you could have a sample sent to Winnipeg to get a grade," Nernberg recalls. "Some farmers, especially ones without much English, didn't have the nerve, though."

But farmers weren't always angels either, and agents knew it. Some farmers loaded a little high-grade grain at the back of the wagon, later the truck's grain box, where the grain spilled out first into the pit below the elevator's driveway. They hoped an impatient agent would quickly sample the better grain and mark the lot with a higher grade than it deserved. Canny agents learned to let the truckload's first few bushels spill into the pit before they scooped a cupful from the dull gold flow.

The grain was lifted from the pit with a diesel-powered vertical conveyer belt called the leg, which had big metal cup-like buckets spaced along it. The leg pulled the grain, cup by cup, to the top of the elevator. It poured back down into the appropriate bin through a movable spout that the agent at floor level directed, using a large hand-turned wheel connected to the upper-level spout by levers and pulleys. Reversing the process enabled the agent to load the appropriate grain into waiting boxcars on the opposite side of the elevator.

Early agents lived onsite, with families if they had them, in tiny buildings steps away from the elevator. The outbuildings doubled as offices, and often also housed the noisy diesel engines for the elevators' conveyer belts. Later, agents were called elevator managers or operators, and lived in real houses, built close to the elevators for convenience. Around each elevator, the town or village prospered, its economic life dependent on its tall wooden heart. "When people heard the diesel fire up in the morning," says Nernberg, "they knew everything was right with the world. The agent was up. The elevator was working."

Farmers hauled occasional loads from their on-farm summer-storage granaries if they needed cash or felt an urge for coffee, cigarettes, and a collective rant about rotten wheat prices. When they joined the agent for a hand-rolled cigarette, it was in the adjacent office building. Wooden elevators are gigantic potential explosive torches, filled with dry grain, dust, and wood. Big signs posted in English and Ukrainian exhorted patrons not to smoke inside the elevator. In the agent's office, mustard-yellow tin boxes of Black Cat tobacco usually sat on shelves beside an array of Edwards coffee cans, only one of which usually held ground coffee. The rest contained assorted nails, spikes, government forms, or odd lengths of binder twine, saved against possible unknown need.

As the century wore on, farms grew larger and became more mechanized. Trucks



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that traveled further and faster replaced horses. Smaller elevator companies, unable to attract enough business, closed down or were bought up, leaving grain collecting to a few large companies and the three provincial prairie wheat pools, the farmers' cooperatives. The railways began rationalizing thousands of branch lines, now little used, that had once spider-webbed the prairies. By 1996, just 1,190 elevators served the prairies.

Seven years later, Everitt figures fewer than four hundred remain. Some, though there are no statistics kept to indicate just how many, are still working. A few have been bought by area farmers who use them to sort grain and store it, waiting for better market prices. "There are others

just sitting around because I guess they just haven't got round to knocking them down," he notes. "And there are some that have been preserved as monuments."

The five Inglis elevators are the most ambitious of these monuments, the only row being preserved for what may or may not be an uncaring posterity. Neglected for years by the companies that owned them, they had been taken over by barn swallows,

*Different destinies for prairie sentinels: in Saskatchewan, the Instow elevator has been demolished since this 1993 photograph, above, while the grain bins of Ponteix, opposite, are now privately owned and operated; the rescued Inglis five, alongside Marcia Rowat, now boast a small museum and interpretive center, below*

People have been coming from all over the world. . . . They'd



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