

Alberta's Grain Elevators

A brief history of a prairie icon



Radway



Agricore-United elevators in Sexsmith

Early development

ALBERTA'S FIRST GRAIN ELEVATOR was built in 1895, by Brackman-Ker Milling Co. at Strathcona. The last traditional wooden elevators were erected 90 years later, by Alberta Wheat Pool in 1985 at Willingdon and Dapp. Those intervening years of the twentieth century saw ups and downs. Rail lines rapidly expanded, but then miles of branch lines were ripped up. Grain elevator companies came and went. There were lean years and years of plenty in the harvest and in prices realized on the grain markets. The story of grain elevators in Alberta follows these trends, as they progressed from novelty to ubiquitous landmark, to vanishing symbol.

Alberta was the last part of the Canadian prairies to be settled and developed as part of the national grain export system. The first elevators were built on the Calgary and Edmonton Railway and the Canadian Pacific Railway. By the 1920s there was a web of branch lines to serve the rapidly expanding grain trade in Alberta. Amalgamations of the railway companies in the 1920s resulted in Alberta

being served by three railway companies. In 1923 railway nationalisation led to the creation of the Canadian National Railway incorporating the Canadian Northern Railway, and the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1926. The Lacombe and Northwestern Railway went to the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1928. In 1929 the Northern Alberta Railway was the result of amalgamation of the Edmonton Dunvegan and British Columbia Railway, the Alberta and Great Waterways Railway, Canada Central Railway and the Pembina Valley Railway.

Expansion and consolidation

Progress in grain elevator construction in Alberta was slow at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1906 the province still had only a total of 43 elevators. This figure had jumped to 109 by the season of 1908, and to 229 by the end of 1909. By 1912 Alberta boasted a total of 279 elevators. These were operated by seventy-two grain companies, individuals or organisations, including the Department of Indian Affairs on the reserve at Brocket. Amalgamations and short term company ventures



Railway Street in Ponoka, circa 1920s. (Credit: Fort Ostell Museum)



St. Albert

characterised the trade in general in Alberta to 1920. Only eighteen of the seventy-two companies listed in 1912 were still operating in 1920. Sixty new or reorganised companies, cooperatives, or individuals had emerged in the Alberta grain trade. However, only a small handful of major companies accounted for most of the construction.

One of Alberta's first commercial line companies was the Alberta Grain Company, established in 1900, it had erected 33 elevators by 1911. The Alberta

Pacific Elevator Co. of 1907 had 71 elevators by 1911. Reorganised as the Alberta Pacific Grain Company in 1912, it held 198 elevators by 1923. The Federal Grain Company (later Federal Grain Ltd.) of 1912 had 52 elevators by 1929. Pioneer Grain Co. Ltd. was in operation in Alberta by 1912 and by 1952 owned 108 elevators. The first of the Peavy Companies, which over time included the Security Elevator Company Ltd., British America Elevator Co., Northern Elevator Co., and National Grain, were launched in 1908 and by 1940 had 84 elevators among them. Cargill Limited – a latecomer in 1974, but a large intercontinental player in the grain industry – had 17 elevators in 1996.

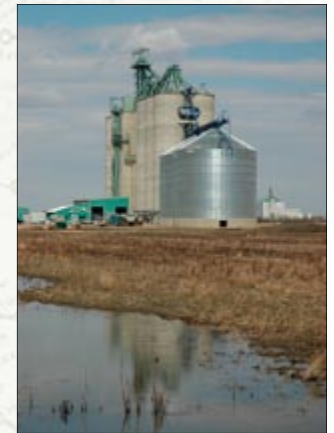
Farmer-owned co-operative grain companies were equally important in the development of the grain industry and the construction of grain elevators in Alberta. The Alberta Farmers' Co-operative Elevator Company was established in 1913 by the United Farmers of Alberta, and by 1917 held 103 elevators. In that year it

amalgamated with the Manitoba-based Grain Growers Grain Company to form the United Grain Growers Company, which owned 321 elevators in Alberta by 1954. In 1923 the Alberta Wheat Pool was organised as a farmer owned cooperative. By 1929 the Pool owned 318 elevators, and at its height had a total of 879 elevators on its books.

Design evolution

There was considerable variation in size and shape among the earliest elevators built in Alberta. The different designs and varying capacities gave elevator rows an interesting skyline. A gable roofed elevator with a gable roofed cupola might have a short, medium or tall cupola. Pyramidal roofed elevators commonly had a gable roofed cupola, but were sometimes built with a pyramidal roofed cupola. Perhaps the rarest profile was the hipped roof with offset gable roofed cupola. No extant example of this roofline remains in Alberta. After 1915 most of the smaller elevators disappeared, and elevators that were built from the 1920s were inclined to be more standard in design as the grain industry benefited from early elevator building experience and proven design.

Typically, standard plan elevators had a gable roof and a gable roofed cupola. This design has become generally known as the "traditional" elevator. Hundreds of new elevators of this type were erected in the late 1920s, often replacing older, smaller elevators. These formed the backbone of the province-wide elevator system, and established the image of the prairie grain elevator in the collective Canadian mind. Minimal elevator construction took place during the 1930s, with no changes in design.



Falher

Elevators of every description...



Single elevator, St. Albert



Single composite, Herronton



Loxstave annex, Mossleigh



Single elevator, Kinuso



Single with twin, Rowley



Single composite & twin, Westlock



Buffalo 2000, Lyalta



Office and outhouse, Rowley



Single with 2 annexes, Andrew



Double composite, Bentley



Coal shed, Stettler



Single composite, Leduc



Single 2-annex, Sexsmith



Concrete modular, Marwayne



Barn, Sharples



Single composite with annex, Sexsmith



Pyramidal roof, Altario



Buffalo slope, Magrath



Meeting Creek

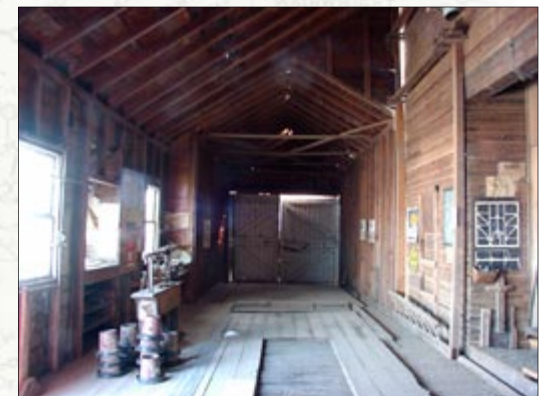
The 1940s and 1950s were largely a period of building additional storage facilities in the form of temporary balloon annexes during the war and then permanent cribbed annexes during the 1950s.

The number of country elevators in Alberta reached an all time high in 1934 at 1,781. By this time, the railway and grain elevator system had matured, with grain elevators spaced along rail lines at intervals of approximately seven miles, and it remained quite stable for the next thirty years. The large number of grain companies resulted in many points with six or more elevators all in competition with each other. The town of Vulcan became famous for its "nine in a line." The emphasis was on storage as the country elevator was used to collect the farmers' grain and store it until it could be sold by the company or through the Wheat Board. Steam trains made frequent stops during scheduled runs to fill with water and for passengers and other freight, so the dropping off and picking up of box cars for grain was integral to the rail service system.

Change in the wind

During the 1960s the system began to collapse. The depopulation of rural areas followed mechanization and consolidation of small farms into larger units during a time of expectations and urban growth. The railroad system simultaneously began to unravel as the loss of the freight and passenger trade made many branch lines unprofitable and the railways sought permission to abandon them. In 1969 the Federal Government froze 6,300 miles of branch line until 1977, guaranteed 12,400 miles until the year 2000, and allowed 525 miles to be abandoned. Alberta's road network expanded and improved and new legislation allowed for the use of larger trucks and semi-trailers. It became less of a chore for farmers to haul their grain to centralized points. At the same time, bus lines and truck lines supplanted the railways' monopoly on the movement of passengers and freight in the province, as one railway station after another closed. During this time amalgamations within the grain industry intensified. All these factors had a bearing on the beginning of the end for the rows of elevators in Alberta, while entire grain delivery points closed as a result of rail abandonment or grain company consolidation of delivery points.

The 1960s saw the replacement of many older elevators with larger new single composite elevators, and the upgrading of others. In the 1970s double



Alberta Pacific Grain Co. elevator, Meeting Creek

composite designs were introduced and the building of metal tank annexes began. The building of wooden composite elevators continued until 1985, and no new designs for traditional wooden crib elevators evolved. By the end of the 1980s construction was focused on new concrete designs in response to the demand for grain handling facilities where increasingly larger numbers of cars could be loaded with greater efficiency. Major upgrading of the last of the existing wooden structures has taken place, at the same time as the development of full service Agro centres, either around a large regional terminal elevator, generally of the slip-poured cement “silo type” design, or at a separate location.

A disappearing icon

There were 1,651 elevators in Alberta in 1951, but by 1982 a total of 979 elevators remained. The 1990s spelled the death of the wooden “country” or “primary” elevator. At the end of the 1990s as the full impact of both of the ending of the Crow Rate in 1995 and further impending rail abandonment was felt, the pace of demolition accelerated at an unprecedented rate. At the end of the 1996-1997 crop year there were only 327 elevators left. Alberta’s largest cooperative grain companies the Alberta Wheat Pool (which amalgamated with Manitoba Pool Elevators in 1998 as Agricore) and United Grain Growers, ultimately formed a new corporate entity known as Agricore United in 2001, issuing issued public shares. Demolition of country elevators has continued, and in 2005 there were only 156 wooden elevators of any kind still standing, only a handful of which are used by the grain trade.

Preserving a legacy

The Government of Alberta has recognised the significance of the traditional wood grain elevators, and has designated 12 as Provincial Historic Resources. They are located in the following communities: Andrew, Castor, Leduc, Meeting Creek, Paradise Valley, Radway, Rowley (3 elevators), Scandia and St. Albert (2 elevators).



Elevator office, Scandia

Credits

Text condensed from Judy Larmour and Les Bergen’s *Heritage Prairie Grain Elevator Project* prepared for the Provincial Museum of Alberta, 1998. Photographs provided by the Heritage Resource Management Branch, Alberta Community Development, unless otherwise noted.

For more information

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