

The Echoes

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The St. Albert Historical Society

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Star of the North Retreat Centre

Hidden in the center of land and buildings that occupy Mission Hill, St. Albert, on property shared by the Edmonton Archdiocese and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate of Lacombe Canada, stands a sacred oasis of hospitality and spiritual renewal - Star of the North Retreat House. The Star, as it has affectionately come to be called, is steeped in and surrounded by history. On the south side, it neighbours St. Vital Grandin house, home to Bishop Grandin, early pioneer of St. Albert. Next to Vital Grandin, stands the oldest building in St. Albert, the Father Lacombe Chapel, where every summer tourists and visitors are invited to experience the earliest years of the St. Albert settlement. To the west lies the church, behind which are the outdoor shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes, and a beautiful expanse of a community garden. To the north we have the St. Albert Parish cemetery and to the east, plenty of land and Foyer Grandin where elder Oblates continue to live and pray.

Opened in 1953, Star of the North was built to house ‘closed, preached retreats’ that had been taking place in the Edmonton area for some three years prior. These retreats were called ‘closed’ because they were organized by invitation for the Catholic Christian population. Up to that time, the Grey Nuns and the Oblates of then Grandin Province of Alberta, were leading closed retreats from place to place for vocation discernment and for lay professionals of the Edmonton area. At a certain point in time, Fr. Ozias Fournier, Provincial of the Oblates for Alberta “launched the movement of a new building solely for the benefit of the closed retreats. The construction of the retreat house started under the supervision of Father Jean Patoine, O.M.I. and editor of *La Survivance* of Edmonton. The building could accommodate 25 retreatants.”¹

In 1957, Fr. Fournier and his team of Oblates plan for and carry out building an extension to the retreat house for an additional 25 bedrooms, a lounge area and more comfortable living quarters for the priests of the time. This means moving the chapel from one end of the building to the place it is now situated at the other end next to the cemetery. The following 30 years of retreat ministry are mostly in this model of ‘*closed preached retreats*’ “for lawyers, doctors, handicapped persons, high-school students, married couples, religious orders and single persons.”² Retreat ministry at Star of the North flourished for “Catholic and Protestant alike.”³ In 1961, a journalist for the Edmonton Journal, Eddie Keen, says further, “Anglican ministers have used the house for annual retreats three times.”⁴ A tradition of growing ecumenism and open hospitality would continue throughout the years.

¹ Quote taken from Star of the North archives for 50th anniversary. Source unknown.

² Eddie Keen, “Rapid Growth of the Closed Retreat Movement at the Star of the North Retreat House, St. Albert, Alberta, from 1,134 in 1957 to 4,167 in 1961”,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The retreat house began as a ministry of the Oblates that was administered by Oblates, often with several Oblates on staff, until 1990. After that time, they hired their first lay religious sister, Sr. Geraldine Kelly, followed by the Star's first lay director Mrs. Sandra Prather. Structures changed as well. From entirely Oblate administration, the Star shifted through to an Advisory board and then a Board of Directors with bylaws being revised along the way.

More significantly perhaps, The Star of the North underwent a transformation of spirit, from a house for closed retreats, to a house for spiritual seekers from all walks of life. Programs invited people to experience a vast array of retreat days and workshops dealing with everything from holistic spirituality of body, mind and spirit to integration of psychology and spirituality, to spirituality and art, and so much more. Maintaining a Catholic and Oblate soul, the Star reached out to extend a welcome to anyone with a sincere heart seeking to be renewed spiritually with programs such as "R&R Days" i.e. Rest and Renewal days, Soul Writing, Twilight Reflections on Gospel themes, Iconography, and working with dreams. The 1990's through the new millennium was full of growth and development for creating programs to meet the needs, challenges and changes of the times.

Alongside these programs sponsored by The Star of the North, the Star hosted groups who sought sacred space to have their events, meetings, retreats, workshops, seminars and strategic planning days. Many Christian denominations have grown to make the Star their second home for retreats. The United Church of Canada, the Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Ukrainian Orthodox, Pentecostal, and others have brought and continue to bring their gatherings to the Star of the North.

To keep up with the growing demand for use of the facility, ongoing care was attended to in both the areas of facility maintenance and renovations. To keep up with these needs, annual fundraisers became essential. The annual Starfest Dinner and Auction began on the initiative of Sr. Geraldine Kelly in the early '90's and has been maintained by successive Executive Directors Sandra Prather and Lucie Leduc. What started in the St. Albert church basement quickly grew to the larger venue of the Italian Cultural Centre. A second annual fundraiser taken on by the Star was the City of St. Albert Roy Financial Mayor's Walk. Moneys raised through fundraising have supported capital and maintenance projects, like replacing windows, furnaces, and renovating rooms.

By the year 2010, and still under the leadership of Sandra Prather, the direction of the Star took on an additional focus for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. In May of 2012, and after twenty-one years as Executive Director of the Star, Sandra Prather retired. The Board hired Lucie Leduc to lead the Star into the future. She maintains many of the practices instituted by the former Director and after three years of leadership is gradually making room for a vision that along with offering programs that address justice, peace, and the environment will include an additional focus for creating a Culture of Encounter at The Star.

The past thirty years were a significant departure from the first thirty years of the Star's history. The next thirty years challenge the Star to grow new patrons, to meet new needs and demands, and to lead spiritual renewal from a creative vision of "Growing our Spirit – Transforming our World".

Annual General Meeting 2016

The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held on Saturday, March 7, 2016 at the St. Albert Train Station with many Members in attendance. Below are the annual reports from the Chair and Treasurer as well as the results of the election of Directors.

Those in attendance were treated to a light lunch after the business meeting. The educational space and kitchen at the station provided the Society with an ideal venue for its AGM.

1. Chair's Annual Report for 2015

During 2015 the St. Albert Historical Society was very active in the field of publications. A reprint of *St. Albert: A Pictorial History* was completed and released in August and, immediately, request for copies were received.

The book committee for the Society's newest publication, *A Bridge Over Time*, has been very active. To date, over one hundred submissions have been received from community organizations and, in addition, the committee itself has researched a multitude of topics. It is expected that the manuscript will be available for the printer by the fall of 2016. The Society has applied for a printing grant and, pending its success, the publication should be ready for distribution by late 2016. However, as with all projects of this nature, there is the potential for unforeseen issues and delays.

The Society submitted grant applications in 2015 for the installation of three additional story boards on the Mission Hill. These applications were successful and the components were ordered and arrived in November. It is expected that the storyboards will be installed in the spring or early summer of 2016.

The Society continued to be active in promoting the history of St. Albert. The Society provided support to sister organizations, conducted tours and provided guest speakers for organizations and events. The Society continued to receive numerous requests for historical information and continued dialogue with the City and the AHF on heritage matters. The Society accepted invitations from the City to participate in Phase II of Founders' Walk, the City's historical interpretive signs and the City's Naming Committee. The Society was also invited to participate in the deliberations on the Transportation Master Plan.

The Society remained in a solid financial position during 2015. Again, many members chose to make personal financial donations and membership in the Society has remained steady from year to year at about 100. In closing, I extend my personal thanks to the Membership and to the Board of Directors for their dedication and hard work during the year.

2. Treasurer's Annual Report for 2015

Statement of Income and Expenses January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2015

Income		Expenses	
Membership fees	\$ 335	Bank charges	\$ 80
Investment interest	230	Office (supplies, postage, etc)	887
Book/video/misc. sales	1,169	Insurance	950
Grants	15,000	Directors' Expenses	97
Donations	1,855	Projects	16,317
Misc.	75	Donations	1,000
Total Income	\$ 18,664	Total Expenses	\$ 19,331
		Excess Income over Expenses	\$ -667

- Notes:
1. The above statement is abridged and rounded to the nearest dollar. For further details, please contact the Treasurer, Germaine Pinco.
 2. Auditors were Members Gerald Vague and Margaret Victoor.

3. Election of Directors

Society Bylaws provide for a Board of Directors composed of a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 10 members.

Elections were held to fill seven vacancies on the Board. Joan Brunner, Germaine Pinco, Ray Pinco, Gerald Vague, Jerry Vague, Anne Marie Venne and Margaret Victoor were elected to two-year terms. Anna Eshpeter, Robert Lema and Simonne Perron complete the Board with one year remaining in their terms.

Remembering Members

March 2016 marked the passing of two long time members of the Society. Members are saddened by their passing and offer sincere condolences to their families.

Doug Topping passed away March 10, 2016. Doug was an active volunteer and assisted with many Society projects. Both he and his wife, Anne, were keen supporters of the Society's Founder's Day events and could be counted on to provide much needed assistance.

Fern Van de Walle passed away March 12, 2016. Both Fern and her husband, Walter, were active supporters of the Society and its activities. The Society could count on their participation at Society events, especially Founder's Day. Receiving copies of the photos taken by Fern at these events was always a highlight of the next board meeting.