

Roads to prosperity

By Randy Lievers
Staff Writer

Don Gagnon isn't sure how long it would take him to snow plow St. Albert's streets. He hasn't done it in more than 20 years.

But the retired 68-year-old knows it used to take two full days to clear snow from every St. Albert crescent and cul-de-sac because he drove the lone snow plow that served the entire town in 1962.

"All we had was that old grader, one old sweeper, a front-end loader and a backhoe," Gagnon recalled last week, over a cup of coffee in his Mission Avenue bungalow. "That was the extent of our equipment. It made it pretty hard to keep up at the time."

The early 1960s were a time of tremendous growth.

Just a few years earlier, town council decided to establish a network of roadways to service four new neighborhoods — Mission Park, Braeside, Grandin Park and Sturgeon Heights.

With rented equipment, the city conducted its own paving operations and laid foundations for the roads. Until that time, only the downtown area was paved. Current-day arterials such as Bellerose Drive and Sturgeon Road were simply gravel.

But within a three-year span, pavement became the rage for residents. And as the city snaked asphalt throughout the four developing neighborhoods, the provincial government stepped up in 1961 and constructed the Highway 2 overpass, crossing over McKenney Avenue (later named Sir Winston Churchill Avenue).

Gagnon, a laborer at the time, was busy putting sidewalks alongside the paved residential roads and oiling the gravel back lanes. His wage was \$1.55 an hour. But shortly after the overpass, the town turned over road construction to private developers. Gagnon and his colleagues were only responsible for maintenance.

That's when Gagnon took the wheel of the lone town grader and sweeper. "I used to have to carry a sledgehammer with me because every time I dropped the shoes (surrounding the bristles) they'd get stuck. I had to give them a good bang to make sure they hit the pavement flat."

As private developers gained more control, the town also started contracting out more road projects, said Gagnon. The workload was simply outpacing growth in town staff levels. Services, including road-

ways, still had to be provided even though St. Albert's 1962 population was at 5,200 residents, nearly 2-1/2-times larger than three years before.

But as St. Albert grew, the beginnings of congestion on St. Albert Trail also sprouted.

The majority of residents were commuting to Edmonton to work and experiencing long delays.

Gagnon said community movers and shakers William Veness, Neil M. Ross, Dr. William D. Cuts and Jean Perron saw the problems in 1965 and had an emergency meeting in the back of Perron's store to figure out what they could do to contend with the massive growth. "They started to press the panic button. They wanted to find a way to cap growth. But it didn't work," laughed Gagnon.

Chatter of a bypass on the city's west side had already surfaced because congestion on St. Albert Trail was getting worse, Gagnon added. "We didn't have the turnoff lanes or anything. It was just two lanes each way with square intersections and stop signs." But safety on the trail improved in 1967 when street lights were installed.

In the early 1970s, traffic congestion was again appeased when the trail was widened to three lanes and traffic lights were added. The improvement followed what Gagnon called a "high-pressure" meeting of town council and the chamber of commerce.

"They wanted to keep the business flowing through town. But everything just mushroomed with the population growth. The streets just kept coming and there was more and more maintenance," said Gagnon, who was superintendent of transportation by 1975.

When St. Albert became a city in 1977, more and more work was being contracted to private firms because city crews were again rushing to keep up. Subdivision by subdivision the city grew. Gagnon took each kilometre day by day. But in 1990, after nearly 30 years of service, Gagnon retired, leaving a few years before the west bypass went from a concept to an alignment, to the limbo it's in today.

Even now he shakes his head at the controversy swirling around the roadway. "We've been talking about this for years. They say talk is cheap, but in this case it's costly," said Gagnon, who just wants to see the problem fixed. But the controversial roadway isn't a burning issue with Gagnon.

He's quite content reminiscing about the days when he laid sidewalks in front of his Mission Avenue home and maintained the town's eight kilometres of roads. "I really enjoyed it back then. I miss that line of work." ♦

ST. ALBERT

Our Story



Don Gagnon

Recording history . . . as it happens in St. Albert

By Bev Rudolfsen
Staff Writer

Newspapers are the mirror of a community, linking neighbors and friends, reflecting the happenings that define it. St. Albert, founded as a humble settlement by a priest on a holy mission nearly 140 years ago in 1861, was no exception.

Over the years, the community hosted a handful of newspapers which quickly came and



went, until the 1960s, when one would become the mainstay for St. Albert readers. Details of St. Albert's early journalistic enterprises are sketchy, and not without some ink-soaked irony. The *St. Albert Gazette*, for instance, was launched June 17, 1961, and has kept humming on the presses ever since. What most readers may not know is the *Gazette* had actually made its debut in St. Albert many years before, albeit for a very short run. The first issue hit the streets in 1908 but also became the last, according to historical references, because of a lack of printing equipment. A second paper, the *St. Albert News*, was up and running by the spring of 1912 and was publishing as late as 1916, but how regularly is unclear. But it did outlive a more flamboyant competitor, the *St. Albert Star/L'Etoile*, which published in English and French, reflecting a desire to serve both cultural facets of a growing community.

The *Star* was put out by Joseph Lafranchise, who also printed a paper in Morinville and, in 1914, moved to St. Albert with his wife Rosanna. The *Star* printed each week in both languages and although most of the articles were similar in content, the French version also contained news that tended to sympathize with that culture, running articles dealing with the protection of French language rights in Western Canada, and other related issues.

The paper, which occasionally ran articles promoting St. Albert as a good place to live and shop, primarily filled its pages with events from across Canada and even the world, with stories filed from as far away as Paris, France. One article might deal with the exciting saga of a threshing machine crashing into a bridge over the Sturgeon River, while another celebrated the first run of streetcars across the High Level Bridge in Edmonton. Advertising, always the lifeblood of a newspaper, helped the *St. Albert Star/L'Etoile* survive through vital clients such as St. Albert pioneer and businessman Fleuri Perron, who owned the community's general store and splashed bargains (eight pounds of onions for 25 cents, men's suits from \$4 to \$20), across a full page each week.

But after the *Star* folded sometime later that decade, there

would be no local paper for a generation. Instead, St. Albert readers read the *Edmonton Bulletin* and the *Edmonton Journal* until 1961, when Wim and Evelyn Netelenbos began producing the resurrected *St. Albert Gazette* from their home on Sunset Boulevard. The Dutch-born couple toiled alongside their children to produce the weekly paper, a generously proportioned broadsheet filled with bits of local news. On June 17 of that year, the first issue rolled off the presses, featuring a sketch of Father Albert Lacombe on its front cover.

In 1966, ownership of the *Gazette* changed hands and became the venture of another family, the Jamisons.

Originally, Ponoka-based publisher Ernie Jamison bought the *Gazette* as a vehicle to distribute another publication, the *Western Weekly*, a magazine supplement running with weekly newspapers around the province. "I needed to increase the circulation to support the publication," Jamison recalls. "I could see I had to be some place where I could get the *Western Weekly* going."

Growing up in Edmonton, Jamison, who worked at the *Edmonton Bulletin* selling ads during the early part of his career, had become familiar as a child with St. Albert as a stopping point, when his family took car trips to visit relatives in Athabasca each summer.

He saw potential in the *Gazette* and approached Ronald Harvey, a well-known St. Albert resident who now owned the paper, asking if he would sell. "I talked to him and he said if I wanted to buy it, he'd be interested." The men struck a deal over a cup of joe at a downtown Edmonton coffee shop and, in 1966, Ernie and his wife Shirley, who took on editing duties, put out their first issue with a circulation of 1,200 papers and six staff.

St. Albert, a town of about 7,000 people, had few businesses, so the Jamisons relied heavily on advertising from the city next door. "All my advertising came out of Edmonton. I could see the businesses there would like to have St. Albert's business."

At the same time, Jamison looked to the north to bring in trade for St. Albert businesses. He clinched a contract with the Municipal District of Sturgeon to put out a paper containing the minutes of council meetings. District correspondents were hired to collect bits of news in their regions and the *Sturgeon Gazette* was born in the late 1960s. The local correspondents became a vital part of the operation, Jamison said.

"They might even take pictures with their own cameras."

Quarters were cramped upstairs in the Perron Street building, which housed *Gazette* operations. Piles of paper tape from the Frieden machine used to set copy littered the floor. Jamison recalled one day when Dr. William D. Cuts stopped in to drop off a news tidbit. He left with one of his own — a long snake of tape caught on his shoe. "He was walking through it and he walked down the street with this stuff dangling."

By the time St. Albert Centre was built in 1979, the population had mushroomed to 29,512 people and the *Gazette* had moved to bigger digs, first across from the

Bruin Inn and eventually to its current home on Chisholm Avenue in the Campbell Business Park.

Printing the paper had always been problematic because it had no press of its own and was at the mercy of other area presses to do the job. That often meant it printed late. Early on, Jamison took it to presses at Wetaskiwin, Edmonton, Edson and even North Vancouver to print. "It was a real challenge," he recalled. "It had me on the run."

In 1980, the *Gazette* reached a milestone by installing its own press, which has been added to many times since. "I thought, we've finally got it made, everything under one roof."

The *Gazette's* editorial flavor rested largely with Shirley Jamison, a strong believer in doing a job up right, said her husband.

"That's the only way she would do it. She was up on all the major things." When she arrived to help her husband with the newspaper, she began penning editorials each week, an unusual luxury for readers, he said.

"Very few weekly newspapers had editorials. She was so far ahead. We tried to put out the best paper editorially and in make-up, which we succeeded in doing." Over the years, the *Gazette* has won numerous awards for its quality and unflinching scrutiny of community issues.

The next generation of Jamisons — Sarah, Mary, Sandy and Duff — now publish the paper. They have taken on Southam as a partner and have expanded the business to a dozen newspapers across Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba and employ 200 people.

The Jamisons have recently undertaken major renovations at the *Gazette* plant in Campbell Park. ♦



Ernie Jamison, seen here at the Compugraphic 7200 machine used to set copy, bought the *Gazette* in 1966.

From black and white, read The Gazette has covered

all over, to full-blown color... St. Albert for 39 years

