

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

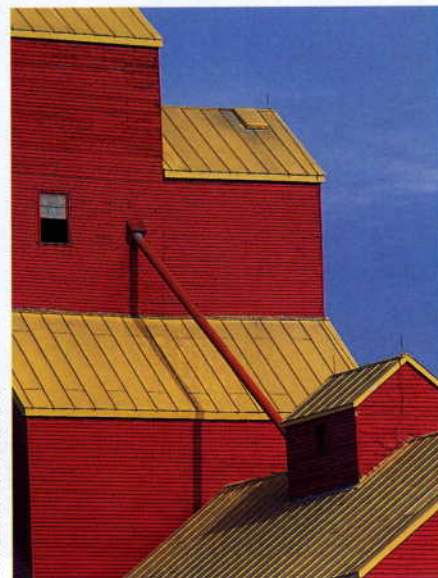
band of determined history buffs who refuse to let them fall.

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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