

Early Days of Edmonton Meeting 1953 – 2003: Fifty Year Celebration

Dee Heston

In October of 2003, Edmonton Monthly Meeting had cause to celebrate fifty years of continuous existence as a meeting. It is interesting to look back at the early years when the meeting first started.

In 1953, two people of widely differing backgrounds found themselves in Edmonton. Both were relative newcomers to Friends: both were hoping to find a meeting. Pauline Hughes had moved from Vancouver and was teaching pottery at Victoria Composite High School; Desiree Heston had recently joined Friends at Skipton meeting in Yorkshire, England, and was working with the Indian Affairs Branch of the federal government. Each set about corresponding with the then three Yearly Meetings in Canada (all located in the east) to find if there was a group in Edmonton.

Eventually a reply was received from Stirling Nelson, then clerk of one of the Yearly Meetings, enabling them to get in touch with each other, and also with Annie and Wilfred Bowkett, formerly of Hardshaw East meeting in England, then living in Jasper Place, a suburb of Edmonton. For some time Wilfred had been the organist at Jasper Place United Church, but he and Annie were willing to provide a place for meeting for worship in their home each Sunday evening.

Through the winter of 1953 the four, with Joyce Schmitz, an English teacher living in a teacherage in Gibbons, and Dorothy Norvell who was working in the recreation department of the downtown YWCA, met on a regular basis, at first with the status of an allowed meeting under the care of Vancouver Friends. After some months it seemed more appropriate to transfer oversight of the fledgling meeting to Calgary, and the group became a preparative meeting of Calgary Monthly Meeting.

In 1954, Ron Mossman and Sid Barnes joined the meeting, as did the McArthur family, moving from Calgary. Advertisements were placed in the *Edmonton Journal* on a weekly basis, and the locale was moved to the Heston home, at that time a suite on 106 Street. (Curious anomalies emerged in ads placed by telephone, 'back entrance' on one occasion appearing in the paper as 'Bach anthem'. Fortunately no crowd of music-lovers appeared!)

As numbers increased, a more central meeting place was needed, and through Dorothy Norvell's involvement with the Y an arrangement was made to use the Board Room each Sunday morning, with space downstairs for the children's First-Day school. The families in the meeting were quite involved with each other, and pot-lucks and celebrations of the various festivals were held in each other's homes, along with skating parties and picnics.

The meeting was much helped by visiting Friends who made a point of stopping over in Edmonton. Dorothy Starr was one of the early visitors who provided experience and insight; Cecil Evans, then secretary of Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC), visited several times, as did W. Lloyd G. Williams, then professor of mathematics at McGill, whose warm encouragement was greatly valued. There were close ties with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Mildred Fahrni of Vancouver was an occasional visitor. The meeting had a representative on the Edmonton Council of Churches, and members did work with the native friendship centre, mentally ill patients and immigrants.

The number of members and attenders varied greatly, particularly as Friends came and went from the University of Alberta. The Potter family swelled the meeting's numbers for

a couple of years while George was director of extension; Peter Brock and his wife Carmen were part of the meeting, as was the Hirabayashi family, newly arrived in Edmonton. The Eddingtons, arriving from Saskatoon, were a valuable addition, as both John and Joan were long-time Friends.

Keith Crook, an Australian geographer who was working on his doctorate, married Norma, an attender, in the meeting's first wedding. One year, however, numbers were reduced to two, with Larry Lees, a probation officer who later moved to Argenta, and Dee Heston the only members throughout the entire winter, holding regular meetings for worship.

During the years 1954 to 1963 Dorothy Norvell and Dee Heston served as clerks of the meeting. There began to be intervisitation between the Calgary and Edmonton Friends, each meeting taking it in turn to host the other for weekend gatherings, perhaps two or three times a year, and it was out of this fellowship that the idea arose for an annual gathering of Friends from the three prairie provinces, which would provide a focal point and a voice for Friends in the West. Yearly Meeting at that time was always held in eastern Canada and seemed a distant Mecca for western Friends.

Prairie Friends Meeting, as it was called, met annually on the long May weekend, at first in Indian Residential Schools at Hobbema, Gleichen and Morley with one or two gatherings at Mount Royal College in Calgary. It was a time of joyful reunion not only for the two main meetings of Edmonton and Calgary, but for isolated Friends from north to south of the three provinces, and many people travelled great distances in order to attend.

Russell McArthur of Calgary, John Robertson of High Prairie, later of Taber, and Ron Mossman of Edmonton served as Clerks of Prairie Friends Meeting in its early years. In the mid-sixties the annual gathering began to be joined by Friends from British Columbia, who formed an increasingly large group, and

eventually in recognition of this Western Half-Yearly Meeting was created, with two meetings annually as at present to accommodate Friends from the extreme west and east of the region.

Through the late sixties, the meeting saw a steady increase in numbers and became established as a Monthly Meeting. Ministry and Counsel Committee was formed and in the seventies there was a flourishing Young Friends group, clerked by Jonathan Heston, to which Clerk Richmond Longley contributed wise guidance. A new home was found on the premises of Metropolitan United Church and a meeting library was established. First-Day school continued regularly.

A schism occurred in the meeting during the late seventies over the question of gay rights, and a separate meeting was formed which became known as Boyle Street Meeting. Through Joan Eddington's social work involvement with street people, a home was found in the inner city in an old United Church which became Boyle Street Community Services, serving the inner city folks in need. This was a small meeting of members seeking openness in dealing with gay people and determined to be a welcoming community. Members included the Eddingtons, Mary Staszuk (then clerk), Hilary Hellum, Dee Heston, Tony Flemming-Blake and several attenders.

Dee Mary Hyde, then clerk of Prairie Monthly Meeting, agreed to take the little meeting under the care of Prairie, and this arrangement continued for three or four years. Emissaries appeared on the scene from time to time, on behalf of CYM Ministry and Counsel, seeking to heal the rift with the Monthly Meeting. This was eventually healed when there was a shift in perceptions and a change in membership within the Monthly Meeting. Through the pain of the separation, growth occurred.

During the eighties, many of the founding and early members moved to other locations,

through job requirements and retirement. Edmonton Monthly Meeting has survived turbulence and is now a well-established

component of Canadian Yearly Meeting. Long may it continue to be so.

A Brief History of Western Half Yearly Meeting

Lesley Robertson

The following information is a compilation of information from many people. Special thanks go to Margaret McGruther, Calgary M.M., Arnold Ranneris, Victoria M.M., Bill Curry, Prairie M.M. and Jane Zavitz-Bond, C.Y.M. archivist.

Prior to the formation of Western Half Yearly Meeting (WHYM), there is a long history of a few Friends east of the Rockies meeting from time to time. Those in Coastal British Columbia were associated with Pacific Yearly Meeting and with North Pacific Yearly Meeting when it was formed and later became part of WHYM.

The earliest meeting in the West that I have information about was in 1904 in Swarthmore, Saskatchewan and had its origins within the Fritchley Friends of England who emigrated to the Canadian West. In 1907, Victoria Monthly Meeting was established with the present Meetinghouse built in 1913. Vancouver Monthly Meeting was established in 1911. Calgary began meeting in 1908 but ceased to meet in 1918 because of the flu epidemic. It began again but stopped again in 1922 and did not begin again until 1946 when the Johnson family, who had been homesteaders in Alberta, moved to Calgary. At that time, Calgary became a Preparative Meeting under the care of Vancouver Monthly Meeting. During the following years, Calgary and Edmonton took turns at being Monthly and Preparative Meetings. Edmonton became a Monthly Meeting in 1955.

In addition, there was from 1920 to 1948 a British Columbia-Alberta Quarterly Meeting, laid down in 1948.

The 1950s were a time when Friends became active in the Kootenays – in 1952, Argenta Friends Meeting and Community began. In 1956 the Kootenay Friends Fellowship was held in various locations and in 1959 Argenta Friends School opened.

Also in the 1950s, Friends began meeting in Vernon, British Columbia. This was largely due to Hugh Campbell-Brown. He and his wife Mary had lived in Vernon since 1935. In the early 1950s Hugh became interested in the Religious Society of Friends and was active in committee work with Pacific Yearly Meeting. He joined Friends in 1953 as a member of Vancouver M.M. Following that, he began a Worship Group in Vernon under the care of Argenta M.M. Vernon became a Preparative Meeting in 1970 and a Monthly Meeting in 1981.

With the growth of Monthly Meetings and numbers of Friends, a Western Friends Conference was formed and as a result we find the following minute in Canada Yearly Meeting's Minutes for 1966:

WESTERN FRIENDS CONFERENCE

A report on the Western Friends Conference held in May, 1965 as distributed. The Conference was well attended and there are some indications of a desire on the part of the Conference for a more definite relationship to

Canadian Yearly Meeting. The Conference in May of 1966 should result in recommendations in this regard which may be considered by the Yearly Meeting. Eastern Friends should be very thankful for the growing strength of Friends in Western Canada and ways should be explored to increase these contacts (35).

THE SPECIAL CONCERNS SESSION

From CYM 1966 Minutes: a Minute was presented from Western Friends Conference asking that a Monthly Meeting be set up with a wide geographical area so that interested attenders of worship groups might join the Society of Friends, since membership must lie with a Monthly Meeting. It was suggested that it be called Prairie Monthly Meeting, which would with Argenta and Calgary Monthly Meetings, form a suggested Western Half Yearly Meeting. It was approved that the Prairie Monthly meeting and the Western Half Yearly Meeting be set up by Western Friends Conference at their meeting in October. It was approved that two Friends represent Canadian Yearly Meeting at Western Friends Conference, and Fred Haslam was asked to consult with Ed and Vivien Abbott on this matter (25).

Following the guidance of the CYM minute of 1966, there was a meeting of Western Friends Conference in Regina, Saskatchewan on the Thanksgiving weekend 8 – 10 October 1966. As a result of decision making during this weekend, important steps for Friends in Canada were made. Minutes from that Meeting read as follows:

Western Half-Yearly Meeting will be composed of:

ARGENTA MONTHLY MEETING
(including Vernon)

CALGARY MONTHLY MEETING
(including Edmonton Preparative Meeting)

PRAIRIE MONTHLY MEETING (see Minute 3)

2. Vancouver, Victoria and Halcyonia Monthly Meetings, and Pacific Half-Yearly Meeting to be assured of a warm welcome to cooperate in Fellowship and activities when ever and to the extent that they would wish.

3. A Monthly Meeting to be known as PRAIRIE MONTHLY MEETING was established. The Meeting will have the capacity to act as a Monthly Meeting between the Lakehead and the Rocky Mountains, excluding Calgary and Halcyonia Monthly Meetings. It will include worship groups in Regina, Winnipeg, Saskatoon and all isolated Friends and Attenders.

It had quite a mandate! The formation of Western Half Yearly Meeting occurred on 9 October 1966. The first Meetings of Prairie Monthly Meeting and Western Half Yearly Meeting were held the next day 10 October 1966. A minute was passed at that WHYM that the next Fall Meeting would be held in Gleichen, Alberta during the October long weekend (Thanksgiving) 1967. During the first meeting of P.M.M., requests for membership, both new and by transfer, were considered and accepted.

A minute from CYM 1967 reads as follows:

At last Yearly Meeting the desire of Western Friends Conference to have a closer relationship to Canadian Yearly meeting was considered, and in October, Vivien Abbott and I (Fred Haslam)

attended the Western Friends Conference at Regina. Yearly Meeting had approved of the setting up of a Western Half-Yearly Meeting and also the formation of a Prairie Monthly Meeting to care for the isolated Friends in that vast area. These objectives were carried out at Regina, and advantage was taken of so many visiting Friends being present, to facilitate the considerations of applications for membership from long-awaiting attenders who were present also (16).

feel that they are an important part of a community of Friends.

Since 1966, there have been Half Yearly Meetings held in a variety of locations including the Old Sun School on the Gleichen Blackfoot Reserve, St. Stephen's College Edmonton, a Catholic seminary in Edmonton, Camp Cadicasu near Calgary, and Gull Lake in Alberta. In Saskatchewan, Meetings were held at Fort Qu'Appelle, Lake Diefenbaker, and Humboldt. In May 1973, WHYM was held at the Sorrento Centre in Sorrento, B.C. where, with the exception of Meeting in 1982-84, we have continued to meet every spring. Fall Half Yearly also has found more permanent homes meeting alternatives at Shekinah Mennonite Retreat Centre near Waldheim, Saskatchewan and at Water Valley, near Calgary in Alberta. This consistency in location has contributed to larger attendance particularly at the Fall Meetings.

WHYM has a children's program, its own Ministry and Counsel, as well as a clerk, recording clerk, treasurer, and finance committee. It serves a wide geographical area with a scattered population and for many Friends and Attenders in Western Canada, WHYM is their Friends Community. This is especially true for those who live a long way from a Meeting and for Young Friends who may have no other people of their age in their Meeting. There are strengths and weaknesses but all are welcome to come and help make WHYM a strong gathering where everyone can