then now

he Big Valley railway station was built in 1912, just prior to the rail and coal boom that turned the town into a bustling community. At its peak, Big Valley was a divisional point for Canadian Northern Railway employing 235 full-time railway workers. In 1912, the company also built a five-stall roundhouse (later expanded to 10) with a 70-foot turntable, a 100-ton coal dock and a 60,000gallon water tank. Train crews from Big Valley operated on the old Canadian Northern "Battle River Subdivision" route between Big Valley and Vegreville. The Battle River Subdivision also extended south of Big Valley to Drumheller. At this point, the Canadian Northern was eventually extended to Calgary, making Big Valley the headquarters for operations between Edmonton and Calgary.

Despite the dynamic vision of its founders, Sir William Mackenzie and Sir Donald Mann—veteran Canadian railroad leaders who helped complete the CPR in the 1880s—financial problems forced a Dominion government take-over of the Canadian Northern in late 1918. This would be the beginning of the end for Big Valley as an important railway centre, and with consolidation of operations into the newly formed Canadian National, by 1931 Big Valley's population had dropped to 447 from its peak of 1025.

But Big Valley would survive. It remained a small railway terminal up to the late 1950s, and would prosper again as oil and gas were discovered, and began production in the region. Over the years, the Big Valley station would become a timeless reminder at the foot of mainstreet of the glory days of the Canadian Northern Railway.

Together with the Big Valley Historical Society, the station has been preserved by a caring community. The two groups have worked very hard for the last twenty-five years to maintain and operate this splendid example of a Canadian Northern Railway Standard Second Class depot. Stepping into the station today gives visitors a sense of a slower, simpler time.

Looking back, the society salutes Mr. and Mrs. Ed Dembicki who transformed the second floor of the station in 1995 as living quarters for the "Central Western Railway Rail Traffic Controller" a duty which Ed performed during that era. The worn grey-painted floors were stripped to reveal beautiful hardwood, closets refinished and cupboards built. In the bathroom the cracked plaster walls were repaired and painted, and new linoleum was placed. Each of the three bedrooms received the same attention. While the Dembickis have now retired to Red Deer, their legacy lives on, and the second floor has become an office, apartment, and training area for the Canadian Heartland Training Railway.

The station has a unique interpretive theatre exhibit originally sponsored by the Alberta



Big Valley Station at the beginning of its restoration work, June 1989.



Waiting Room prior to 1990.



Waiting Room with the beginning stages of restoration completed, 1990.





Above: Baggage Car 'Museum'.

Left & Below: Restored Roundhouse.



Treasury Branch and by Don Gillespie at Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions, who hand crafted the beautiful theatre seating. The station has washrooms, and the garden area is available for picnics.

It took more than five months for volunteers to excavate the roundhouse area that for decades had remained chocked with coal dust, tangled in weeds and buried beneath rotting hay bales. Although the roof has been removed and wooden structures like the water tower and coal dock are gone, its concrete walls have withstood time. The Canadian Northern Society has developed the roundhouse into an interpretive centre that offers a self-guided tour of the once busy locomotive and car repair shops. An effort has been made to keep the undiscovered look.

Big Valley is proud to have the Railway Hall of Fame Pavilion in its park area for visitors to enjoy. The Canadian Railway Hall of Fame honours Canadian achievement in the railway business. A virtual hall of fame was designed first on the internet, which can be viewed at www.railfame.ca. However, in addition to this on-line Hall of Fame, there is also a physical component located in Big Valley. Through the use of outdoor interpretive signage, and the pavilion, those individuals, communities and the technology honoured on the Internet site are also featured within the interpretive park at Big Valley.

In addition to the station, roundhouse, the Hall of Fame, and the interpretive signage placed throughout the station grounds, a visit to the Village of Big Valley would not be complete without viewing the outstanding effort of the Big Valley Historical Society in preserving the village's heritage. Historic St. Edmund's Church, the 'museum of collectables' located in two 1950s era railway baggage cars, McAlister Motors and a large collection of historical implements are highlights of the collection. Finally, the private "Creation Science Museum" offers a view of a very long time ago.

Without the commitment and effort from volunteers within the Canadian Northern Society and the Big Valley Historical Society, these landmarks would be long gone. These types of efforts are always products of community team work; however, two individuals must be recognized, for without their vision and leadership, it is certain that the heritage preservation efforts in Big Valley would have been far less success-

ful. Of course, these two are Allan R. Johnston and Harry Stuber. Allan began it all-making sure that the station was preserved after the senior citizens moved out in the mid-1980s, and ensuring that St. Edmund's would be "a survivor." Despite his United Church upbringing, he worked like a dedicated Anglican-painting, fixing, and filling holes in the plaster walls. It is fitting that Allan, son of an old Canadian Northern locomotive engineer, has taken up the torch and ensured that the history of this old railway town will not be forgotten.

And what more can we say about Harry. A lifetime member of the Canadian Northern Society, a tireless and dedi-

cated community volunteer, and a humble but wonderful guy. From climbing down the side of the Big Valley elevator, selling memberships every year that raise valuable funds for our efforts, to these days quietly making sure that the station and grounds are cared for—the Canadian Northern Society says thank you!



Harry Stuber

It should be mentioned that behind every great man is a woman. And it is no different for our two Big Valley Heritage super volunteers. Both Florence and Frances have worked and supported Allan and Harry respectively for years. Thanks to these fine ladies is due as well.



Each summer visitors and tourists to Big Valley are able to enjoy the trains from the Alberta Prairie Railway Excursions.



Railway Hall of Fame Pavilion.



St. Edmund's Church.



McAlister Motors Garage.





Compiled and Designed by Whale Tail Graphics and S.I. Smith.