

AT HOME

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A place in HISTORY

Highlands plaques celebrate homes built by ordinary Edmontonians

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The Ada Boulevard mansions of notable Edmontonians like William Magrath and Bidwell Holgate are protected by historic designations, their former owners assured a place in civic history.

But what about bookkeeper William Rose, who lived just down the street in a modest, art-and-crafts-style bungalow? Or carpenter James Wright? Or school teacher May Griffith?

They also lived in Highlands some 80 or 90 years ago, albeit under more humble circumstances.

It is their stories current resident David Locky wanted to preserve, with a simple but innovative program to post plaques by the front doors of neighbourhood homes, celebrating Highlands' earliest residents.

Many of the houses included in the program would never make the city's "A" list of historic resources, or even the "B" list. But Locky thinks they deserve a place in Edmonton's cultural chronicle, even if they don't meet the criteria of being architecturally or historically "significant."

"The spirit of this program is really inclusive," says Locky, president of the Highlands Historical Society. "Some of the homes in the hood here are 600 square feet, and the homeowner worked in the coal mines, or was a labourer at Eaton's. It just reflects the fabric of the neighbourhood."

As long as the home is at least 50 years old, it doesn't matter if some of its historic elements have been removed, plastered over or covered with purple shag, he says.

His own 1924 home is remarkably shag-less and well-preserved; one of only two on the block that still has its original windows and exterior, an unusual, double-shingled pattern of wood siding. It also features clinker brick, used on fewer than 100 homes in the whole city, he says.

Its arts-and-crafts styling includes an enclosed front porch, dark wood wainscoting and mouldings, lots of windows and few hallways. "It was really the first open-concept home," Locky adds.



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A look down 112th Avenue



GREG SOUTHAM, THE JOURNAL

Real estate agents Brian Fischer and Rosanna Mazzuca own a business in the Highlands participating in the plaque program.



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His was owned by bookkeeper William Rose, a fact Locky discovered with a simple search of the city's old Henderson directories, which listed the addresses, phone numbers, names and occupations of local residents. Now, that snippet of history is noted on an attractive plaque by his front door.

Several dozen of his neighbours have similar plaques, thanks to Locky's efforts. Down the street, for example, passersby can see the longtime home of Doug and Cheryl Toshack, which, until 1920, was the boyhood home of one of Edmonton's most famous sons, communications guru Marshall McLuhan.

The Toshacks, like many of their neighbours, were thrilled to get a plaque commemorating their home's original — and in their case, famous — resident. "It creates pride in the neighbourhood," says Doug. "It creates some enthusiasm in the neighbourhood to keep it nice."

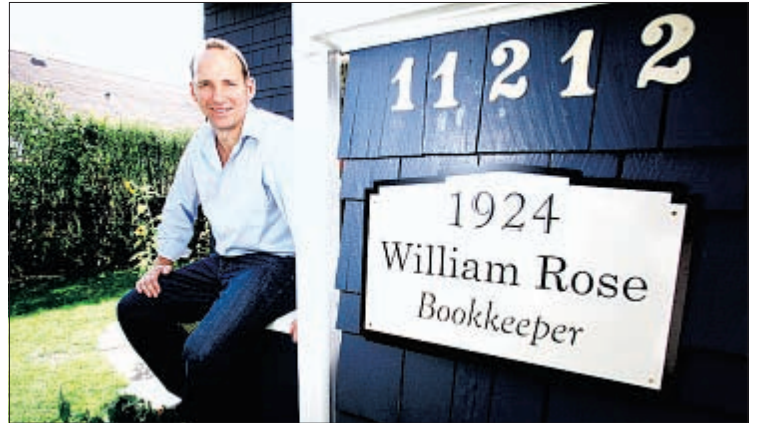
Area businesses have also embraced the idea, says Locky. The former Jamieson's Coffee Bar on 112th Avenue (circa 1948), home of the first drive-thru coffee window in the city, now houses the offices of the three real-estate agents who own the building.

When Locky told them about the project, they were thrilled to post a sign, says co-owner Rosanna Mazzuca. "We just found that the history was really interesting," she adds. "It's a great way to maintain



RICK MACWILLIAM, THE JOURNAL

Above: The Highlands home of David and Sarah Locky was once owned by bookkeeper William Rose, a detail noted in a plaque, at right.



GREG SOUTHAM, THE JOURNAL

the originality and the character of the neighbourhood."

Locky borrowed the idea from the small, southern Ontario town of Fergus, where he attended high school. Many of the community's old buildings had similar, wooden plaques, commemorating their original owners.

"You could almost see the ghost inside the homes," he recalls. "I thought it was a great way to bring life to a neighbourhood."

His brother, who still lives in the area, measured the signs and sent him pictures so he could create modern versions of the plaques. Locky's are made of more durable, laminated metal and plastic.

After running his idea past members of the Highlands Historical Society, Locky sought, and received, a matching grant from the city for 100 signs over three years, ending in 2012, the year of the neighbourhood's centennial.

So far, he's had more than 40

signs made in the project's first year. The homeowner pays half the \$140 cost of the sign and the city grant covers the other half.

Locky, a wetlands scientist at Athabasca University, has clearly spent a lot of time researching the history of his neighbourhood.

He says because it is particularly interesting because it developed gradually, unlike other central neighbourhoods such as Westmount or Oliver, which were developed all at once. "We really reflect the boom and the bust of Edmonton," he says.

"We had homes as early as 1910

in the neighbourhood, but you'd have a boom for five or 10 years and then you'd have a lag. You could actually have a 1912 home sitting right beside a 1950s home, and that lot was actually empty until the 1950s. It was not a knock-down."

Locky and his neighbours at the historical society are happy to show anyone how to quickly research their homes' original owners, and will soon post the information on their website, edmontonhighlands.ca. Locky can be reached at david-locky@gmail.com.

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RICK MACWILLIAM, THE JOURNAL

The Highlands house owned by Doug and Cheryl Toshack was the boyhood home of one of Edmonton's most famous sons, Marshall McLuhan, a hidden fact of history heralded by a plaque, below.