



Central Memorial Park is being restored and honouring the past.



# Central Revival

We mustn't forget the history of Calgary green spaces when planning for the future.



**B**ig things are happening in the inner city—towering condo buildings are springing up everywhere, the Stampede is expanding and change is in the air. However, with change there must be a balance between preserving and honouring history and moving forward.

It's impossible to talk about the inner city without talking about history. This is where it all began for Calgary over a hundred years ago, this is the soul of the city.

Descriptions of "oldest" and "first" come up often when talking about neighbourhoods such as Victoria Park, the Beltline, Connaught and Mission. All were thriving residential and commercial centres in the early 1900s, a period of intense development in the city's history which transformed the little town on the prairies into a bustling city. And entwined in the social history of Calgary is the horticultural history.

On the corner of 12th Avenue and Fourth Street SW stands Calgary's oldest park, Central Memorial. A gift in 1885 from the Government of Canada to the city, it was initially used as a tree nursery and distribution centre for a local street tree planting program.

Influenced by William Pearce, by 1912 the park was well landscaped in the formal Edwardian style with a variety of geometric beds planted with annuals surrounded by trees and a large pavilion along Fourth Street.

Around the same time, a grand sandstone library was built, the first public library in Alberta, financed by Andrew Carnegie. Eventually a number of war memorials were added to the park, including an equestrian statue of R. L. Boyle—a tribute to all

Albertans who fought in the Second Boer War, it is Calgary's oldest work of public art.

Today the park is undergoing a major facelift, complete with outdoor reading rooms with movable tables and chairs and wireless Internet, a cafe and infrastructure for events and festivals. So once again the park will be a beautiful place to enjoy as it was years ago when people visited it on a Sunday afternoon. History has also come full circle, with the installation of water fountains featured in the original plans but never built.

Across the street from the park, between Fourth and Fifth streets, is the former site of the Burns Manor, a sandstone mansion owned by Pat Burns, rancher, beef baron and one of the founding members of the Stampede. In 1908, he hired a gardener from England, William Reader, who became a monumental horticultural figure in Calgary.

In 1913, Reader became Calgary Parks superintendent and moved to the house provided for him south of the Stampede Grounds, adjacent to Union Cemetery and what is now Macleod Trail. Over the next 30 years he transformed the bare, windy prairie hillside into a world-renowned showpiece, a collection of over 4,000 species of plants from all over the world.

He also designed gardens for Edward, Prince of Wales at his EP Ranch South of the city. During his 29 years as superintendent the area of parks more than doubled and included several landmark parks. He was also instrumental in planting thousands of boulevard and street trees, including the poplars along Memorial Drive commemorating veterans of the First World War. Reader also shared his extensive gardening knowledge with Calgarians by

judging fairs at the Stampede and by helping to found the Horticultural Society.

After his death in 1943, his garden was named in his honour and opened to the public as a city park. It gradually slipped into a state of neglect until 2005 when the house was rebuilt modelled after the original, to be used as a teahouse and restaurant, and the grounds were completely restored following his detailed original plans. The new version of the old Reader Rock Gardens is again open to the public as a horticultural showpiece.

Just to the north of Reader Rock Gardens is the community of Victoria Park which, since 1912, has been the home of the Calgary Stampede. The Stampede grounds are in the process of expanding, so most of the surrounding area has been razed to make way, but gracing a parking lot on Olympic Way between 12th and 13th Avenue SE is a stately elm tree. It's not known exactly how old it is or who planted it but it certainly is one of the oldest and largest elms in the city, a witness to all the changes over the last 100 years or so. When the house was demolished the tree was saved. It has been designated a heritage tree and will continue to be a witness to changes over the next years.

This quote from William Reader sums things up: "We can serve ourselves, our home, and our community at the same time—by employing our best effort to make the earth lovelier, to tidy up neglected places, to plant trees, and to set out plants whose blossoms will refresh the weary-minded." It revives the soul indeed. [h2h](#)

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