

The Boosters in Boosterism: Some Calgary Examples

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Article abstract

Through an examination of four Calgary boosters in the pre-1914 period, this article argues that boosterism in the prairie west was largely institutional. The rhetoric of progress was proclaimed loudest in publications produced by business organizations and political bodies. The expansionary policies of prairie cities were pursued by large railway companies or by city councils that were hardly dominated by single individuals. The ethic rather than the individual was dominant and in this respect the latter operated most effectively through representative institutions.

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

Through an examination of four Calgary boosters in the pre-1914 period, this article argues that boosterism in the prairie west was largely institutional. The rhetoric of progress was proclaimed loudest in publications produced by business organizations and political bodies. The expansionary policies of prairie cities were pursued by large railway companies or by city councils that were hardly dominated by single individuals. The ethic rather than the individual was dominant and in this respect the latter operated most effectively through representative institutions.

En examinant quatre boosters de Calgary d'avant 1914, cet article veut montrer que le boosterisme dans l'ouest des plaines fut en grande partie institutionnel. La rhétorique du progrès se faisait le plus entendre dans des publications d'organisations d'affaires et de corps politiques. C'étaient les grandes sociétés de chemins de fer ou des conseils municipaux, qui n'étaient guère dominés par des individus isolés, qui poursuivaient la politique expansionniste des villes des plaines. C'était la doctrine, et non la personne, qui dominait, et ainsi celle-ci pouvait s'exprimer de la façon la plus efficace à travers les institutions représentatives.

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In a recent article presented to the Canadian Urban History Conference at Guelph, Alan F.J. Artibise commented on the relevance of boosterism to the development of prairie cities before 1914.¹ By discussing the impact of certain policies on the five main urban centres of western Canada, Artibise buttressed his thesis that "it can be said with some degree of certainty that one determining factor in the particular pattern that did emerge in Manitoba, and later Saskatchewan and

¹Alan F.J. Artibise, "Boosterism and the Development of Prairie Cities, 1871-1913," paper presented at Canada's Urban Past: Canadian Urban History Conference, University of Guelph, May 1977. To be published in Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F.J. Artibise, eds., Shaping the Canadian Urban Landscape: Essays on the City Building Process (forthcoming, 1980).

Alberta, was the boosterism of civic and business leaders."² It is not the concern of this paper either to agree or take issue with Dr. Artibise, but rather to focus on a neglected aspect of boosterism: the boosters themselves. For when viewed as the unnamed representatives of a particular phenomenon, the boosters themselves have emerged as somewhat crass stereotypes. The purpose of this brief discussion is simply to stress the human dimension of boosterism through four individuals who could be classed as boosters in Calgary between 1889 and 1913.

For Lawrence P. Strong, boosterism was one way he could convince individuals to support specific schemes.³ His primary aim was to bring settlers to certain lands he held in conjunction with various colonization companies. With this in mind he became very active in promoting the cultivation of fall wheat in southern Alberta and in encouraging the westward movement of grain. He did this in two main ways. First, he was instrumental in the formation of Calgary's initial grain exchange in 1910 and was active in lobbying for a federal grain elevator in the city. Secondly, he wrote extensively in promotional magazines endorsing Alberta and Calgary as an agricultural paradise and a businessman's Mecca.⁴ He was thus a most avid contributor to the rhetoric of boosterism. This boosterism was closely linked with the ambitious growth policies of the land speculator and the railway promoter, and in this sense Strong did resemble the stereotype implied in Dr. Artibise's study.

²Ibid., p. 5.

³I was unable to locate biographical data on Strong.

⁴See, for example, "The Handling of Western Grain," Prosperous Calgary (pamphlet, c. 1910).

James Reilly was a far different character.⁵ An original resident of Calgary, Reilly was a garrulous, self-styled ambassador for the west and particularly Calgary. He continually sought political honours but achieved success only at the local level where he served two terms as mayor. In private and civic affairs he proclaimed himself an authority on a host of matters from dairying to provincial status for Alberta. With his wit and joviality Reilly was a welcome addition to banquet head tables. Whenever he was away from Calgary in the United States or eastern Canada, he would seek interviews in the local press and extol at great, even wearisome lengths, the merits of Calgary and western Canada. Yet in his role as mayor he was more restrained in financial matters. Probably his previous experience as a builder and hotel keeper had developed sound business instincts. Also, being a colourful and positive personality, he often had cliques lined up against him in Council and could rarely influence his colleagues to follow his leadership unquestioningly. Reilly's boosterism was essentially one of bombast. The speaker's platform was his second home and Calgary his main inspiration. In practical policy-making, however, Reilly represented more the cautious businessman of the 1890s than a proponent of practical boosterism.

Of all Calgary boosters, Wesley Orr was the most complex and the most fascinating historically.⁶ During his terms as mayor (1894-95

⁵ Reilly was born in Quebec in 1835 and came to Calgary in 1884 by way of Regina. Originally a supplier of temporary dwellings to the C.P.R. construction crews, Reilly operated and owned the Royal Hotel in Calgary. He was active in local politics and worked for the incorporation of Regina and Calgary, filling the mayor's chair in the latter city on two occasions (1891 and 1899). He ran unsuccessfully in both federal and territorial elections. He was active in the Calgary Board of Trade and was an influential mason. Reilly was in demand as a banquet speaker, particularly in the years 1900-1905 when he was recognized as one of the City's most outspoken figures on the subject of provincial autonomy. He died in 1909.

⁶ Orr was born in Lachute, Quebec in 1831 and came to Calgary permanently in 1886. He sat on town and city council between 1888 and 1896, serving three terms as mayor and dying in office in 1898. He was a member of the local Conservative Association and was active in the Irrigation League and the Board of Trade. Orr had no permanent business to occupy his time and in many ways was a full time politician.

and 1897-98), and as perennial town councillor (1888-93), he worked tirelessly in civic affairs. Originally drawn to local politics for reasons of self-interest,⁷ Orr gradually became an ardent promoter of town and district. His diversified schemes included railway promotion, irrigation, milk condensing factories and the development of new coal fields. In civic matters he was instrumental in implementing an attractive industry inducing policy and in the provision of expensive utility services. He was a classic booster in that, while he cared little for areas of social concern, he was prepared to expend large sums of money for commercial purposes. He was the first local politician to speak in favour of heavy debit financing and produced his own consolidation scheme for approval.

Orr's character is illuminating not only for its boosterism but also for the ingredients which enabled him to be a true, practical booster. Essentially he was an insecure dreamer with a long legacy of business failures behind him. As his misfortunes continued, self-delusion worked increasingly to influence what was basically a fertile but cautious mind. Civic office was ideal for him, and as such his frenzied boosterism became a personal crusade in which he blended his remarkable energy and attention to detail with schemes of grandeur and prodigality. In Orr's case extravagant boosterism was a by-product of what happened when an individual with an agent's attitude towards business and life itself was able to gravitate to the reins of power. As a postscript, it should be added that Orr died in 1898 in relative obscurity and years before his time.⁸

Freddie C. Lowes represented the dream of every westerner and epitomized the success story paraded so profusely in the promotional

⁷Orr came to Calgary to protect his land investments. He had bought land in 1883 on what he believed was to be the future townsite of Calgary. He erred, as the C.P.R. located its townsite west of Orr's land.

⁸Orr is discussed more fully in Foran, "The Makings of a Booster: Wesley Fletcher Orr and Nineteenth Century Calgary," in Alan F.J. Artibise, ed., Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development (forthcoming, 1980).

magazines.⁹ He made a fortune in real estate between 1906 and 1912¹⁰ and was reportedly worth \$1.2 million in landholdings at the height of the real estate boom in the spring of 1912, all before his thirtieth birthday. Brash, flamboyant and generous Lowes was idolized in the press which enshrined him as a living legend. Bob Edwards of the Eye Opener, for example, was a great admirer of Lowes and often devoted whole pages to recounting his "Robin Hood" exploits at the expense of outside confidence men.¹¹ Lowes genuinely seemed to be amazed at his own success and firmly believed that the same awaited any venturesome individual. He preached his message of faith in the west in a host of interviews on two continents. In this sense his expensive advertising programme was as much a gesture of confidence as it was a necessary business practice.

In many ways Lowes was a typical booster. Through his land transactions and speculation he helped swell Calgary's corporate boundaries beyond reasonable limits. He donated large sums of money to worthy causes, but characteristically scorned "knockers"¹² as a despicable form of humanity. He pursued an opulent lifestyle and was easily coaxed into discussing his meteoric rise to wealth. It was his extreme optimism, however, which advertised his booster mentality. Yet this optimism was of a different sort to most who dwelt at length on the

⁹Lowes was born in Brampton, Ontario in 1880 and came to Calgary in 1903. Although virtually inactive in public life after 1920, Lowes, between 1906 and 1914, was easily the best known real estate man in the province of Alberta. He was never active in politics at any level though he was asked to be a mayoralty candidate in 1909. Lowes was popularly known as sportsman and philanthropist. He sat on the executives of many local organizations and was a founding member of Calgary's Town Planning Commission in 1912. He died in 1950.

¹⁰When he began his real estate business in 1906 his total capital was about \$400.

¹¹For a good example see the Eye Opener, September 19, 1906.

¹²"Knocker" was a term used to describe any individual who held negative or faithless attitudes on the west or who, more often than not, simply questioned the views and policies of the boosters.

need for Calgary to expand and grow commercially. In his personal commitment Lowes stood to lose heavily as well as gain. He continued to preach his message of faith after 1912 when the clouds of uncertainty began to darken the economic horizon. As such he refused to see and actually increased his indebtedness. He failed to survive the inevitable consequences either financially or mentally. His partially completed mansion in south-west Calgary stood for years as the city's most tragic epitaph to the practical booster who willingly and steadfastly matched his confidence with his money.

Strong, Reilly, Orr and Lowes contributed to the boosterism described by Dr. Artibise by articulating certain priorities or pursuing policies of growth. But they were vastly dissimilar characters. One wanted to scramble to quick wealth; another merely loved to talk; another mortgaged a lifetime of unfulfilled dreams in a sustained "last hurrah"; while the fourth and the youngest was idealistic enough to believe that his success was due to the land itself rather than mere fortuitous circumstance. To be sure they boosted Calgary. But they did so from differing viewpoints, times and personal experiences. Something of the impersonal veil of boosterism falls when it is viewed as one dimension of the personal ambitions of disparate individuals.

The boosterism described by Dr. Artibise is essentially institutional. The rhetoric of progress was proclaimed loudest in publications produced by business organizations and political bodies. The expansionary policies were pursued by large railway companies or by city councils that were hardly dominated by single individuals. The ethic rather than the individual was dominant and in this respect the latter operated most effectively through representative institutions. Probably this explains the conspicuous absence of individual boosters in proportion to the universality of boosterism. It seems ironic then that boosterism, so much a manifestation of unbridled individualism, may well exemplify the dominance of institutions over individuals in directing the historical process.