

# Edmonton's community leagues blend community and creativity – and they've done it for almost 100 years

## Leagues Of Their Own

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by Myrna Kostash

In Delton Community League hall one Saturday afternoon in the 1950s, I was deposited by my errand-running parents to be entertained by a theatrical troupe dramatizing *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. The shot went “bang!,” the lights went out and I started howling. Several years later, while skating at Crestwood Community League's rink, I sailed in wobbly swoops around the ice to the music of Perry Como. Oliver Community League hosted my first-ever Canada Day pancake breakfast – alderman Michael Phair flipping flapjacks – when I moved into that neighbourhood several years ago.

What ties these anecdotes together is the story of community leagues in Edmonton. Neighbourhood, socializing and networking, recreational and creative programs, family-friendliness, affordability. But they are much more than that. I'm a lifelong Edmontonian, and even I have been taking them for granted.

Community leagues have been part of Edmonton communal life since at least 1917, when Crestwood was formed. Among that league's initiatives was “shared use of the school,” a direct reference to the “social center movement” in the U.S. In 1907, in Rochester, N.Y., a coalition of communities persuaded the school board to keep public schools open in the evening for “discussion forums.” By 1911, the movement was politically dead in Rochester (a Republican party “boss,” unhappy about “socialist” speakers at the forums, leaned on the board to make groups pay to use facilities), but on 142nd Street in Edmonton the ideal lived on. Thanks go in part to an American native and city industrial commissioner, George M. Hall, who lived in Jasper Place, and in part, according to Allan Bolstad, the current executive director of the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, to “our western rural ethic, where neighbours in farming communities pitched in to help each other bring in the crops or build a barn.”

The agenda of that first Edmonton league included district improvements, social evenings and organized sporting events – a philosophy of self-reliance that has defined all subsequent leagues. As non-profit societies, community leagues form an ever-expanding web unique to Edmonton: with Griesbach incorporated in 2012, there are now 155 such leagues. They lease one acre of land each from the city for \$1 a year, renewable every nine years. Anything they build on that

acre, they own. Municipal and provincial operating grants and occasional casinos keep them going, along with rummage sales and hall rentals, not to mention the many, many hours of volunteer labour. While Edmonton's community leagues vary in the programs and services they offer their constituents, they all share the same spirit of social entrepreneurialism.

At Delton on 118 Avenue, where a single-parent family can join for \$15, thespians are still at it – local actors perform stories told by neighbourhood seniors. At Crestwood, tennis courts are swept and nets are up, and its Redevelopment Committee prioritizes planning for its community parks. The Oliver community league is present for the unveiling of the Broken Families monument in Grant Notley Park, and Member of Parliament Laurie Hawn meets with my league's board about the federal budget and what it means to Edmonton communities. In Grovenor, the league has hosted a film about "how Cuba survived 'Peak Oil'" and is in the process of designing an "environmentally- friendly" hall for rent. Revitalized Boyle Street announces collaborative efforts with Edmonton artists "to conceive provocative and innovative public interventions," starting with gravel parking lots. Each league is a vivid reflection of the people it gathers and the interests that they share.

Talk with any active league member, of course, and you get an inside look at some of the rows and disputes that can pit neighbours against each other – people at loggerheads over a development scheme or the NIMBY syndrome – or at the fact that families tend to join with young children and drop out as the kids grow up. But the kernel of that first self-help meeting of west end residents in 1917 remains potentially revolutionary – neighbourhood-based, citizen-generated committees, forums and networks that keep us in community with each other.