

The Castor Pharmacy Museum - Presentation by Michael Bain, CPhA, Calgary, May 2010

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Background

The Castor Pharmacy Museum is located in the town of Castor, Alberta. The town was founded in 1910, it is now 100 years old. Castor is located about between Edmonton and Calgary but is further East, near the Saskatchewan border. It now has a population of about 1000.

At the turn of the century there were many small towns that bubbled up across the prairies as millions of settlers established homesteads. In virtually all of the towns, one of the first businesses to locate was a drug store. Often before there was a physician or a hospital there was a pharmacy with a druggist, often trained by apprenticeship..

Early pharmacists provided patent and prescription medication to the sick, stocked veterinary medicine and even acted as a veterinarian, sold a wide range of general merchandise: perfume, cosmetics, china, confectionary, gift ware, chemicals, spices and poisons. There wasn't enough business in medication alone to support a pharmacy. Because they carried a wide range of merchandise, they had a lot of customers. As the people gathered to shop and visit the stores served as a social centre for the community, especially if they had a soda fountain.

Pharmacists were respected and had the trust of the people. They were often leaders in the community. Their dedication and commitment shaped the image of Pharmacy that continues to this day as the "most respected" profession. It was in this context that the decision was made to create a pharmacy museum in a rural setting to reflect the dedicated work and contribution of these early pharmacists.

Museum Description

The museum is representative of an early turn of the century Western Canadian pharmacy. Part of the charm and appeal is that it could be moved to just about any small town in Western Canada where it would be as representative there, as it is in Castor. Attempts have been made to make the pharmacy interesting to people of all ages.

Farmers and ranchers will find a veterinary section while ladies will have; cabinets of cosmetics and toiletries, a baby cabinet, an assortment of general merchandise that was sold in the 1920's. Children will have an opportunity to see candy and chocolates.

Pharmacists will be interested in the excellent collection of artifacts, jars, books, pamphlets and products. These items all reflect an era of pharmaceutical history. This is a very large collection with some unique collections of narcotic jars and calendars. Cabinets of patent medicines from the 1950's back to 1900 will evoke memories of former treatments used by families. Old familiar company names such as; Nyal, Chamberlains, Davis and Lawrence, Wampole, Na-Dru-Co, Rexall and many more are featured.

The collection of narcotic and controlled drug bottles was originally collected by the first narcotic inspector in Alberta, David Ritchie. He spent a large part of his career destroying and disposing of old and outdated narcotics. As a hobby he began collecting some of the empty

bottles and containers. These were cleaned and sorted by company into a large collection of over 1000 pieces that he contributed to the Castor Museum. There are bottles for opium powder, cocaine, morphine, cannabis, americanus, lead and mercury products. There are hundreds of unique and interesting drug products made by companies that are long gone. It is a treasure trove of history begging for research.

Dingbat calendars were issued yearly by the Charles E., Frosst company, an early Canadian manufacturer. The little "Dingbat" figures were featured each year in some aspect of health care, usually reflecting current issues or interests. The collection of calendars from 1915 to 1995 was compiled by M. J. Bain and donated to the museum. This is almost a complete calendar collection and an icon of Canadian pharmacy history. The Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association of Canada ruled in 1991 that the calendars violated marketing practices regulations and the calendars were soon phased out despite pleas from pharmacists across Canada, including M.J. Bain in Castor (correspondence on display). In the history of Pharmacy we even have room for political correctness.

Bottles, books, pamphlets, advertisements and glassware from over 100 pharmacies all over British Columbia and Alberta represent over 5000 articles. This is a storehouse of enormous interest.

History of the Castor Pharmacy

In 1909 Gordon Souch operated a pharmacy in Williston, but when the railroad came though it was several miles further North than expected so the pharmacy was moved to Castor. The next year, in 1910 there were two pharmacies in the newly incorporated town of Castor, Souch's and "Brown, My Druggist" operated by George L. Brown.

Souch sold to W. Buckham and C.P. Johnson in 1912 and Castor Drug Company was born. That same year S.L. Dorland purchased Brown's and operated as Dorland's Drug. This state of affairs did not last long. A chain from Calgary, McDermid Drug Co. bought both stores in 1914 and combined them into the Dorland location. At that time McDermid's was one of the largest chains in Alberta with stores in Calgary, Lacombe, Carstairs and Castor.

McDermid's in Alberta during the period 1914 to 1944 were innovative and the company became known for expert photo finishing in Calgary. They were also a training ground for some well known Alberta pharmacists. Mr. Acton managed the Dorland store in Castor until 1926 when he transferred to High River. Mr. Vickerson worked in the store from 1924 to 1930 then moved to McDermid's in Lacombe until he established his own pharmacy in Lacombe. H.R. Lackey managed from 1930 to 1944 and then left for Killam, Alberta. In 1935 Mike Bain from Castor began an apprenticeship under Mr. Lackey then studied Pharmacy at the University of Alberta, graduating in 1940.

The store was sold to Stan McLuhan in 1944 and operated as McLuhan Rexall Drug Store. In turn it was sold to Mike .J. Bain and his brother Patrick .F. Bain who operated as Castor Drug Store until 1977. From 1977 to 2008 the pharmacy was owned and operated by Mike Bain Jr., a period of 31 years. In 2008 the pharmacy was sold to Randy Kary, a long time employee of Castor Drug Store.

The building was constructed in 1921 after a fire destroyed the original building. It was built on an adjoining lot. This served as Castor's drug store until 1986 when a new 8000 sq. ft. building was erected. The original building was closed and retained as a storage building. It is now the Castor Pharmacy Museum.

Many of the old cabinets and counters have been rescued and refurbished by Mike and Wendy Bain as a labour of love.

Pharmacy Operating Procedures

For many years the pharmacy was operated according to these precepts.

1. The store never closed - you responded to all calls at all hours, from vet products at 6 AM and 10:30 PM calls for "childrens' Aspirin".
2. A child's prescription is always dispensed and put on "credit", regardless of how small the chance of payment was or how large the account already was.
3. Adult prescriptions were always dispensed in "necessary" - service was NEVER withheld.
4. Phone calls to the house were always taken - even Sundays (in a time when ALL stores were closed).
5. Community service was a responsibility that went along with your position - church, school, social, hospital, and government.

The Castor Pharmacy Museum

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Wendy and Mike Bain have established the Museum as a labor of love. There has been a lot of labor as they have had to do refinishing of furniture and work with stained glass. With a 1921 building there has been a lot of repairs and restoration. Preservation of photos and documents has also proved to be a major task with a continuing need for cataloguing.