

# The City's Exposed Outer Flank and the Heroes Who Live There

by FRED STENSON

**A**LBERTANS ARE famous for saying: "You don't like the weather? Wait fifteen minutes." These are Albertans who don't live in new suburbs. Out on the fringes of the city where Pamela and I live, people don't make jokes about the weather. They scan the horizons and clutch amulets. They experience Old Testament dread.

Our home ownership is recent. The summer of '97 was our first spent where the naked houses perch upon the sun-baked clay. During the winter I wondered why I was getting this feeling of a giant force massing, something before which our little Eden might not stand.

By March, the subdivision stood bare for miles. The snow had not fallen, something the weather folks explained with reference to El Nino. One weekend, as my kids and I played basketball at the park, a dervish of swirling dust enveloped us. The ball took off, headed southeast. Just a few feet away was a massive dirty-brown cloud, moving fast. With a sense of pioneer urgency I gathered my children and ran for home. We abandoned the basketball, now just a dot in the sky.

On the way, we fought wind and grit, and dodged a volley of rolling and flying garbage can lids. I grabbed a green one. Waited for a matching can. Several hours later we emerged from the basement. The house had taken its beating with no apparent damage and, after a few hours of dusting, things were



back to normal. The windstorm became the subject of jolly letters to friends. The trials of the new homeowner. Ha, ha.

At the same time, joking aside, I was worried about the snow. Why hadn't it fallen? What if there was a drought? I hoped the snow would still come somehow, and it did. All of it. In a single day. The Blizzard of '98.

The blizzard was less frightening than the dirt storm and Pamela and I did our huddling above ground. It was all fun and single malt by the fire—until the snow stopped and I had to tunnel off the porch, down the path, and completely around each of the cars. It was hard work but there was

great camaraderie and bonding all up and down the block that day. The next morning I was almost too sore to rise but I was cheerful. I had really done something—principally to my back.

When the snow melted, it did so in about forty minutes. A torrent of water gushed from the slopes of our backyard. According to the engineers' careful plans, this water was to pass neatly between our house and the next one, to the street and away to the coulee, and onward to the sea. But something was awry. The water on one side had stopped in a lake, stubbornly refusing to flow uphill. On the

other side, the water made it almost to the front before disappearing down a hole by our foundation. Having grown up in a farmhouse with a wet basement and frogs, I donned gumboots immediately. I slogged forth with my shovel. Sodden clay weighs slightly more than sodden snow. I canalled. I moated. I e-moted.

Afterwards, I walked in the tall grass across the road, trying to get the pontoons of clay off my boots. Between the snow and the clay, I was pumped to almost twice my size. At work, use of steroids was rumoured. But the basement was dry and I felt victorious over nature.

Fool. In the sweet bliss of May, we

purchased garden loam, a wheelbarrow in a box with a sheet of instructions, a great many bedding-out plants. Seeding began. We wished for rain. The rain obeyed. It came. And then it came some more. Six weeks of rain.

From time to time the rain abated long enough for me to mow the foot-tall grass on the postage-stamp front lawn; for Pamela to slog forth and poke more seeds and bedding-out plants into the mud. The only dry place was the composter, which was supposed to be wet, but we couldn't get there on account of the mud. Nature was a bit out of control, some began to say. El Nino, the weather people continued to say, nodding sagely. The bonding up and down our block took place more briefly now, under umbrellas. The pricey garden loam that we had spread and seeded began to wash into the canals I'd built, depositing on the scrap of front lawn.

What the heck more could happen, we asked. Forgetting momentarily about hail.

**W**e were not home, either of us, for the Great Hailstorm of '98. Nor could we get home. A great lake had formed on the road into our suburb, rapidly filling with drowned cars. When we did get home, the hail had blasted through the plastic siding on the upwind wall. White beads from the asphalt roof shingles decorated the yard. The downspouts and other tinworks looked as if someone had run amok with a ballpeen hammer. The garden? A kind of mucilaginous green mush, as if it had all been digested and expelled by the same giant aphid. The hail was lying around in innocent-looking drifts.

Up close, they looked like eyeballs, some of whom winked. I began having strange thoughts that day. Old Testament ones. Of Job stretched on the wheel of natural disaster to settle a cosmic wager. Fifty bucks says this time he cracks. Of the Plagues of Egypt: God's way of telling the Pharaoh to free the Jews. I lay in bed wondering if I was the oppressor or the oppressed, or maybe just the innocent receiver of wrath meant for someone else. A victim of weather's imprecise aim. I thought

of my grandfather who earned a great reputation as an optimist one day in the '20s when he and his neighbours were hailed out. While others moaned and struck their breasts, he collected the hail and made ice cream. I wondered if he'd've been so darn cheerful if his house had had plastic siding.

The clouds went away. The land began to sweat. About half the garden plants straightened their spines, albeit with leaves that looked like the frayed ears of alley cats. And so the mad weather ended—touch wood. And I probably should have forgotten about it, except that it is not the human way. We look for cause. For purpose. The atheist says that such weather probably caused man to invent God. I think it caused man to invent insurance.

What it's done to me is give me an attitude: about El Nino, weather people, and the Albertan joke about waiting fifteen minutes if you don't like the weather. Beginning with the last first, these inner city jokers should learn to thank the people of the suburban frontier. Clearly, we are protecting them from Nature's wrath. Nature probably doesn't like cities much and probably opposes their growth. At the same time, growth also means the area of devastation will soon move beyond us. Maybe by next year we might be sheltering behind the houses of fresh innocents, pretending concern.

As for the weather people, would they please for crying out loud stop talking about El Nino? Or at least admit they have no idea what it is or what it does? Prior to the invention of meteorology our ancestors said these weather aberrations were manifestations of the devil, of God's unhappiness, or Coyote's odd sense of humour. To predict the weather, they consulted the entrails of sacrificed sheep or asked the Delphic Oracle. For my money, the big animated satellite map with the clouds moving clockwise or anti-clockwise is just a high-tech sheep's entrails. As for El Nino, it's a couple of Spanish words signifying nothing. Might as well blame it on the Bossanova. ■

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