

“American City”

BY FRED STENSON

It has happened again: another media declaration that “Calgary is the most American city in Canada,” this time in the *National Post*.

First off, let me get out of the way why I object. It isn't that I'm deeply anti-American (shallowly, maybe). It is because the people who say it are not being complimentary, nor merely descriptive. They mean it as a slur, a slam, a way of taking Calgary and hiving it off into its own little category. American. Hence: not Canadian. Hence: not like the rest of us. Hence: not one of us.

Some might say that I am unable to read Calgary's American-ness by virtue of having long lived here and



United States. If Calgary is American, I should notice no difference when I go to an American city, right?

But, you know what? I do notice differences, quite a few.

I notice, for instance, how much more bouncy Americans are. I spend much time trying to see American natural and man-made marvels while avoiding American guides.

“Now, stop right there, everyone. And close your eyes. I want you to imagine being on this steep, steep path, five hundred years ago—with twenty gallons of water on your head! Isn't that freaky?! Isn't that wild?! Did you imagine it, sir? You don't seem as deeply touched as everyone else.

of the fact that I was born and raised within 100 kilometres of the U.S. border (same as 90 per cent of the rest of Canadians). The test of that should be when I travel to cities that are even more indisputably American than Calgary, by virtue of being in the

Okay, now come over here and feel this rock.”

I notice that eating fast food is the American nutritional base line. Usually you eat it out; sometimes you eat it in. Occasionally, you go out to some better restaurant, by which is meant a well-known national chain. Rarest of all, you cook. Americans seem willing to eat almost anything for dinner (in the well-known national chain restaurant) provided that it is invisible under one of two kinds of gravy: fecal brown or death-pallor grey. When it comes to breakfast, however, American urbanites are gourmands, with the pickiness of your average mad Bavarian monarch. They eat “egg whites only” or “egg yolks only,” and I absolutely swear that I heard a man in Flagstaff order two whites and two yolks, but not in two fully assembled eggs.

Trust me, Calgary is not like this. What’s more, in Calgary, when you put your briefcase up on the counter at a

bank, the tellers do not hit the floor.

The *National Post* reporter’s evidence for Calgary’s being American began with the fact that the city has 80,000 people of American descent. Gasp. About the same time as this article ran, I heard on CBC Radio that Calgary has 100,000 recent immigrants and therefore is facing an ESL-training crisis. This radio reporter did not hasten to conclude that Calgary must therefore be Canada’s “most immigrant city.” Last time I heard, Toronto had 500,000 people of Italian descent, but I don’t recall anyone saying that makes Toronto “Canada’s most Italian city.” No, Calgary is definitely singled out for special treatment. Why? Read on.

The *National Post* reporter delved into Calgary’s history to explain our major sources of American-ness. The first wave, she said, came when American ranchers and cowboys flooded the country during the open range ranch frontier. It happens that I

have been researching this period and locale for a book, and a generous estimate of the number of American ranchers and cowboys flooding a 100-kilometre radius around Calgary in 1885 or so was probably 150 souls. Is it cheeky to also point out that, being ranchers and cowboys, they did not live in Calgary? In fact, they didn’t like Calgary, because its Ontario and English storekeepers, hotelkeepers and police kept evicting them and throwing them in jail for having a little fun. They preferred the more sporting town of High River.

The second major wave of American influence, according to the same article, were the Americans who came to show the clod-hopping Canadians how to drill for, refine, process and pipeline our petroleum. Leduc was the big strike in 1947, and, last time I looked, Leduc was 50 kilometres south of Edmonton and 250 kilometres north of Calgary. The next big strike, Redwater, was north

of Edmonton. Is it not likely that the American experts would have met their Canadian students where the petroleum was, thus making a better case for Edmonton's American-ness than for Calgary's? But perhaps I quibble.

The *Post* reporter's next area of evidence was Calgary's thoroughly American corporate culture. The point seemed to be that Calgary had done so much business with Americans that the culture had rubbed off. The United States, as we know, is Canada's major trading partner, to the tune of more than half our total economy or something stunning like that. Doesn't that imply that Canadians all over Canada do a lot of business with Americans? And if it's the capitalist ethic that Calgarians share so deeply with Americans, what exactly is it that the Bay Street businesspeople are trying to accomplish? I assumed they were trying to make a buck as well.

If the issue is American ownership, I concur that a great deal of what was once the Canadian oil patch is now American-owned. Thanks to the 60-cent loonie, pretty much everything in Canada worth owning is owned by Americans. Given how seldom Calgarians have voted for a party that formed the federal government of Canada, I don't think Canadian monetary policy can be hung on us.

Let's face it, folks. It isn't that Calgary businesspeople are more like Americans than Toronto businesspeople are; it's what kind of Americans they resemble that leads to the charge of being too American. Whereas the Toronto set like to take on New Yorker characteristics, fast and urbane and wise-cracking, the Calgary bunch more resemble people in Houston and other parts of Texas, or Oklahomans, slow and drawly. That's what those who call Calgary *too American* really don't like.

The dots begin to connect. What is objected to may not be American-ness at all, but *western*-ness. This would not only explain hostility toward Calgary's business community, it would also explain the weird statement often

made by people from Ontario upon arrival in Calgary. To wit:

"When I was coming to Calgary, my friends said, *Don't do it!* It's all a bunch of cowboys. I expected everybody to be in cowboy hats, really I did. But you guys look pretty normal."

Of course, we're supposed to reply, "Golly gee, thanks for noticing." But what I want to say is, "What the hell is wrong with a cowboy hat?"

Finally, what I'm inspired to say is that people around the land might as well continue calling Calgary Canada's most American city, if it so pleases them. But I'm putting in a bid for a more fact-based approach. Here is some more accurate fodder:

Fact: the Calgary Stampede was started by an American, from New York State.

Fact: the Americans who came to Calgary in the 1950s brought with them the tradition of the backyard barbecue; Calgarians have been partying this way ever since.

Fact: the fifties Americans were interested in the Calgary Stampede, but found it a little pallid. The American who started it, Guy Weadick, had been fired for drunkenness and the Rotarians who were now in control were taking it in the direction of competing pickles and petting zoos. The Americans intervened, introducing spectacular western gaudiness to the costumes of riders in the Stampede Parade (which I love) and a much louder and boisterous brand of hilarity (which I also love but am happy to see end after the two weeks are done). Then we can get on with our Canadian Rotarian relative solitude.

And by the way, I do own cowboy boots and cowboy hats (several of each). I wear the boots when I don't have far to walk. I wear the hats when I'm working in the sun. I don't wear the hats much publicly because I don't look much like Ian Tyson when I do. To quote a friend, I look like a guy in a hat.

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