

# **A HISTORY OF GRASSLANDS NATURALISTS**

## **Compiled by Eileen Cowtan September 2015**

### **(assistance from Dennis Baresco and Rob Gardner)**

The minutes of Grasslands Naturalists meetings show that September 23, 1985 was the first gathering of a group of people who had decided to start a naturalists' club in Medicine Hat. Twenty-two people were present at that meeting but I have not been able to find a record of their names. It is recorded that some of the names suggested for the new club included Wild Rose Naturalist Society, Hat Nats, Grasslands Naturalists Club, Badlands Goodguys (I like that one!) and Cypress Naturalists Club. The name 'Grassland Naturalists' was selected at their next meeting on October 8. Attendees at that meeting were Rob Gardner, David Jamieson, Arlene Larson, Brent Larson, Brian Mann, Gary McFarlane, Beth & Gordon Milne, John Patterson & son, Pat Summers and Bob Townsend. Rob and Bob are still members. In December, they participated in the Christmas Bird Count. The first executive was elected in July of 1986. It consisted of President Paul Strickland, Vice President David Jamieson, Secretary Brent Larson, Treasurer Bryan Danegan and Program Co-ordinator Rob Gardner. Membership fees were set at \$5 for individuals and \$10 for families. At the November 21 executive meeting, Rob Gardner offered to edit an informal newsletter and proposed that it be called the "Sagebrush Chronicle". At that same meeting, possible affiliation with FAN (Federation of Alberta Naturalists) was discussed.

In 1991, under the leadership of Lorine Marshall, the club was incorporated as a Society and its first bylaws were drafted. The proper name of the group as registered is "Society of Grasslands Naturalists". The membership list from that year includes seventy individuals and families. Of those, eighteen are still members. A year later GN was registered as a charitable organization. Presidents over the years have included Paul Strickland, Lorine Marshall, Ivan Shukster, Dennis Baresco, Linda Canham, Corlaine Gardner, Kelly Bogle, Veronica Swan, Phil Horch, Michael O'Shea, Martha Munz Gue, Vaida Siga, John Slater, Anne Bernhardt and Dave McKenzie.

In 1991, the new society held a competition for the design of a logo. Ben Velner's design of the sage grouse was declared the winner and Jim Marshall stylized it for our use.

The history of the relationship between Grasslands Naturalists and the Interpretive Program is a convoluted one. The "City of Medicine Hat Interpretive Program", as it was then known, was formed in 1982 as part of the City Parks and Outdoor Recreation Department. A major grant from the Alberta Heritage Trust Fund allowed the construction of Police Point Park as well as Strathcona Island and Echo Dale. An interpretive centre, an innovative concept at the time, had been built in Police Point and the City hired Rob Gardner as the first park interpreter. The building officially opened on June 26, 1982.

This program was jeopardized by City budget cuts in late December of 1993. It was saved by the 1994 signing of a co-operative agreement between the City, GN, and Medicine Hat College. Dennis Baresco was instrumental in suggesting to the City that GN might take over the operation of the program. The City agreed and insisted that the College be included in the partnership; it was to act as financial administrator. At that time, the name of the program was changed to Medicine Hat Interpretive Program and the title "chief interpreter" was introduced by Dennis. The College asked to be removed from the agreement several years later.

Many people, including many GNers, I suspect, still believe that the MHIP is a City-operated program. It is easy to understand their confusion because the building is a City facility, the Park is managed by the City Parks Department, and it was the City which first operated an interpretive program from its Police Point Park facility. BUT, GRASSLANDS NATURALISTS HAS BEEN MANAGING IT FROM 1994! This management includes the hiring of staff and management and operation of the program, under the direction of the Chief Interpreter. We still receive funding from the City which covers almost one-half of the operating costs. The remainder is raised from grants, revenue from offered programs, sales at the Nature Centre, donations and other fundraising activities. Members of the club provide an important role by exercising overall control of the interpretive program, allowing it to flourish with relative security.

Grasslands Naturalists have often been officially recognized for their environmental stewardship. Federally, in 1999, they won the Canadian Nature Federation's Affiliate of the Year Award, based in large part on the activities of the Interpretive Program. Provincially, they were recognized as a finalist for the Emerald Award (Community Group Category) in 1994, the Alberta Centennial Sunshine of the Year award in 2005 and Alberta Stewardship Network's award for Grassroots Environmental Stewardship in 2009.

Locally, many members have been recognized in the "Environmental" category of the City's Civic Recognition Awards. Those so honoured include Sean Allen (2015), Jan Scott (2013), Corlaine Gardner (2010), Veronica Swan (2008), Michael O'Shea (2007), Rob Gardner (2006), Phil Horch (2005), Martha Munz Gue (2003), Bob Townsend (2001), Anne Bernhardt (1999), Linda Canham (1998), Carol Porter (1997), Dawn Dickinson (1996), Dennis Baresco (1995) and Ben Velner (1994).

As I delve more deeply into our past, I realize that there is much more to share so I have decided to continue this effort next month at which time I plan to chronicle some of the achievements of the Grasslands Naturalists club. Contact me with any interesting information, corrections or *especially* photos that you may have.

Please make an effort to celebrate with us at our anniversary party at Police Point Park Nature Centre on September 27; noon to 4pm. We will be acting as hosts to the Interpretive Program's Fall Festival as they celebrate Alberta Cultural Days 2015.