

THE SAGA OF EDMONTON

BY RONALD SCHILLER

"THE quickest way to frighten anyone in Edmonton is to sneak up behind him and whisper 'Boom!'"

This remark — a favorite among Texas and Oklahoma oilmen — pretty well expresses the exasperation that visiting Americans, and many Canadians too, feel about the peculiar state of mind that exists in this northernmost city of Canada. An unbriefed visitor may wonder, at first, why Edmonton should exasperate anyone. It seems a pleasant enough place, spread thinly over the prairies on both sides of the winding Saskatchewan River in northern Alberta. It has some eccentricities, of course. Cinemas list their attractions as being "Family" or "Adult" types and no child may go alone to an "Adult" movie. The city's largest department store disapproves of smoking, won't sell cigarettes, and draws the shades on its show windows on Sunday so as not to distract strolling citizens from godly thoughts. A branch library, installed in a streetcar, goes clanging

around town. The Mounted Police have planes, cars, motorcycles and dogsleds, but no horses. Mixed drinking is not allowed in public; men and women each have their own beer parlors. Brewers may not advertise beer, so they keep their names before the public by featuring their soft drinks in huge neon signs, which makes it look as though the city were madly addicted to ginger ale. All in all, however, Edmonton creates the impression of being a quiet, conservative sort of place that likes to mind its own business.

But *that* is precisely what irritates Edmonton's critics. Because, they point out, Edmonton happens to be in the throes of a terrific boom.

In the three years since northern Alberta's first oil strike, at nearby Leduc, Edmonton has become the oil capital of Canada and one of the important petroleum centers of North America. Major oil fields now radiate in all directions from the city. Others may lie under the streets. The city council is considering a motion to

RONALD SCHILLER *has been, at different times, managing editor of United Nations World, assistant foreign news editor of Life, and a national affairs writer for Time.*

drill a well on public land near the river. The country club also will drill, if it can brace itself against ruining its sixth hole. Petroleum reserves uncovered thus far total a billion barrels, and a new producing well kicks in every third day.

Sixty-four new businesses related to the petroleum industry have moved into town. Others await the building of additional offices and shops. A \$10 million U. S. refinery in the Yukon — war-surplus — was hauled piece by piece a thousand miles down the Alaska Highway and reassembled on the city's outskirts. Two more refineries are on the drawing boards. The flow of incoming oil workers from all over America has assumed gusher proportions. At the well sites, soft Texas talk mixes with the hard Alberta speech like oil with vinegar — with an occasional Slavic accent adding a dash of paprika.

Edmonton is, at present, the fastest growing city in Canada. Its population leaped from 91,000 in 1941 to 150,000 in 1949, and may reach a quarter of a million in the next decade. Despite a \$40 million building program last year alone, families live doubled and tripled up in apartments and houses. Hotel rooms and office space are so scarce that men with business in Edmonton frequently stay in Calgary, two hundred miles south, and commute to the city by

plane. City land values have doubled, and some surrounding farm lands sell — when they can be bought at all — for a hundred times what they did before the war.

II

Such a flourishing state of affairs might be expected to generate a modicum of enthusiasm, but — and this is what irks the outsider — Edmonton takes the whole thing with a maddening calm, almost verging on boredom.

The brokers' offices are *not* thronged with excited plungers. There is no noticeable increase of drinking or gambling. There are no fast women on the streets and no night clubs. GIs in town on a Sunday pass from the nearby U. S.-Canadian Air Force base have their choice of several churches and a free ball game — but no movies, beer parlors or newspapers.

There is no wild spending. Farmer John Rebus, who got \$200,000 in cash and an eighth royalty on the oil produced on his quarter-section, still plows his fields himself, and has not bothered to paint his house. His neighbor, Mike Pyrcz, who received \$50,000 outright and banks another \$150 every day, has splurged to the extent of buying a new tractor.

The city itself, which has reaped a bumper harvest in taxes and land sales, has yet to vote itself a new city

hall or a municipal auditorium. A few shiny new store-fronts are to be seen in the shopping district, but most of the new buildings seem to have been designed with an eye to preserving Edmonton's traditional atmosphere of rough-cut homeliness.

When they bother to talk about the thing at all, most Edmontonians fall into two schools of thought. There are those who say there is no boom, and there are others who will remark with a shy pride, "They say this is the dullest boom town on earth." There are a few mavericks, however, who will come right out and admit not only that Edmonton is having a boom, but that it has been the beneficiary of more fantastic and unrelated booms, in a shorter period of time, than any city in this generation.

"It all started with the Alaska Highway in 1942," says John "Mike" Michaels, a prosperous news distributor and probably the most widely known man in town. "Then came the Canol Project, the air boom, the uranium boom, and now the oil boom. And we never raised a dollar or a drop of sweat to bring in any of them!"

The fact is that geography makes Edmonton as susceptible to booms as other cities are susceptible to earthquakes or floods. Except for a little leakage through the Alaskan side-

ports of Anchorage and Skagway, all the trade and fabulous riches of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories must funnel through Edmonton. All the more remarkable, therefore, is her almost clinical immunity to anything approaching a boom psychology.

The oil strike, for instance, caused excitement all over the continent. In Washington, military strategists breathed a sigh of relief at being presented with a bountiful supply of petroleum so close to the bases of Alaska and the Arctic. In Ottawa, Dominion officials were happily predicting that it would change Canada's entire economy, making it a petroleum exporter instead of a heavy importer. The rest of Alberta gleefully watched the province's oil revenues increase to a fat \$12 million last year, foresaw lower taxes and vast appropriations for new roads, schools and public works. Edmonton, alone, remained unmoved.

Syndicates bent on exploiting her oil were formed in rival Calgary, in Montreal, New York, Tulsa and Honolulu, but not in Edmonton. Of the millions of dollars being spent on drilling and exploration in the Edmonton area, it is doubtful that more than one tenth of 1 per cent comes from the city itself. People in Edmonton were cold to the whole thing until Atlantic's No. 3 went on the

rampage for six months in 1948. Then they packed picnic lunches and went out to watch the miniature Vesuvius of oil, gas and mud erupting over a forty-acre field. It made for a nice afternoon.

III

This allergy to the boom mentality has a simple explanation, according to Edmonton's mayor, Harry Ainlay. "We were inoculated against it 38 years ago and I guess we've just never been able to catch the fever since."

The dose which Edmonton took shortly after 1905 was a dilly. That was the year the transcontinental railroad reached town. The prairies were filling with settlers, the North seemed ready to open up, and Edmonton decided it was about to become a great city.

Men went land-crazy. Property on Jasper Avenue, still a prairie, rose to \$2000 per front foot. People lined up in block-long queues to draw lottery tickets entitling them to buy lots at \$20,000 apiece, sight unseen. The lucky winners turned over immediate profits of 100 per cent. When the railroad station was opened, the contractors — working on a cost-plus basis — threw a champagne and chicken party for the whole city, gave a silver dollar to everyone who attended, as a souvenir. Buildings were going up so rapidly that rival

contractors met the incoming trains, hired carpenters and masons as they stepped down from the coaches. On the banks of the river rose the big Macdonald Hotel, a caravansary worthy of the metropolis of half a million that Edmonton was expected to become.

The boom collapsed in a wave of bankruptcy and bitterness that the city has never forgotten. Seventy-five thousand lots went back to the city for taxes. The population fell nearly 20 per cent in the single year 1915.

For thirty years Edmonton lay, not uncomfortably, in the doldrums. Large tracts of land near the business district were turned back to farming. The big hotel was ghost-ridden. Steel skeletons of unfinished buildings rusted in the sun until they were torn down as hazards to safety. Streets in the best residential districts lay unpaved, while an uninhabited four-lane concrete boulevard, three miles long, complete with sidewalks, never-used streetcar tracks and hydrants, went back to bush in what was to have been an even swankier residential area. Men found it a convenient place to teach their wives to drive. Post and Gatty used it as a runway in their epic flight around the world in the *Winnie Mae*.

Meanwhile, with the first thaws, famous bush pilots like "Wop"

May and Grant McConachie came in from "down North" carrying prospectors with their little bags of gold or heavy cases of ore, Catholic nuns and padres garbed in mukluks and mackinaws in place of their usual robes, trappers with their mink-clad squaws, and papooses wrapped in ermine. And, with frontier impartiality, Edmonton welcomed American tourists on their way to Jasper Park in the Rockies, immigrant Ukrainians, the Prince of Wales bound for his Alberta ranch, Chinese restaurateurs, sportsmen out for moose and bear, Mormon settlers, a colony of Negro farmers from the Deep South, and Arab refugees who scarcely paused on their way from the hot sands to the Arctic snows to trade with the Eskimos.

The city lived contentedly, if not richly, on the business from surrounding farms, which have never known a crop failure. Timber, coal, fish and furs formed profitable sidelines. Several times a year, buyers from New York and other Eastern cities swarmed into Edmonton — as they still do — for the great fur auctions. About \$5 million worth of pelts pass through Edmonton every year.

One thing Edmonton never did again, however, was to go overboard on anything. When oil was discovered in the Turner Valley, in southwestern Alberta, in the twenties, Calgary went

wild with speculation. Edmonton kept its hands in its pockets. Gilbert LaBine flew in from Eldorado, a thousand miles north on Great Bear Lake, with rock that glowed in the dark, the richest radium strike in the world. Edmonton was only mildly interested. Large gold deposits were discovered at Yellowknife on Great Slave Lake. Edmonton provided the miners with supplies and a blessing, but did not rush north with them. The city thought it was forever done with get-rich-quick projects, until the war set off a chain reaction of them from which it will probably never recover.

IV

It was Japanese Premier Tojo who lowered the first boom on Edmonton's surprised head. Tojo had probably never heard of Edmonton when he ordered his troops into the Aleutians in 1942. But the U. S. Army had. They countered with "The Road," which in Edmonton and anywhere north of the fifty-fourth parallel, means, of course, the Alaska Highway and its southward extension, that fabulous ribbon of graded gravel that snakes its way over two thousand miles of mountain and tundra from Edmonton to Fairbanks, Alaska. Next came Canol — the operational name for the successfully-completed, but little-used, 577-mile pipeline

that ran from the Norman Wells oil field, below the Arctic Circle, to the seaports and airfields of the Yukon and Alaska.

The two projects, together with a string of air bases, all built by U. S. Army engineers and paid for by the United States, poured more than a quarter of a billion dollars in cash and material, and more than 200,000 American soldiers and civilians, through Edmonton in two frantic years.

The "American invasion" is remembered as the era when American money was the only plentiful commodity and Edmontonians greeted each other like members of a down-trodden minority. U. S. civilians "went native" in a big way, with beards, gaudy mackinaws, fur hats and moccasins, while the natives clung to conservative business suits and ties. Soldiers on their way back from a stretch in the bush paid \$35 a fifth for bootleg whiskey, handed \$20 bills as souvenirs to the first white girls they saw.

"They bought everything in sight," says "Uncle Ben" Leibovitz, who conducts a famous outfitting emporium for hunters, trappers and prospectors. "A gold pan costs five dollars, is impossible to pack, and is good for nothing on earth but to wash gold from rivers. There must be thousands of housewives in New York

and Chicago, right now, wondering what on earth to do with the gold pans their men brought home."

The air boom, which hit Edmonton because the city happens to lie directly on the Great Circle Route to Alaska, Siberia and the Orient, reached its peak during 24 hours in September 1943. On that day, 865 aircraft, most of them lend-lease planes for Russia, took off or landed at the civic airport to establish a world record for a single day's traffic. "One time we even had to keep Mr. Molotov circling for an hour before he could come in," grins airport manager Jimmy Bell.

Molotov, who arrived complete with his own food, typewriters and NKVD guards, didn't excite Edmonton much, but an occasional Russian aviatrix window-shopping on Jasper Avenue usually stopped traffic.

The air boom did not end with the war. Today the Edmonton airport handles more freight than any other airport in the world, with furs, fish, uranium and gold as its steady cargoes, and an occasional odd assignment like dropping ballot boxes by parachute to isolated precincts before an election. Last year the airport surpassed its 1943 world record by recording more than 100,000 takeoffs and landings.

Until the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, Edmonton remained blissfully unaware that it was enjoying a uranium boom. Some people may

have idly wondered at the millions of dollars' worth of equipment and the thousands of men that passed through the city on their way to the Eldorado radium pits on Great Bear Lake. But even the miners had no idea what their work was for.

Edmonton still knows little about the uranium operation. The only facts made public are that Eldorado is the world's second largest source of the metal, that the Belgian Congo produces more but of a poorer quality, that the ore is concentrated and sacked at the plant, that part of it is flown out and the rest brought by barge and rail 1500 miles up the Mackenzie and Athabaska Rivers. It leaves Edmonton in sealed cars guarded as though the cargo were as valuable as — well, uranium. Production figures, techniques and the destination of the ore are all top secret.

v

In 1947, with Alberta's farm products selling at the highest prices in history, the uranium and air booms leveling off nicely, gold, fish, furs and lumber pouring through at a steady rate, traffic over the Alaska Highway increasing, and Edmonton's prosperity thus assured for years, the oil boom struck! The circumstances leading up to that strike should forever dispel any remaining doubt as to Edmon-

ton's special status as fortune's god-child.

For decades, geologists have known that there was oil in the Devonian limestone which underlies the Canadian prairies. The limestone extends, however, under an immense area of 891,000 square miles, reaching from the Arctic to the U. S. border, from the Rockies to the Great Lakes.

"For 25 years we looked for that oil," says Jim Rennie of Imperial Oil, a Standard Oil (N. J.) subsidiary. "In ten years we drilled 114 holes over an area larger than Texas, California and Oklahoma combined. All dry. Finally we hit it — but big! — on the hundred-and-fifteenth try. Where is it? At Leduc; twenty miles south of Edmonton. Next year, we find an even bigger field, and where is it? Redwater; 45 miles on the other side of Edmonton. Last year, five more fields blow in, and where are they? All within 35 miles of Edmonton!"

The oil boom, still in its infancy, could end the cycle of booms. But there are plenty of people who will bet you that it won't. There are mountains of copper, lead, manganese, steel and lumber in the North, awaiting only the money and the need to start them flowing south. When the runs start, as they eventually must, Edmonton will be standing at the payoff slot of the jackpot, collecting rich

tribute in return for her goods and services, as she has in the past.

More immediately, there is talk — entirely unconfirmed — of a multi-million-dollar program of Northern defenses to be built jointly by the United States and Canada with Edmonton as its command headquarters. It makes sense from a strategic point of view, but no one in authority will talk about it. "I assure you, sir," says a senior Canadian commander, "that this is not just another case of hush-hush. It is absolutely hush-hush-*hush!*"

With history, geography and even the rock beneath her feet ganging up against her, it is only a question of time before Edmonton is forced into acceptance of her destiny as a Northern metropolis. For the first time in four decades, voices are being raised to sell the city on its own future. The *Edmonton Bulletin*, under its fire-eating new publisher, Hal Straight, delivers blunt daily lectures to the city on developing a booster spirit.

But the same circumstances that

compel Edmonton to become big and rich also insist that she can never entirely lose her unique buckskin-and-snowshoe atmosphere. The city still sits on the edge of one of the world's great frontiers. Around the corner from exclusive women's specialty shops, the cavernous, cluttered emporium run by Uncle Ben Leibovitz will still provide bear traps, beaver bait and, sometimes, malemute dogs or mail-order wives. In dusty little shops on the side streets a fortune in prime mink and fox pelts will lie stacked like cordwood. Jewelers will still keep their scales handy to weigh in gold dust over the counter. The police will always stand ready to lock up drunken trappers, to keep them from squandering the proceeds of a whole year's catch in a week-long binge.

Edmonton will never call herself "The Oil City" or "The Uranium Capital," as she has a right to. Her favorite slogan has always been, and will doubtless continue to be: "A good place to raise a family."

WINTER THOUGHT

BY LILLIAN EVERTS

We who have fashioned minarets of crystal
and flooded them with brilliance of the sky,
must hope to see reflected on their contours:
the last of the delusion passing by.