

# JACK UNWIN:

## HE MADE A DIFFERENCE

It was March, 1972, almost a year after the death of Jack Unwin, longtime Highlands resident and one of the originators of Klondike Days.

Downtown, more than 400 people met to pay tribute at a "boisterous raucous, out-of-step evening - perhaps the only kind Jack Unwin would have appreciated," reported the *Edmonton Journal*.

They met to "pay tribute to the man who in daily activities, had paid so many to the city."

At the Macdonald Hotel there were three ice sculptures, one with a boot and spur, another with a pick and shovel, and a third carved with the letters JU.

Inside, wall hangings depicted gold rush scenes, and guests arrived in K-Days garb. Many men had head starts on Klondike Days beards, and women were resplendent in dyed ostrich plumes like the ones Jack once marketed as a boost to K-Days.

A band weaved among the patrons until someone announced there "were no more tink drickets on sale," and so the procession followed a pipe band down Jasper Avenue to the Chateau Lacombe, according to the *Journal*.

It must have been a weird-looking procession, with people dressed in summer costumes braving the chill night.

At the Chateau, entertainers like Tommy Banks, Rolanda Lee and the "Two Hits and a Miss" entertained; The "miss" who performed in the banjo-strumming trio was Jack's daughter Loie. (This year, Loie Unwin is president of the Edmonton Klondike Days Association.)

It's hard to imagine that kind of heartfelt tribute today. Jack Unwin's death was widely covered in media in May, 1971, and compliments poured in.

As an emcee, he could keep people laughing and enjoying themselves for hours at a time. A K-Days official said Jack Unwin was a natural salesman for the event, and "it was never a hard-sell job because he believed in it himself."

But the workload must have been crushing. In 1970, for example, he put on 86 Klondike nights at conventions to push the K-Days theme.

Jack Unwin was born in Winnipeg in 1919, but most of his schooling took place in Calgary. He moved to Edmonton in 1935 when his father Joseph was elected to the Alberta Legislature.

He started in 1938 with the local Belasco Players, and began building scenery and stage managing for the Edmonton Little Theatre during the 1940s. During the early 1950s he wrote and produced variety shows for senior citizens, and later wrote and produced "The Varieties," city-sponsored shows for young adults.

He stage-managed "Guys and Dolls" for Edmonton Civic Opera in the late 1950s, and later worked as well with the Light Opera of Edmonton. He directed "Can Can", "Funny



Jack and Maureen Unwin in 1965

Girl" and "The Boys from Syracuse" for Civic Opera. The design and production section of the Citadel Theatre's library is dedicated to the memory of Jack Unwin.

Several big-name entertainers started their careers under the direction of Jack Unwin, including the Allan Sisters.

Jack Unwin even got into football, directing half time shows for the Eskimos during the 1950s and early 1960s. It was said he really knew how to organize an enthusiastic kickline, since he trained both Eskimo cheerleaders and women over 70 years old at the Edmonton Friendship Centre.

When he wasn't working out of the office, he ran an import business and entertainment booking firm.

And he never forgot his Highlands roots, says Maureen Unwin.

"Jack worked many long hours for the community league, supervising teen dances, selling hot dogs at the Highlands booth at the exhibition, etc.," she says.

Maureen Unwin still lives in the house on 56th Street that she and Jack moved into in 1948.

"I'm the last of the originals on this street," she says.

But the southern end of 56th Street was a dirt track back in 1948. Just one treed lot stood in the way of linking the street to 111th Avenue.

She says an interesting event occurred when a city crew arrived with a bulldozer to complete the link in the summer of 1949.

"Miss Ethel Field (of the landmark Field house at 5610 - 111 Avenue) came out of her house and stood in front of the bulldozer and said they couldn't do it."

But (at least in 1949), you couldn't beat city hall.

D.C. and Ted Smith