

## Putting the Royal Alex Back Together Again

by Garry Anderson

*The Canadian Museum of Rail Travel in Cranbrook, British Columbia, received a Heritage Canada Foundation 2007 Achievement Award for the ambitious and creative Royal Alexandra Hall restoration project.*

Royal Alexandra Hall is the centrepiece of the Canadian Museum of Rail Travel and its deluxe railway hotel architectural tour in Cranbrook, B.C. This stylish heritage venue encompasses the best of Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) hotel architecture.

Since the hall's resurrection, it has been a busy community venue for a variety of events, including tours for thousands of people who visit the railway museum from around the world. The return of the Royal Alexandra Hall is the story of a "phoenix" rising.

### History

Royal Alexandra Hall was one of the finer features of Winnipeg's sumptuous Royal Alexandra Hotel (the Royal Alex), built by the CPR in 1906. It was connected to the large rail station in Winnipeg— then known as the "gateway to the Canadian west"—making it a busy railway hotel.

Designed as an urban corporate hotel, its exterior style was quite different from other railway hotels built for tourist use. The Royal Alex was built on a substantially larger scale than, for example, the Empress Hotel in Victoria, which opened in 1908 and catered more to tourists.

The hotel was demolished in 1971 as air travel increased and rail passenger traffic declined, but some important parts were thankfully saved, including the formal dining room's massive twostorey- high carved oak fireplace and the impressive oak-panelled Grand Café, later known as the Oak Grill and the Selkirk Dining Room.

The restoration project could never have happened without the actions of Allan and Donni Stern of Winnipeg, who were hired by Atlas Wrecking to dispose of the contents of the hotel. They persuaded the company to delay demolition to enable the salvage of the room and fireplace.

A master craftsman was hired to oversee the dismantling, which took several weeks. Once separated, the hundreds of components were coded, wrapped and stored in a semi-trailer by the Sterns, who hoped to reassemble them in a planned hotel construction project in Winnipeg that never took place. The pieces remained mostly forgotten for over 25 years until acquired by Streit Brothers Antiques of Whippetree Junction in 1996. In 1999, the room and fireplace were purchased by the Canadian Museum of Rail Travel in Cranbrook and integrated into designs for the museum's new site and facilities.

The site, called the museum development zone, is a 1.5-



Meticulously restored, the Grand Café, renamed the Royal Alexandra Hall reopened in spectacular style in September 2004.

Photos: Courtesy of Canadian Museum of Rail Travel



The shell, to which the hall was attached, is seen under construction.

kilometre-long section of land in downtown Cranbrook. The new museum buildings and historic trains are themselves almost one-half kilometre in length.

### **Project Work Since 2001**

The original two-storey Grand Café was restored to a museum standard of display by June 2001. It was dedicated as Royal Alexandra Hall and included in public tours along with the museum's impressive railcar collection.

The 260-square-metre oak floor was finished by December 2001. In September of the following year, the entire collection of 28 historic luxury railcars was relocated to the new trains display site, adjacent to one end of the hall.

The exterior neoclassical brick façade of the museum, including the hall, was completed in late 2003. However, there were still some surrounding facilities and building code requirements to complete in order to support the hall functions and allow it to be used legally for public assembly. Since the café was originally part of a large hotel, a shell was constructed to house the hall as part of the new museum design. One side of the room has five immense windows that overlook the museum site. The other side features five unusual curved double French doors that originally opened on to other rooms, so a reception hall was built to allow these doors to be used. Similarly, a palm court was created, which three more French doors at the end of the room provide access to.

The last wall has three leather-bound doors that originally led into the hotel kitchen. A small holding space was built here for caterers, to allow food services for dinners, weddings and receptions, extending its rental uses. (Rental revenue is essential to help meet the substantial operating costs of a space with large interior volume and high-quality finishes.)

Nearly all the elements of the room and fireplace were restored so that only a few replicas needed to be created. There are 16 wall columns with bronzed cast plaster capitals, over which was installed an elaborate cornice banding the room. A high curved beamed ceiling with recessed segmented vaults was topped by a series of skylights. Eight hand-forged chandeliers weighing a quarter ton each were salvaged and reinstated.

The new building shell, to which the contents of the former café were attached, was separated by about 20 metres from the historic 1898 railway freight shed. This allowed construction of an imposing new entrance hall and attached office/ticket area.

By early 2004 the surrounding public rooms, heating and air-conditioning systems, lighting, large public washrooms and security system were complete. The hall opened April 4. Due to the scale and cost of the project, work continued on smaller parts of the hall over the next two years.

The museum held a spectacular grand opening September 2004. The three-day event offered a formal eight-course dinner in the Royal Alexandra Hall and a steam train excursion from Calgary, which arrived at the back doors of the museum. The Honourable Iona Campagnolo, Lieutenant Governor of B.C., presided over an official ribbon cutting followed by an afternoon concert. The hall has endeared itself to musicians with its superb acoustics and seats up to 280.

The annual gala Christmas dinners, held since 1983, are major fundraisers for the museum. They were formerly held in the 36-seat, walnut-panelled dining car, "Argyle," from the 1929 Trans-Canada Limited.



Also salvaged from the hotel was the intricately carved two-storey fireplace mantel now installed in the museum's entrance hall.

Since 2004 they have been held in the larger and more accessible Royal Alexandra Hall, where up to 184 can be served in grand style.

### **An Exciting Place in 2007**

Today, the Royal Alexandra Hall is the centrepiece of the new museum building complex. As well as being a busy community space, a large number of visitors tour it and the luxurious railcar collection every year. All of this increased activity is being very carefully monitored to ensure the hall is preserved for future generations.

Although not in its original location, it is in a similar context with historic and operating trains nearby. In a museum sense, the hall is truly a “phoenix” project, celebrating over 100 years of a most unusual survival.

For more information about the Canadian Museum of Rail Travel and to view the documented restoration project, visit [www.crowsnet.bc.ca](http://www.crowsnet.bc.ca)

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