

PEI's 1970s: the decade that changed everything - part 1



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

The 1970s are known for being a groovy decade, but on PEI they brought massive changes. In Part 1, we learn about how the Comprehensive Development Plan is the reason why we have fewer family farms, zero one-room schoolhouses, and an economy more focused on tourism today. We also discuss Junction '71 – the rock festival that never happened because the PEI government shut it down.

Features guest interviews Dr. Ed MacDonald and Doug MacArthur.

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Beach PLZ music introduces.

Welcome to The Hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name’s Fiona Steele, and I’ll be your host for this journey.

Stay in the canoe. Rowing sounds. Ocean. Light wind.

And we’re back again for season three. It feels nice to be in the water again, exploring hidden sides to our history. Except this year, we need a bigger boat. We’ve created more episodes than last year. We’ve found all new topics to explore. And we’ve got some fantastic voices that you’ll hear this season.

Ocean sounds fade out.

But that’s for you to listen and find out. First, we begin as always by going back. Except this time, we’re not travelling far. In fact, when I first told my supervisor I wanted to do an episode about the 1970s, he just kind of stared at me. My parents had the same reaction.

I think it’s because to a lot of people, the 1970s isn’t history. But 1970 was actually over 50 years ago. And the 1970s in PEI were pretty wacky. This decade brought in a lot of big changes for the Island.

I think sometimes I forget how quickly life changed. For example, in 1961, half of the homes in rural PEI didn’t have running water. Only a quarter of them had central heating. And two of three homes didn’t have indoor plumbing. Today, that’s unheard of. Now, I’m from the 90s, so the 70s are before my time. Let’s create a landscape of the 1970s really quick, just to show what it was like.

Funky-disco music comes up for a moment.

This was the time of bellbottoms, platform shoes, and of course – disco. Here on the Island, Jean Canfield became PEI’s first woman MLA in 1970. That year is also when female students in junior or senior high school could begin wearing pants instead of skirts in class.

(old cellphone ringing) Although the first cellphone was invented in 1973, they weren’t very popular until the 1990s. So, you probably made calls from an old dial-phone *(dial phone sound)*, and the privacy of your phone call depended on how long the cord was.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = narration

In fact, a lot of people living in rural areas shared their phone lines with other houses nearby, so you never knew who might be listening in on your private call. They called it the party line for a reason!

At the start of 1970, there were still six thousand farmers on PEI. However, only 1,100 of them made more than \$2,500 a year.

(Typewriter sounds) Computers hadn't really taken off yet, so typewriters were still the go-to. And forget about the internet *(dial-up internet sound)* – everyday people weren't using the World Wide Web until the 1990s. In PEI, the bridge hadn't been built yet. You had to take the ferry to leave the Island.

Funky-disco music fades out.

Ed: it's kind of funny, it's a difficult thing to live through a period and then to write about it as an historian, because your own experience of the events gets entwined with the way you view it. So I was born in 1957.

That's Ed MacDonald, a UPEI professor who focuses on Island history.

Ed: I can remember being outraged in high school in 1973, when there was an ad in the newspaper explaining to islanders how to behave around tourists. I can remember being outraged about that, saying what you think islanders don't know how to be friendly? We don't know how to treat a visitor that we have to be told in condescending terms? Even as a 15-year-old kid in grade 11, going into 11, I just thought, well, that's wrong.

Now, that's not what I interviewed Ed for, but it is an interesting sidenote. The reason why PEI's 1970s are so important are because of something called the Comprehensive Development Plan. Before you turn this episode off, I promise you this will get interesting. Just bear with me for a little bit of background information first.

Elevator-style music introduces

In the 1960s, PEI Premier Walter Shaw becomes really interested in the Island's development. He commissions a series of reports to show where PEI can grow and modernize. At the same time, the federal government creates a Fund for Rural Economic Development, also known as FRED. Provinces can now create programs that improve the social and economic conditions in rural locations with this funding. Now, at this time, PEI has the second lowest per-capita income going into the 1970s. So, we definitely qualify.

Then in 1966, Alex Campbell wins the provincial election. He becomes one of the youngest premiers ever elected at 32 years old. And Alex Campbell wants change for PEI. In 1969, in order to make this change happen, the provincial government signs a Comprehensive Development Plan with the federal government. I'm simplifying here but basically, this comprehensive development plan looked to change every aspect of life on the Island.

Ed: The society, the economy, the education system, the health system - all aspects, and it was meant to be interlocking. So, each of the parts of the plan was going to affect the others. And the idea was to transform our economy and change us from being like a have-not economy to a have economy. The standard of living gap, the average income gap between the Island and the rest of Canada, was significantly big. And this was meant to reduce the gap and maybe eliminate it. So, they're going to rationalize the traditional economy, the fishery, agriculture, reduce the numbers involved in those so that they could expand, modernize. The pie will get larger, but the number of people trying to eat from that pie would get smaller.

Ed: At the same time, they're going to educate people for change. So, transform education on PEI. What would happen to the fisheries and the farmers no longer involved in the industry? You retrain them for jobs in new industries, for example, in the tourism industry, which got a big investment, or manufacturing, which they were trying to jumpstart on the Island, with your grants and assistance with the taxes, etc. At the same time, we had to be made, of course healthy, so investments in health so that we would be well equipped for change.

Elevator music fades out.

It sounds ambitious, right? It was. This massive plan is what sets the stage for the 1970s in PEI. Premier Alex Campbell announced at the March 1969 signing ceremony,

Male Narrator: "I would like to say, most emphatically, that this Development Plan is not a Government Plan. It is a Plan by the people, of the people, and for the people."

But Alex Campbell had previously written in a telegram that he wanted the Plan to be written in

Male Narrator: "A language which will warm the cockles of all Island hearts and will inspire their efforts to renew, restore and revitalize the Island they so much love."

Ed: And in one sense, you have to admire the hubris of this, the planners, the economists, sociologists, all of the experts who really thought that you could orchestrate change, that a comprehensive plan was possible. Except sometimes they forgot they're dealing with people and that we don't react like your molecules in an equation. We react in different ways depending upon our value system. The circumstances that we're in and our identities.

Ed: There was a backlash by Islanders who were looking at so much change so quickly and orchestrated from the top down. They wanted the same objective, but at the same time, they felt a lot of good things were being lost in the rush to the future.

So, on one hand you have this desire to become more modern. On the other hand, you have this reluctance to change. I asked Ed whether the plan was a success, looking back.

Ed: How much they succeeded is a little bit open to question because how do you measure success? Standard of living increased, the availability of amenities to people increased. There are a lot of new jobs that were created in the service sector. But a lot of them were government jobs.

Ed: I think one of the effects of the plan was to actually increase the reliance on government not only for employment, but government as the catalysts for any kind of initiative. Anybody that starts up a business, anybody that has an idea on PEI or wants to do an improvement, the first thing they do is turn to the government to see if they can get a grant for it. So, the idea of the development plan was to use government to make us less reliant on government. But in a curious way, we're more reliant on government perhaps than ever.

Now, a lot of change did happen. The family farm largely disappeared, but that trend was already happening. Nearly one in three Island farms had disappeared since the Second World War. The development plan just sped that along. This plan also changed education on PEI. In 1966, the province had over 400 operating schools. Of those, 65 per cent had one room. These one-room schoolhouses were exchanged for larger consolidated schools. And that's what we know today.

I see two big reasons why this plan mattered. First off, Islanders lives weren't the same after the plan. You can argue change is constantly happening, but not like this. This was a massive shift in a relatively short timeframe. And it's part of the reason why our economy is the way it is today.

Second, this plan helped create a bit of a rift in society. You had those who wanted to the future to come to PEI. And you had those who really valued tradition, the way things had always been done. Those groups didn't always agree.

And that's what I want to focus on today, using a few key events. First up is Junction '71.

Instrumental rock music comes up, fades under narration.

Narrator: Introducing Junction '71. The finest entertainment ever to appear in the Maritimes at one time. Featuring Bruce Cockburn, Edward Bear, Pepper Tree and Melody Fair. April 10 and 11 at the Kennedy Coliseum in Charlottetown. 50 per cent of proceeds are being donated to the 1971 Timmy Easter Seal Campaign.

Junction '71 was going to be PEI's first big rock festival.

Doug: We wanted to do it on Easter weekend, we wanted to have it really early in the year. And one reason for that is at the time, I was in university, and I was trying to make a living from university wherever while I was in university.

That's Doug MacArthur. When Doug and his friend Cuyler Cotton were in their early twenties, they decided to organize a music festival on the Island. Here's the only problem: PEI in the 1970s hadn't seen such a thing before.

Doug: Our objective was to have an audience of about 5000 people.

But Junction '71 only ended up attracting a couple *hundred* people, not thousand. And it's not because the bands were terrible. It's because there was so much backlash against the festival that the PEI government shut it down through a new law they created. Here's the story:

Doug: Everything was going real well into well into February of 1971. And then all of a sudden, we started noticing that there was getting to be a bit of a public backlash to the event.

Doug said that when they began organizing, they'd asked local community groups, churches, and individuals if they'd be alright with a rock concert. And they were fine with it. However, as time went on, opinions changed.

Doug: And we didn't know why the backlash was there because we had checked everything out beforehand. And we're pretty comfortable that we knew of no groups who would oppose it. But we found out very quickly that the people opposing it, not really people, the ones who were creating a lot of dissension about it, were actually the head of the Prince Edward Island RCMP. He had the view that this could turn into another Woodstock. And so, he was very concerned on the safety side of things and whatever.

Woodstock was a music festival that happened in New York, 1969. Originally, 50,000 people were expected to attend. Instead, half a million people showed up. Although there was no reported violence, there was a lot of open drug use and sex. And cleaning up after the festival took several days, costing tens of thousands of dollars.

Greg Marquis wrote in the Island Magazine that by 1971, the RCMP across Canada was trying to block massive rock festivals. They had "devised elaborate plans for spying on and policing those events which did take place." The superintendent of the PEI RCMP then was L. G. Pantry. He'd been previously posted in Washington for three years, so he knew first-hand the problems associated with rock festivals.

Keep in mind, the RCMP in the 1960s and 1970s did a lot of spying. This was the time of the “fruit machine,” a device designed to identify queer folks working in public service. If you failed their tests, you could be fired because they’d assume you’re a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The RCMP also spied on the on-to-Ottawa abortion rights caravan. They even had the UPEI student newspaper pegged as a possible threat. So, this idea of the RCMP being involved in daily life wasn’t new.

Doug: But he went very much overboard on it as far as we were concerned. We started hearing stories that he was showing video of the of Woodstock when it was held and, and it and anyone who would see those videos, it would give a very bad impression in terms of what sort of event it might be.

The RCMP had data from the FBI, which included 150 shocking photographs and a 40-minute film, showing nudity and open drug use for example. Other opposition came from the Parkdale village commission, who were worried about 5,000 people coming to their neighborhood.

A group of 16 prominent clergy sent out a letter based on what they’d heard about rock festivals in the rest of Canada. They felt this event could include drug trafficking and ‘increased escapism.’ The PEI Medical Society was worried the Island didn’t have enough medical facilities for drug users who might come to the Island. Bad news was adding up fast.

Doug: so I got a call from the Premier's office asking to meet in late February or early March of 1971. And Cuyler Cotton, my partner in this venture, went to the meeting. And the Premier was there and, and his principal Secretary Andy Wells. And we were very surprised that our event had that much profile that that people that senior would be interested in meeting as we were very young at the time and whatever. And thought, jeez, this is surprising. Anyway, the Premier, he was absolutely terrific. But he told us, he said, I'm getting a lot of backlash about this. He told us that the RCMP were very concerned about the event, and whatever, and that there were visions of maybe 40 or 50,000 people being there, which would be absolutely ridiculous, no such thing could possibly happen.

Doug: And anyway, so he said, look, we don't want to do anything, the government doesn't want to do anything rash about this at the moment. But we want to stay on top of it to make sure it doesn't get away from us, and that it doesn't become something that becomes a big problem. So starting in probably early March, we met once a week every Friday afternoon with the Premier and with the principal secretary. And we would give them an update on things. And they kept asking us many questions about it to make sure we had security covered that that we weren't selling tremendous amounts of tickets, that would cause problems. And in fact, we were only selling a few tickets at that time.

And then the final straw came, one day in March. Mind you, this is less than a month before the festival was to be held.

Doug: And we had one particular meeting in the Premier's office in late March and the principal Secretary Andy Wells was called out and then he came back into the meeting, and he told the premier he had just received a call From the Women's Institute of PEI, and they were very much against this being held. And the premier looked at me and he said, Doug, he said, this is not going to happen. He said, We cannot. He says, once the Women's Institute, a body like that, are against this to the extent that they are, and also some of those ministers and other clergymen were talking about preaching against it on Sunday mornings.

Around the same time, the PEI Legislature passed Bill 55. It was called, "An Act to Prohibit Certain Public Gatherings." This new law allowed the Attorney General to prohibit any public gathering of more than three people which "in his opinion may contribute to the disruption of public order." By that description, Junction '71 was a no-go. Greg Marquis wrote in his article that this bill "was an attempt to protect a traditional society from the evils of the 1970s."

Premier Alex Campbell said that Junction '71 was cancelled before the new bill was passed. In Greg Marquis's article, Doug and Cuyler said they'd been told to cancel the concert after the bill was enacted. That's a sticky part of history, but this fact remains: Junction '71 couldn't go ahead as planned, and now Islanders had a new law to deal with.

But this law was bigger than a potential rock festival. The American magazine Time heard about it and wrote an article, calling PEI the "uptight little Island."

Doug: and the only reason it was in Time magazine was because this was a holy cats infringement on civil liberties.

Public backlash against this legislation was immediate. Islanders might not have wanted a rock festival, but they sure didn't want this new law. Unions were worried it would limit striking workers. Student activists and anti-war protestors thought it would silence them. The National Farmers Union, or the NFU, called for the law to be repealed. All this from a planned rock concert.

Doug: And I thought it was just amazing to think that you know, how could you get something more distant from each other? the distance between a rock festival and PEI agriculture - and yet both the NFU and The Rock Festival. The NFU were very concerned that they were going to be affected by it. That's why they protested. They were on their tractors all over Charlottetown and do and doing stuff like that.

Within two weeks of protest, the PEI government promised it would repeal the law in the fall sitting of the legislature. But the festival couldn't go on. It became a one-day folk concert. Here's what it might have felt like, being there:

The sound of a door opening/floodlight turning on. Small crowd begins cheering. Music introduces.

It was one or two degrees because spring hadn't hit yet in early April. In a stadium originally hoped to fit 5,000, a few hundred people stood.

Doug: the people who were there were the diehards, who said, hey, I'm not going to stay away. I'm not going to be influenced unduly by the RCMP or by my parents or by anything else.

Their leading act was Bruce Cockburn, a well-known Canadian folk singer.

Doug: Someone joked that we had more security people there that day than audience.

Greg Marquis wrote, "the audience shivered in the cold of the Kennedy Coliseum, watched by undercover police."

Doug: It, it felt like a funeral.

All sounds fade away.

Doug: But within months, that was all forgotten and people realize that there was nothing really to be feared about in the first place. And we went on with our life and I've had a wonderful life ever since. But I have that - Junction '71 - I'm known to be associated with it as the one who really caused a bill to be passed that everyone regrets.

Today, I look at that story and I'm astonished. Because now, Cannabis is legal. Cavendish Beach Music Festival brings 40 or 50 thousand people every year, and it's been going on since 2009. But someone had to be the first, and it looks like Doug MacArthur and Cuyler Cotton got the worst of it. Now, Doug said he continued in the entertainment business and had a lot of success. But the Island just wasn't ready for a large rock festival in 1971. And it sounds like the RCMP made sure the Island just wasn't ready.

Theme music introduces.

And that's the first of our 1970s stories. We have three more coming up, and we'll cover them in part two of this episode. Here's a sneak peek: We'll be talking about the PEI Museum's creation in 1970, as well as the Kitten Club that used to operate in the Brudenell Resort. The Kitten Club was in the same ballpark as a Playboy Bunny club. Finally, we'll look at the time when PEI was at the forefront of sustainability with the Ark it built. Yes, ark like Noah's Ark from the bible.

But that's coming up soon. In the meantime, thank you to Innovation PEI and Skills PEI for your support, along with our sponsors: Upstreet Brewing, Confederation Centre of the Arts, Beyond the Brim Consulting and Trailside Music Hall. Thanks to Phoebe Mason and Matthew McRae for your voice acting in this episode. As well, our fantastic theme music? That's produced by Adam Gallant. And finally, thank you for listening and we will talk to you very soon.