

PEI's 1970s: the decade that changed everything - part 2



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

In part two of PEI's wild and wacky 1970s, we learn about The Kitten Club. It opened in 1970, and it was something like a Playboy Bunny Club that operated in Brudenell. Yes, you read right. We also discuss the Ark – an experimental bio-shelter built at Spry Point and designed to be a world-leader in renewable energy. Finally, we celebrate the founding of the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation.

Features guest interviews Dr. Ed MacDonald, Catherine Hennessey and Dr. Alan MacEachern.

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.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = narration

Hello again and welcome to part two of the decade that changed everything. We’re once again talking about PEI’s wild and wacky 1970s. It was a decade of massive changes, beginning with the Comprehensive Development Plan. Basically, this plan changed all aspects of Island life from economy to education to tourism and more. Part one focused on the Development Plan and its effect on PEI. We also looked at Junction ’71 – the rock festival that never happened. So, if you haven’t listened to part one, I’d say go listen to that and come back. This episode will make sense on its own, but the context from the first part is helpful.

Now, the 1970s. We’ll start off close to home with the creation of the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation. I talked to Ed MacDonald about this, who you’ll remember from part one.

Ed: Heritage movement really owes its grassroots organized phase to the development plan because you're right. Things were changing so rapidly, both because of the Development Plan and because of modernization, which was happening on its own, that by the early part of the 70s, people became concerned about the preservation of their past before it, you know, washed away. And so, Heritage Foundation I think founded in 1970. Catherine Hennessy and others, they had a stated goal. They had watched artifacts from the province being trucked off Island and antique folk dealers coming from off Island buying up spinning wheels and buying up artifacts that Islanders didn't appreciate the value of. But more than just physical artifacts leaving the province forever, they saw our heritage leaving the province forever as we rushed towards the future.

Again, here’s that relationship between the old and new. Change was happening so quickly on PEI that some Islanders could hardly keep up.

Ed: And part of the backlash to modernization at such a rapid pace was an interest in heritage. So, you could be interested in both. You could be interested in the past and also interested in progress. And many were, but there were a lot of people concerned that this rush to progress was costing us something important, a vital part of our identity.

Now, there had been historical societies on the Island for a while, but no formalized provincial organization existed. Catherine Hennessey, who Ed just mentioned, is one person who helped create the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation.

Catherine: I was executive director, the first executive director for the Heritage Foundation.

In the beginning, Catherine said the PEI Museum had a small office on Kent Street. Then, the 1973 Centennial Celebrations arrived. PEI got a lot of federal funding to celebrate the Island's 100th anniversary of joining Confederation. Part of that went to the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation.

Catherine: In '73 there was big money going around to do something and that's where we got the money for the sites: Green Park, Basin Head and Orwell Corner and headquarters for the Heritage Foundation. So, it really was it was significant money, the dollars. Anyway, we ended up buying Beaconsfield, which was for sale. And we that's how we got to move into Beaconsfield.

Today, The Foundation operates seven sites from tip to tip across the Island. This 70s story wasn't as much of a wacky or wild event, but it's still interesting because you don't think of heritage when you think of modernization. But the two were connected in PEI. As we grew and developed, the capacity to protect natural and human heritage also became more important. In other words, when life changed drastically for Islanders, we wanted to remember what had come before us.

Now, I want to mention, that's a limited heritage. For the longest time, those in charge didn't protect heritage or the lives of those who had come before. We saw this with the colonization of the Island and terrible treatment of Mi'kmaq people who were here long before settlers came. We saw it with the Acadian deportation too, or the destruction of The Bog, a majority-Black community right next door to Beaconsfield Historic House.

Today, the Foundation works towards protecting and sharing this Island's full history. That said, we acknowledge that heritage institutions have often been focused on telling the story of the most privileged people in society, to the exclusion of many others.

While the heritage movement on PEI might not have been particularly wild, there were plenty of other wacky events. We'll be sharing two more of them today. First up is The Kitten Club. Our setting is at the Brudenell Resort in Eastern PEI, where the PEI government was trying to boost tourism.

Ed: So, they first had a Provincial Park, they added a golf course and then the government construct it with money from the development plan. They constructed a resort complex, and the idea was to establish a major tourism attraction, which would draw people into the area and then other people would be able to operate businesses in the tourism sector, so it would be kind of a catalyst for the development of tourism.

Ed: In 1971, when they opened the resort, they contracted out the bar and dining room and club part to kitten Clubs International, which was a feline equivalent of the Playboy Club

Yes, you heard right. PEI had something like Playboy Club in 1971.

Ed: And so instead of dressing up like a bunny, in silk and satin, abbreviated outfits with lots of cleavage and fishnet stockings and your bunny tails, the kitten clubs international waitresses dressed up like kittens, with little kitten ears and whiskers, and but with the same fishnet stockings and cleavage and satin. And out in the country, it began all kinds of jokes. I mean, just in a predictable way. Who would go to the kitten club? Well, Tomcats go to the kitten club, and people are hanging around the kitten club.

We have a first-hand account of someone who visited the kitten club. Winnifred Wake donated a glass ashtray to The Foundation years ago, and this is what she said:

Voice Actor: “During the summers from 1969 to 1972, I worked at the P.E.I. Travel Bureau in Charlottetown. Each spring all the summer staff was taken on three-day tours of all the attractions of P.E.I., one day for each county. One spring, our Kings County tour included a stop at Brudenell Resort, where the Kitten Club was just getting geared up for its first season.

“The powers that be seemed very anxious that the summer travel bureau girls get the ‘right’ impression about the operation, as we would be in the position to directly talk it up to visitors.

First, we were given a tour of the facilities— pro shop, grounds, restaurant, bar, lounge, etc. The kittens, who were to work as waitresses and bartenders, were not in evidence. Then we were taken into one of the motel units, which was somewhat crowded for a group our size.

Soon, what we were there to see, a kitten in costume, emerged from the bathroom. She was a local woman, and this was evidently her first public appearance. She seemed rather embarrassed, becoming more so as time went on. She was probably in her late 20s, and dressed in a blue, satiny strapless ‘bathing suit’ (with high-heeled shoes and fishnet stockings, I believe.)

There was some sort of neck choker, wrist bracelets, and headgear which depicted whiskers, ears, etc.

I think there was some sort of tail attached as well. A number of male officials from the Department of Tourism were there to make brief speeches to introduce us to the kitten, each one emphasizing the ‘clean wholesome family entertainment’ that the resort and the kittens were offering. Between their speeches, they were busily eyeing the kitten and making lewd comments in not-so-low voices. We were each given a souvenir ashtray to take home.”

Ed: But, of course, the idea was to attract businesspeople. The idea was to project an image of modernity to diversify the island's image a little bit as a tourist attraction. And in the beginning, there was lots of press. And the premier was writing to the Minister of Tourism, you know, saying, 'Wow, did you pay for the publicity?' And the implication was that this was all fantastic. But the press quickly turned negative. Because the image of Prince Edward Island was an of Green Gables. It was a family destination. It was a whole some rural retreat from modernity, not a sex club, even though I mean the kitten club operated the same as any other bar. So, it wasn't as if it was as risky as it looked. But it was demeaning. And it was opposite to the image that islanders had with themselves. So, a lot of the tourists didn't like it. And a lot of islanders didn't like it. And after one year, the contract was not renewed.

Like Junction '71, PEI wasn't ready for this type of entertainment. Arguably, it still isn't. Although we now have large music festivals, we've yet to successfully open a similar type of bar or club. But like Junction '71, we again see tradition and growth or modernity clashing. In this sense, the Kitten Club ties into a wider story of PEI in the 1970s.

Ed: So, the kitten club is not only the wrong issue, it becomes emblematic of too much change too quickly in the wrong direction.

Let's talk about change in the right direction now. Or, the right direction from my personal opinion. The mid-1970s brought a new experiment in sustainable living to PEI: the Ark.

A 1978 documentary by the National Film Board of Canada about this experiment said:

Female Narrator: Out at Spry Point, there is an experimental bio-shelter called 'the Ark.' It's been designed to provide shelter, heat, food and electricity for a family in a northern climate, using natural systems only.

It sounds pretty futuristic for the 1970s in rural PEI, right?

I talked to Alan MacEachern about the Ark, who's a professor of history at Western University. He grew up in PEI, and he wrote a book about this era called, "The Institute of Man and Resources, An Environmental Fable."

Alan: I don't think sustainability was really a word on anybody's radar until the 1980s. So, what kind of words were they using in the 70s? They're using words like simplicity, or self-sufficiency, getting away from, from fossil fuels for sure in the 70s, as well. And a lot of that had to do with I think it was kind of the spirit of the times that that people were trying to get closer to nature and having a simpler, more self-sufficient life. And then the energy crisis hits in the fall of 1973. And makes it really kind of drives home, just how important that is.

The energy crisis of 1973 was caused by political decisions. Again, I'm simplifying, but Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries – or OPEC – imposed an oil ban against the United States. This is because America was supplying the Israeli military to fight against Egypt and Syria. So, all allying countries with Israel were temporarily banned from Middle East oil. OPEC also raised the price of oil by over 130 per cent. This created the first oil crisis because OPEC oil production accounted for 55% of the world's supply.

Here in PEI the energy crisis hit hard. The Island already had the highest electricity prices in the country. And we were dependent on outsiders for all our oil, gasoline and electricity.

Alan: I think the concern about self-sufficiency was really something that was going on across Canada and across North America at this time, partly because of the energy crisis. That kind of realization of how tied we were to Mideast oil. But I felt I also think Canadians were worried about how tied we were to the United States in terms of energy, energy development as well. So, I think that there was a lot of interest at a national level in self-sufficiency. And I think that PEI as a little island has always felt that kind of desire to be self-sufficient.

So, instead of PEI begging the federal government to freeze oil and electricity prices for the Island, Premier Alex Campbell goes down a different path. Remember: this is the time of the Development Plan when new ideas are already being tried out all over the Island. This is how the idea of the Ark begins.

Alan: Well, the Ark was an idea of an American group, actually an American kind of think-tank called the New Alchemy Institute. And the New Alchemy Institute had already developed a bio-shelter on Cape Cod, and they were interested in doing one in Canada. The idea of the Ark was that it would be partly kind of a laboratory for self-sufficiency and renewable energy. So, it would be all greenhouses and solar panels and things like that. But it was also an important part is that it was a single functioning home. I think that that's where the kind of idea of calling it the Ark comes from, like to imagine kind of a, maybe not quite post-apocalyptic, but at least that in the future, we would be having these individual households that would look like this, so that they would be self-sustaining.

The idea was that a family of four would live in this bio-shelter, using alternative energy. The funding was approved in 1974, and a location near Spry Point was chosen.

Alan: They got the funding in I think '74, they started building in '75, and they finished up in September '76.

When the Ark was officially opened, it attracted people from all over. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau attended the ceremony. In the speech he gave, he said,

Male Narrator: "Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Those who are concerned about the future of mankind are haunted by three questions: will there be enough food, will we have enough energy, and can we produce both without making the earth a place which is not good to live upon?... The Ark is answering 'Yes!' to those three questions."

Alan: There was a lot of interest in it as an experiment, I guess. But yeah, I think people were really sold on kind of the idea of it and what kind of, of what it said about us trying to live simply in the future. And I mean, there's lots of ironies inherent in this. I mean, this is living simply with a starting point of a \$400,000 grant from the federal government. Not a lot of houses were costing \$400,000.

Once the Ark was built, it was designed to supply a family with all they'd need. It would use wind and sun for power sources, there was a greenhouse section for food, an aquaculture section, and living space for an entire family. One of the architects, David Bergmerk, lived there with his family in the beginning.

Here's the only catch: the Ark didn't really work.

Alan: But even the architects themselves, kind of, they thought it was a noble failure. I think that's fair to say. And there were a lot of components that didn't work or didn't work well. And, you know, that's more or less fine. Like I mean, this was to be a laboratory. This was to be a lot of experiments in renewable energy, and frankly, a lot of the kinds of things that we had to fail at repeatedly in the 1970s, and 80s, are what finally kind of broke through. And really only in the last 10 or 20 years really, are we really getting going with those thinking of something like windmills like the windmill that was supposed to generate electricity, they had horrendous problems with that. And it never, it never generated enough electricity for the house itself, it was supposed to actually help the surrounding grid if it really got going. And it never did.

Alan: I think it's hard to say. I think one of the things that they discovered was that, because the whole point was that all this was going to be integrated. So, so all the kind of aquaculture and our solar energy, and that all the kind of components of the ark, were going to be working together. So, one of the problems that they discovered was that when one thing failed, it affected everything else. So, it was hard to kind of have it as an experiment when nothing was siloed, nothing was on its own. That was one of the problems that they faced.

Alan: So, there's lots of ways to be idealistic or cynical about this period. And I kind of go back and forth on it. And then I think you have to actually possess a little bit of both. But I think one of the simply the most effective thing was simply that it made people think about what the future might be, in a way that wasn't, it was a living example of what the future might be, and how it didn't have to be the way we'd been living to that point.

Although the Ark didn't succeed, it was another idea PEI hadn't seen before. I think that's the theme of PEI in the 1970s, if I was to sum it up in a sentence. Something new the Island hadn't seen before happening all the time. And I think Alan's right; just because the Ark failed doesn't mean it was a waste. I'm sure many people will disagree with me. And that's okay – I understand. But we have to try new ideas in order to get somewhere.

Once the Ark was decommissioned as a science experiment, it found new life in other ways. For a while, it was a restaurant. Then, it was an inn – although it was heavily renovated for both.

As someone who never lived to see the Ark in its glory, I look at this moment and I'm confused. Where did all the momentum for sustainable living go? What happened?

Alan: If you looked at the energy crisis in the 1970s, and tell people that 50 years from now, we would have spent the last 50 years still driving automobiles and the automobiles would have gotten larger and larger, more and more trucks on the road. I think everyone would have been surprised by the direction that's happened since then.

Alan: I always say, but what happened in the 1970s was that for a time people, I think the energy crisis scared people enough that they thought, okay, we're definitely getting away from oil. So, what's going to happen? But we didn't get away from oil, while we did do was, we used less of it. So, we did things like we did some measurement, some measure of improving insulation, for example, in homes, that are building construction, more energy efficient, home construction. And in terms of cars, we made those more energy efficient, or at least a lot of Asian automobiles did, and then forced everyone else to. So, we were using less oil, and less gas.

Alan: So instead of switching, sort of switching away from fossil fuels, we just use slightly less of it. And that seemed to satisfy people. And then once we, because we stayed with gas when we stayed with oil, then slowly kind of went back to normal. Like, if you look at what's happening now, like compared to 50 years ago, we have more cars, we have more cars per person, the cars are bigger than they were 50 years ago, there's so many trucks on the road and everything like that, that all the gains that we made in energy savings from more efficient engines are kind of lost by the fact that we're driving more that we own more cars, and that we're owning bigger cars. So, I think we tried to make some changes in the 1970s. And we did make some changes in the 1970s. But then we've kind of slowly gone back that all those savings are kind of gone.

Theme music introduces

And here we are today, still facing a crisis having to do with oil. But instead of being worried about oil running out, or controlled by certain organizations, there's a fear that we have too much. That climate change will ruin what we know and love about this planet because we haven't stopped burning fossil fuels. Food for thought.

But anyways, I hope you enjoyed this episode, and you learned a thing or two. I have not in any way covered all important events on PEI in the 1970s. I just talked about the weirder ones. There's still so much more about this decade we didn't get a chance to discuss.

Now, if you did like this episode, feel free give us a rating or follow the podcast on whatever platform you listen from. You can find us on social media, at peimuseum.ca, where you can donate or buy a membership. As a not-for-profit, we really appreciate it. Speaking of appreciation, I want to thank Innovation PEI and Skills PEI for your support, along with our sponsors: Upstreet Brewery, Confederation Centre of the Arts, (sponsor names here).

Thank you to everyone who gave me their time to interview, and those who helped behind the scenes, including Phoebe Mason and Matthew McRae who were fantastic voice actors. Finally, shout out to Adam Gallant, who produced this amazing theme music.

Thanks for joining and I'll talk to you next time on the hidden island!