

Another bit of Ukrainian heritage survives

General store built in Smoky Lake will be moved to new home at heritage village

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Andrij (Andrew) Shymko built the United Merchants of Alberta general store in Smoky Lake out of boards, rustic lath and yellow clay.

He did such a good job that this week the 35-by-60 foot piece of Canadian history will make a long, slow trip by truck from the town to the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village about 50 kilometres east of Edmonton.

On Tuesday, McConnell Building Movers will move the store out to Highway 28, and the next day the Millet-based company will transport the 81-year-old building the rest of the way to its new home.

For 48 years, the blocky building was the town's general store, supplying everything from razor blades and bolts of cloth to kitchen utensils and candy. If there were items farmers wanted but Shymko didn't have in stock, he would bring them in, said Radomir Bilash.

"He responded to the needs of his clients and he would bring goods to them," said Bilash, the village's senior historian. "He had a hardware corner with axe handles, nails and tools of various sorts. He even had a specific area of shoes."

In 1927, Shymko inherited control of the Smoky Lake store from his father-in-law. Three years later, he tore down the store and built a new one on the site.

At the time, east-central Alberta was home to the largest number of Ukrainians outside Ukraine and most business was done in Ukrainian. That resulted in the formation of the United Merchants of Alberta organization, which Shymko and other Ukrainian-born businessmen in the area joined.

"They were like a chain company," Bilash said.

By the 1940s, Shymko had children in university and sold his Smoky Lake store. It was later bought by the Mykytiuk family, and they ran the company until 1978. Bilash said Smoky Lake residents still refer to the building as the Mykytiuk store.

Over the past three decades the building has been home to various businesses, including an Internet cafe that flopped a few years back.

Smoky Lake had been looking to get rid of the building and the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village took it off their hands for \$1. The village is intent on restoring it as close to its original form as possible.

Though the building was constructed in 1930, the interior hasn't been significantly modified since then, said Jim Nakonechny, a restoration officer.

New floor joists and a centre wall have been added to make sure the building doesn't collapse en route to the village.

Once the building arrives, it will sit for two to three weeks waiting for a new foundation to be built. Nakonechny's focus will then shift to restoring it.

"This March we want to begin recreating the front facade of the building, and our goal for 2011 is to restore the exterior so the appearance looks appropriate," Nakonechny said.

The director of the village, Arnold Grandt, said eight historic buildings are being brought to the village to be restored this winter. "As time goes on there are fewer and fewer buildings we can bring in. Some may be in such disrepair, but this one (from Smoky Lake) is one of the largest and in the best physical condition."

The full restoration of the old Smoky Lake general store, along with the other seven buildings, likely won't be finished for a few years. Grandt said it will take time to do the necessary research before diving into the intricacies of restoring the buildings.

In the meantime, the old general store will house Ukrainian artifacts such as tables, dishes and clocks. When it's fully restored, Bilash thinks the store will bring back a lot of memories.

"It's very rare to find a general store in this day and age in such wonderful condition," he said. "It's a part of Canadian history."

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