

Community spirit rooted in strength

By Murray Lyons
of The StarPhoenix

Residents of one of Saskatoon's most forested neighborhoods spent a lot of time this past weekend talking about trees.

And little wonder. When the first residents of Montgomery Place took up houses built by the federal government for returning veterans in 1946, the land where this lush, treed neighborhood sits was a farm on the highway leading to Rosetown.

It was flat, bald prairie with only the government elevators dominating the skyline. In fact, the land was so flat that it was used as an emergency, auxiliary landing field during the Second World War.

How that has changed in 50 years. Photographic displays tacked up on the basement walls of Trinity United Church this weekend show the contrast between then and now.

Montgomery Place residents past and present celebrated their neighborhood and its unique history this weekend with a commemoration ceremony, fun in the park, a supper, family dance, and fireworks display.

The event ended Sunday with a church service.

Long-time residents Al and Robbie Harder were well-known in the neighborhood for their involvement in scouting and the huge outdoor rinks Al used to construct in the winter.

By the time the Harders moved into the area in 1958, Veterans Affairs was still selling the land and offering long-term, low-cost mortgages, but it was up to residents to decide how big a house they could afford.

The Harders bought their land and built their house for \$12,500. As a veteran, he was eligible for a low-cost mortgage up to \$8,000.

He and his wife were undaunted by the task of developing the landscaping on a lot 83 feet wide and 300 feet deep. Some of his fellow veterans, however, did not see the attraction of helping to open up a new neighborhood in Saskatoon's far west end.

"A lot of my friends were eligible, but their wives refused to come because there were no sidewalks," Harder recalls with a chuckle.

"You had to be a certain breed of cat," he said.

The federal government, through the



Residents of Montgomery Place revisited the past and celebrated the present during a weekend-long commemoration ceremony.

Veteran Lands Act, believed providing half-acre lots to returning veterans would help them augment their income through tending garden plots, fruit trees and raising chickens.

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One of those original residents in 1946 was Margaret Gent whose memoirs of the area's first years were made available to those attending the anniversary celebration.

Montgomery Place was named for Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, famous for his victory over Rommel at El Alamein. The streets in the subdivision reflect the names of towns where Canadian troops fought during the Second World War such as Caen or Dieppe, military leaders (Cresser) and warships (Halda).

When the subdivision's first 25 houses

were built in 1946, the area was in Cory Municipality. The first houses to be built cost approximately \$6,000 with payments spread over 25 years at three per cent interest.

Tax payments to Cory were about \$66 a year.

The veterans were also given grants based on years of service during the war that helped make the down payment. As well, the VLA gave residents a \$250 grant to purchase whatever was needed to furnish their homes.

"Our purchase was a gas stove and wooden table and four chairs. I still have the table and two of the chairs," Gent writes in her memoirs.

She and her late husband Arthur moved into the property in September of that year even though the area still hadn't had its sewer, water, or phone connections.

"It was rather a bleak and barren neighborhood at first and I don't think there were very many who were physically and emotionally equipped to tackle either half-acre or three-quarter-acre lots," she writes.

A stipulation in the contracts said the veterans could not sell their homes for 10 years.

The neighborhood was slow to fill up in the first 10 years until the baby boom hit full blast in the 1950s. Most of the original houses along 11th Street had their frontages subdivided during that time.

Leslee Newman grew up in the area in the 1950s and '60s after the area elementary school was built and remembers what a tight group it became.

"We travelled as a herd to Mount Royal (Collegiate)," she says of her teenage years.

When she grew up, Newman eventually bought a house in Montgomery Place, and when her parents died, bought the house she had grown up in.

She says her four children are enjoying the same feeling of neighborhood closeness her generation did.

The feeling of neighborhood safety for their children was one of the things neighbors talked about Saturday night at the dance as they watched their children play in the park, Newman said.

As for the trees, Margaret Gent explains how the VLA helped arrange for fir and maple trees from a Saskatchewan government nursery at a price of 100 for \$2.

"The fir trees were about five inches tall, but baby, look at them now," Gent said.

The subdivision was eventually absorbed by the city in the mid-1950s. The residents, through a strong ratepayers association, managed to negotiate a standstill agreement that set the Montgomery Place mill rate 20 per cent lower than the rest of the city.

By the time the tax limitation agreement expired in 1980, most of the half-acre lots had been subdivided, lowering the tax burden on individual residents.

Many of the artifacts collected for this weekend's display are being collected by Janet MacKenzie, a relative newcomer to the area who also had residents attending the celebration fill out a questionnaire.



The Montgomery Place neighborhood has taken on a new look from these early bleak and barren days.