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A banner day

Shayne Campbell is the founder and curator of the Argyle Prairie Museum, which houses the largest collection of Canadian flags on the planet

By: David Sanderson / Collectibles

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Melody McCurdy, 4, helps her uncle Shayne Campbell (rear) open one of the Canadian flags housed at the Argyle Prairie Museum.

WHETHER the punishment suited the crime or not, flag lovers everywhere owe a debt of gratitude to

grade school teacher Audrey Taplin.

Twenty-three years ago, Shayne Campbell was a student in Taplin's Grade 3 class at Brant-Argyle School in Argyle. One morning, Campbell did something -- he can't remember what, exactly -- to ruffle Taplin's feathers. His sentence? Spend an entire recess standing at attention at the foot of the school's flag pole.

"My friends were running and playing all around me, but I wasn't allowed to move," says Campbell, who, coincidentally, now teaches at Teulon Collegiate. "So I spent my time staring up at the Canadian flag. As it turned out, that detention started a lifelong fascination with flags in general."

When he's not busy teaching English and art, Campbell is the curator of the Argyle Prairie Museum -- a museum he founded in 1991 as a Grade Seven social studies project. In addition to antique farm equipment and railroad memorabilia, the privately run facility -- located alongside Highway 322, two kilometres south of Argyle -- houses arguably the largest collection of Canadian flags on Earth. And by "Canadian," we don't mean banners bearing only maple leaves or Union Jacks.

"It might sound pretty vague, but basically we're aiming for anything that's Canadian -- be it a regional flag from a town like Stonewall, or a business flag from a company like CIBC," Campbell says. "Most museums will have a couple of old-school, Canadian flags, but I've never seen such a diverse collection as what we've got going here."

Flag poll: At last count, Campbell had 241 different flags on site -- representing everything from the 10 provinces to the Hudson's Bay Company to the Blue Bombers. No flag is too big or too small. Or too peculiar: "My grandma gave me these sandwich flags, from her church group," Campbell says with a laugh, pulling out a slew of miniature, plastic flags marked "ham & cheese" and "egg salad."

"And during the Olympics, I spent a lot of time running back and forth to Safeway to buy Cokes, because each box came with one of those flags that attaches to your car window."

Campbell regularly fires off emails to officials of events like the Manitoba Games, asking for contributions. He's also not afraid to knock on doors of local businesses. "I tend to spend a lot of my time looking up, when I'm driving around town," says the North Kildonan resident. "And yeah, on occasion, I've spotted an interesting flag that I wasn't aware of, and gone inside to ask if they have an extra one, kicking around back.

"I try hard not to be pushy -- people definitely have a right to say no -- but I do try and convince people that the museum would be a good fit for their flag."

Obviously, the Government of Canada agrees. Last March, Campbell was contacted by James Bezan, the Member of Parliament for Selkirk-Interlake. Bezan was familiar with Campbell's collection, and he wanted to make a donation.

Campbell learned that the flag that flies above Ottawa's Peace Tower is changed every day, Monday to Friday. He also found out that there's a waiting list Canadians can put themselves on, if they want to own one of those 2.3-by-4.6-metre flags. Unbeknownst to Campbell, Bezan placed the Argyle Prairie Museum on that list.

"I was completely floored and shocked," says Campbell, referring to the day when Bezan showed up at Teulon Collegiate, Canadian flag in tow. "It came in a mahogany box, with a letter of certification. It

was like getting a game-worn hockey jersey -- it was just fantastic." (Not to be outdone, Ralph Eichler, the area's MLA, arrived three days later to deliver a flag that had been flying above the Manitoba Legislature.)

Campbell turns to the Internet from time to time, to see what's up for bids at sites like eBay and Kijiji. "But it's kind of sad when I come across one that would be great for the collection, but somebody wants a ton of money for it," Campbell says. "We have a very tight budget, so unless it's something that's absolutely historically significant, we usually have to let it go."

Campbell is currently on the lookout for flags from Canada's 1967 centennial celebration, ones related to a Briar or Scott Tournament of Hearts, and banners from the 1967 and 1999 Pan Am Games. "Maybe we can even twist the arm of the *Free Press* -- they probably have something stored away that we can use." (We'll be sure to pass along the message.)

The Argyle Prairie Museum is open by appointment only. To book a visit -- or to make a donation to the museum's flag exhibit -- contact Campbell at argylemuseum@gmail.com.

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