

Episode 2 Transcript from Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule

Peter Brown (host): Previously, on *Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule*.

A whisper...

Devin McLaughlin: It was a rumour about 10 years ago — a time capsule here at the Convention Centre. We had no idea where it was, or even if it existed.

Brown: A mission.

McLaughlin: I kept being, putt putt, no, no, it's just a rumour, there's nothing there. Heard about it, but no. But I didn't give up, and it became, well, if there's something there, we have to find it.

Brown: An eyewitness.

McLaughlin: He was employed at the time, in the mid-'90s, when the statue was moved. He did witness it, and did remember there were items in the base of the bust.

Brown: A vindication.

McLaughlin: We take it off and there's a hole, and you can see documents and you can see paperwork inside. It's like, thankfully, yes, it does exist.

Brown: And a discovery.

McLaughlin: Entry forms from the initial contest that really created the statue in the first place. Back in 1975, the initial contest to determine who was Calgary's Citizen of the Century was asked of local Calgarians.

Brown: And now 50 years later, so many questions.

McLaughlin: What did people think about 50 years ago that would be of interest to people of today? Would there be something very interesting that we could go on display? We can talk about who picked the judging panel? Who were they? What was the process?

Brown: This contest — and the thousands of nominations found in the time capsule — offers fascinating glimpses of life in 1975. And shows us who and what Calgarians valued the most. By the end of this podcast, you may form your own opinion about who should have been named Citizen of the Century.

This is Episode 2: Colonel James F. Macleod should have been named Citizen of the Century, and not Brisebois — the winter jerk.

Reading the thousands of nominations for Citizen of the Century was absolutely fascinating, because they are all over the place. Some of the nominations are straightforward — just a name and a few important facts about the person and the contributions they made.

Sometimes the entries are identical. It's obvious that entire school classes all wrote the same entries, word for word, copying what the teacher had written on the board. Some groups printed off hundreds of the same blank form, and then hundreds of people just filled in their own name on the blank line. I'm looking at you, fans of Father Lacombe. But every once in a while, there's a comment that feels personal, and you wonder what is going on with that person.

Like this one from Edmond Mah, who wrote:

Colonel James Macleod of the NWMP founded the proper and official name for our city nearly 100 years ago. The name was thought to have meant clear running waters.

Pretty straightforward.

The name out-popularized the name Brisebois (French), which didn't sound very good for a name of a settlement at the time.

Brown: That is very specific. Go on.

The city of Fort Macleod is named after him, and the pathway to the Macleod Trail is also named after him.

Brown: Okay, maybe the French thing wasn't a big deal. Let's see what...

Most people agree that Calgary sounds an awful lot better than Brisebois.

Brown: He made his point. He moved on. But he couldn't help himself — he had to circle back to Brisebois. What did Brisebois do that pissed off Edmond Mah a hundred years later? Brisebois is mentioned in another nomination, and so is this naming business. This letter comes from a schoolchild named Tracey Leblar:

Student: A long time ago. Brosi-isb-broy...

Brown: Young Tracey spells Brisebois, B-R-I-S-I-S-B-R-O-Y, Brisisbroy, but we'll just say Brisebois from now on.

Student: ...and Macleod had an argument. Brisebois said it should be named after him, and Macleod said it should be named after his home in Scotland. Brisebois didn't like this, but he suffered.

Brown: And Tracey continues...

Student: Brisebois was also selfish. Macleod fixed that in a jiff.

Aritha van Herk: It is surprising, especially given how people now virtually don't know him. I don't blame them, because he was pretty awful.

Brown: That's Aretha van Herk.

Van Herk: I'm a writer. I'm a faux historian — not real — and I'm a professor at the University of Calgary. If there is someone, even in the distant past, that Calgarians think has dissed the city or offended the city, there's a long half-life of fury about that.

Brown: Oh, I'm hooked. Half-life of fury is fantastic. Who was Ephrem Brisebois? What was his relationship with Macleod? And most importantly, why were people still mad at him a century after he was in Calgary?

Van Herk: Brisebois was one of the original North-West Mounted Police who trained the recruits in Ontario and then who moved with them. And he seems to have risen through the ranks relatively well, because he is described as competent.

Brown: By moved with them, Aritha means they moved west to set up forts in what would later become Alberta.

van Herk: They didn't have a hot clue, and as they proceeded across the prairie, they didn't have water or feed for those fine Ontario horses, and so, the horses were dying, and the Mounties were dying.

Brown: Brisebois led F Troop to establish a fort on the Bow River.

Van Herk: He seems to have been completely at sea about geography, because they were wandering around somewhere close to Red Deer.

Brown: Once they had figured out they were more than 100 miles too far north, and, I assume, stopped in Red Deer for doughnuts, they made their way to the Bow River at its confluence with the Elbow, well behind schedule.

Van Herk: They had to build a barracks, they had to build a fort, they had to build a storehouse, all of those demands — but it was just a brutal winter.

Brown: This was the winter of 1875.

Van Herk: It was so cold, even the Bow River froze, and because it's a really swift-flowing river, that's unusual. But they were living in trenches. Can you imagine that? The tradition of the Mounties was that everyone was supposed to pitch in, even the commanding officers worked really hard alongside the men.

Brown: Brisebois, however, did not pitch in. We've all had that boss.

Van Herk: They were kind of hunkered under spruce and pine logs, and they were supposed to drive these poles into the ground, in this frozen earth, make the fort with logs that were chinked with clay, and it just got colder and more and more uncomfortable, and everybody got more and more pissed off.

And this kept on, of course, because winters are unrelenting in southern Alberta. So, they were supposed to keep warm with buffalo robes, but they didn't have enough and they hadn't been paid, so they couldn't go and buy more from the Métis traders.

Now, Brisebois had a few good robes. And because he was in charge, he appropriated some robes from the men. So they were not happy about that, they were shivering, they were cold. They were worried about keeping their horses warm, too. You have to remember that without horses, they were immobile. So they were worried about that.

Now, they built some fireplaces, but as you can imagine, stone fireplaces were about as useless as can be, they smoked more than they heated. And they had brought up one iron stove for each structure. So they had one, Brisebois had one, and Brisebois commandeered the stove for his rooms.

Brown: So there's a long list of reasons the men of F Troop were justifiably angry.

Van Herk: The very worst part of it...

Brown: Oh, there's more!

Van Herk: ...is what I am convinced was the straw that broke everybody's fury. There were, of course, several Métis families camped nearby, because they would often work with the North-West Mounted Police, they would work with the traders, and he persuaded a beautiful Métis girl to move in with him. So he had the buffalo robes, he had the stoves, he had the women, and it was colder than hell.

Brown: So the men of F Troop became, forgive me, the men of F-This Troop. Get this, the Calgary region may have been home to Canada's first strike.

Van Herk: The notion of a strike, I think, wasn't then in common parlance. But they did say, "We aren't doing any more until you solve this." And that was pretty much as close to a strike as you can be.

I'm sure that whoever was the cook was still cooking, they didn't starve. And I'm sure they tried their best to stay warm, because otherwise you would not survive. But they simply wouldn't do what he told them to do.

And so, Macleod had to go in and rather settle this dispute.

Brown: And there's James Farquharson Macleod, the hero of our letters.

Van Herk: He very quickly dispatched Brisebois down east to head office somewhere, and he put in another leader.

Brown: In young Tracey's words:

Student: Macleod fixed that in a jiff.

Brown: But what about the accusation in the nominating letters? The anger over Brisebois naming the fort after himself?

Van Herk: The fort was supposed to be called Bow River Fort. Brisebois decided it should be called Fort Brisebois, and we know that because there are a couple of letters where he has written at the top "Fort Brisebois." So we have archival evidence that he did.

But of course, the men were less than eager to name the fort after this hated commander, and it was renamed by Macleod after one of his connections to his Scottish ancestral home of Calgary.

I don't even think it's a place, I just think it's a name Macleod liked, perhaps when he was sober, perhaps when he was drunk. They drank a lot. All of them.

Brown: And back in 1975, 100 years later, and in fact, even now...

Van Herk: Macleod is one of the heroes of the North-West Mounted Police, and he's certainly one of the men that is remembered fondly in Calgary and in Lethbridge in southern Alberta. He seems to have had a capacity for, through humour and an enormous intake of alcohol, to make everyone around him happy.

He could, I guess, get annoyed, and he had occasional temper tantrums. But he was, on the whole, one of those men who was with the men, rather than in front of them.

Brown: One nominator wrote that:

After many miles of traveling across the country, most men would have been very harsh, but Colonel Macleod kept his cool. Colonel Macleod was responsible for the way we are here today.

After Macleod and Brisebois crossed paths in what would be Fort Calgary, their lives really went in opposite directions.

Macleod served as commissioner of the NWMP, he suppressed whiskey traffic, he won the trust of the Blackfoot Chiefs and negotiated Treaty 7 and was later a judge on the Supreme Court of the North-West Territories.

Whereas Brisebois...

Van Herk: His life was short and brutal. He died in his 30s. He went back to Quebec after having been in the North-West Mounted Police. He worked for Conservative politicians. Now, he never ran for office, but he then went on to be a land commissioner in Manitoba and he died in Winnipeg, very young.

So, it's a strange career, especially strange because the North-West Mounted Police certainly had Franco-Canadian officers, but not that many. And it probably was important that they did have some, because of the connection with the Métis, many of whom were Franco-Canadian.

So, it's a, it's a strange, it's almost like an appearance of some kind of hydra in Calgary and then he mucks it up completely and he's gone.

Brown: I can now understand a bit better why the stories about Brisebois and his ego might have been passed down in Calgary families for a century, but is it possible it wasn't that simple? Is there a more sympathetic way of viewing Brisebois and what he did?

Van Herk: He was French, and he didn't have many people to converse with. Or perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps, he had, I don't know, why did he turn into such a winter jerk?

Brown: Colonel Macleod is now remembered in Calgary not only with a school bearing his name, but also one of the city's main arteries. You say his name all the time, as in, "*Why did I take Macleod Trail at 4:30?*" Macleod's fingerprints are all over the city he named, whereas the name Brisebois shows up in only one modest place.

Van Herk: And that is a very short suburban road, and it's called Brisebois Drive, and even the people who live on it have no clue who Brisebois was, what he did, whether he was important, or whether it's just some name that somebody picked out of a hat.

Brown: There is a bigger lesson in the history of Brisebois and Macleod that show us what kinds of history we choose to remember.

Van Herk: We might remember names, but we also tend to apply ourselves to the heroic stories. We want to know the stories of triumph and overcoming difficulty, we want to hear about that. We don't want to hear about a miserable, cold winter where everybody was ready to have a slugfest with the next man. We don't want to hear about the fact that maybe the North-West Mounted Police trek west was not so heroic, and believe me, it wasn't.

Brown: So, several things have become clear. The trek west was brutal on the men, and especially the poor horses. Edmond Mah was right, Brisebois was, in Aritha's words, a winter jerk, and Colonel J.F. Macleod, leader of men, builder of bridges, namer of city, should have been Calgary's Citizen of the Century.

This has been Episode 2 of *Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule*.

Thanks to Aritha van Herk, and to our letter readers in Miss Hayward's class at Hugh A. Bennett School. We'll be hearing a lot more from them in Episodes 4 and 5. Special thanks to the Calgary Telus Convention Centre, the secret stewards of the time capsule.

You can see all the nomination letters we talk about, as well as other documents and children's art, just go to the link in our episode description.

Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule is produced by me, Peter Brown, for Calgary Arts Development and the City of Calgary.