Episode 5 Transcript from Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule

Peter Brown (host): Hi, I'm Peter Brown and this is Episode 5 of *Greetings from 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule*. In our previous episode, we talked about the most popular nominee in Calgary's search for the Citizen of the Century, at least the most popular in the entries we found in the time capsule, Tom Baines.

Tom Baines: *These are the claws of a grizzly bear.*

Brown: Tom Baines visited hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren. Some set that number at a million.

Baines: *This is a rhino bone. Coyotes, some interesting things about coyotes. I haven't got a live one, but I've got the foot of one and a tail.*

Brown: He had skeletons and bear claws and sharks' teeth and ostrich eggs.

Baines: *Ostrich eggs, this is the biggest seller in the world.*

Brown: He told fantastic stories of nature and other cultures. He let the children handle the precious artifacts.

Baines: *This is how to throw a boomerang if anybody wanted to try it when you get away from school.*

Brown: The school children who nominated Tom Baines clearly adored him.

Student: Once he brought a snake, he let us feel it and he even put the snake around us.

Brown: They sent in some fantastic artwork, which you can see by going to the link in our episode description.

There's still more to say about Tom Baines, and we'll say it in this episode, If Tom Baines Isn't the Citizen of the Century, I Don't Even Know What We're Doing Here.

We're going to hear about a visit from Tom Baines 50 years ago that was a pivot point in one man's life. And I will solve the mystery that haunted me for months.

First, let's see what we can do about another mystery: the contest itself. Why was Colonel James Walker named Citizen of the Century? On what basis did the selection committee make that decision? I may have found a clue in the time capsule. I ran it past Devin McLaughlin, the man who found the capsule and got this whole thing rolling.

Devin, I wanted to talk to you about this very interesting document that was just sitting in the midst of all the entries in the time capsule. This is a piece of foolscap paper, at the top is the word "maybes." And then there's a number of names with a number of votes on the right-hand

column with William Aberhart, 48; Doctor Isabella Stevens, 20; Mrs. Ruth Selby Walker, 27, that's the daughter-in-law of Colonel Walker who won; Guy Weadick, although they said 1 vote; Colonel Macleod, 16; and there's another group of names with like 21 votes and two and two and four. It's hard to know what this is, but what do you think this could be?

Devin McLaughlin: It's possible that this is the shortlist for at least maybe one of the judges to determine who could potentially win.

Now, it's interesting that, yes, there's 48 votes for Aberhart, which would be a fantastic choice, but the one where I know there's like a thousand votes is Tom Baines. Like, why is he not even listed here? Is it something that the judges just determined that there's no way we're going to let him win, and determine they just discounted him right from the start? And there's even other names I, I don't know why they're not even on this list. So it may be something where one of the judges determined that these were their top choices, and these are the number of votes that confirmed their top choices.

Brown: So you're saying if Tom Baines is not the winner, it was because of unfair dealing and someone cruelly, cruelly who hated children, left him off the list?

McLaughlin: Sounds perfect to me.

Brown: What's undeniable is that to hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren in Calgary, Tom Baines was a rock star.

Blair White: It was Christmas electric when people heard the buzz, and it would always start as a rumour mill. I don't know if it came out of the teacher's lounge or what, and then everybody, as soon as you got that letter of permission to go home to your parents, then you knew it was coming fast. My name is Blair White, and I grew up in Calgary. I think it was probably Grade 4, Mr. Baines would always come once a year, and it was an anticipated carnival day. Because you could be selected as a volunteer, which is how I came into possession of an item.

Brown: Let me stop there. Remember Blair White, we're going to hear more from him. Also, remember those two little words:

White: One item.

Brown: Those may be the most satisfying two words I heard in the course of this podcast, because I had been chasing that item for months. In their nominations, dozens of children mentioned good luck charms.

Student: Almost every year, he's given me a good luck charm and two wishes on his kangaroo skin.

Student: He gives us a small keepsake like a whale eye, which he told us to put under our pillow, and in the morning, we might get our wish.

Student: And he brought us once a dragon eye. And he came again and gave us a snake eye.

Student: He gave us this little white thing. You can make three wishes.

Brown: I asked people who knew Tom Baines and his school visits well, people who knew him from the Calgary Zoo, whether they knew anything about these good luck charms and what they were.

Peter Karsten, you happen to know what that good luck charm was or what those were?

Peter Karsten: No. I'm not sure what you're referring to. You mean some little object or something?

Brown: Yeah.

Karsten: Oh. Okay, yeah. Little, oh, little, little things. Oh, well, one thing that was typical for Tom, so he did go to these conferences and visit the many zoos and wherever he went, he picked up all kinds of paraphernalia, pins and whatnot. And I know another thing he had was automobile badges that you could stick on the front of your vehicle. And so he'd always have something in his pocket that he gave away. That was a very typical Tom.

Brown: The word they use is dragon's eyes. Do you know what those would be?

Karsten: No, I don't know. Yeah. Are they candies of some sort?

Brown: No joy there. Trish Exton-Parder, do you know what the good luck charm would have been?

Trish Exton-Parder: You know, I'm not sure that I would recall anything as a good luck charm other than something that dates back to a symbol at the Isle of Man that often times he would carry in his pocket, and it was a pin that had a Manx cat on it, and the symbol of the flag of the Isle of Man. I'm not really sure why he had them, other than the fact that he thought that Manx cats have no tails are cool, and he was from England. Maybe he had a connection to the Isle of Man? I'm not sure, but I remember those pins.

Brown: So, some of the good luck charms were described as a snake eye or a dragon eye. This is not, this is not that.

Exton-Parder: This is not that.

Brown: This good luck charm, this snake eye or dragon eye, fired the imagination of many, many children. But nobody I spoke with had any idea what it was. In fact, I got blank stares. Here's what that sounded like.

I must have had my own good luck charm, because a few months into this search, when I was going nowhere, I got this email from Laura Glick at the Calgary Zoo.

Laura Glick: Hi Peter, I actually have a staff member who has shared stories about his father, Blair White, who vividly remembers Tom Baines coming to his school in 1971 or 1972. And after the presentation, Tom took time to connect with each of the students and actually gave them a snake eye. It's still in Blair's possession to this day. Talk soon. Laura.

Brown: Blair White. Remember him? And so off I went to Blair's ranch west of Bowden, a place Tom Baines would have been proud of.

White: We have horses, dogs, cats, wolves, fox, moose, deer, badgers, skunks, squirrels. Pretty well Noah's Ark.

Brown: Blair could tell me about the good luck charm and what's more, the good luck charm was the cherry on top of a life changing moment.

White: I wanted to follow two paths in my life, zookeeper, veterinarian kind of thing was one, and police officer was the second. Animals, animal care, animal conservation, all those things have been huge in my life ever since I was a kid.

Brown: Tom Baines, as he did hundreds of times, showed up at Blair's school with his bag of tricks and Agnes, the boa constrictor.

White: As soon as the snake came out, you heard everything from screaming to yelling to cheers to silence. And again, from my recollection in elementary school, the snake was huge. The snake was a lot bigger than any of the kids that were in there lengthwise, height wise. But on one particular occasion, I mean, most of the kids, when Mr. Baines would ask for a volunteer, most of the kids were going bananas, absolutely crazy, jumping up and down. And I got just lucky enough to get selected. And up to the front of the assembly, you go and you're in front of all your buddies and the school and the teachers, and I just remember the snake coming out and he was whispering in my ear. He just said, you know, "are you scared of snakes?" And I'm like, "no, sir." And he said, "do you mind? Do you want to reach out and touch it?'" Of course I did. And, you know, I just remember the eyes, I remember the tongue, I remember all those things. And he said, "would you mind if I put them on you?" And I'm like, "It'd be great," so he did. And of course, he never let it go or anything, and, but it felt to me like I was I was living The Jungle Book. Yeah, I was, and it was just euphoric. And it seemed like it lasted forever, it probably lasted under two or three minutes, I suspect, but he told stories while the snake was

with me, and we were standing up there, and then, it was over, and it seemed like it was over way too fast.

Brown: What do you remember of the sensation of the boa constrictor on you?

White: It felt nothing like I thought it was going to, no, it was, you know, I think some people think it's slimy and cold and whatever it was, I mean, it was quite actually peaceful and serene. He was, it was dry, it was, he was very well-behaved. Yeah. He didn't try to wrap itself around me or anything, it was just very relaxed. I just remember the, the sensation of it around the back of my neck and then draped around the front of my body, and what I remember looking out and seeing everybody, there's people, like I said, everything from screaming to silence, eyes wide open to cheering.

Brown: And now we get to the good luck charm. The snake eye.

White: He put the snake away, he went into his pocket, and he bent over and he whispered in my ear, “thank you, I appreciate your help,” something about being brave, take care of animals, and then he opened up my hand. And you know how a grandparent sneaks you a toonie, or, I guess, a toonie now, but back then, probably a nickel or a dime, so you’re closed fisted, and they take your hand, and they open your palm up, and then they slip something in, and then, I didn't even open it up. He said, “don't peek until you get back,” so I went back, and then everybody circled around me. I was like a rock star. And so I opened it up, opened up my hand, and there was this, this item.

Brown: So what was the good luck charm?

White: The way he explained it to me is he said that it was the eye of a snake. And like I said, I still have it. So I'll show you a picture of it.

Brown: He showed me two pictures. You can see those pictures by going to the link in our episode description.

White: That's the top side, yep, that's the bottom side

Brown: It's a circle with a circle within it. So, it's a pale blue...

White: Off-white, yeah.

Brown: But pretty much a button.

White: Yeah, pretty much a ceramic button.

Brown: Is that an anti-climax? Not for Blair. For him it was magical.

White: Like the snake eyes are dark or black. Didn't matter to me. He told me that that's what it was, that's what it was. I do remember telling the story to my dad. I made him guess at what it was, and I told him the story. And then I showed it to him, and, you know, the great thing is, is, they were great parents, and he played along with it. So I think that's part of the reason that I hung on to it.

Brown: Where did you keep it?

White: Believe it or not, in a safety deposit box. And yeah, and I can't say I consciously thought it was of such value that I needed to keep it in a locked safe, but that's where all my memorabilia is, like from my grandpa who was in the First World War, to, you know, anything that I don't want to part with. That's where I kept it.

Brown: Blair's son has the snake eye now, and he's carrying on the legacy of Tom Baines.

White: We've been zoo members for close to 30 years, and, even when I lived in Vancouver, we still kept their zoo memberships, because what I believe what the Calgary Zoo stands for is something that I need to stand up with, and my son feels the same way he always has. And so I basically passed along the myth of this wonderful button or snake eye.

Brown: And he works at the zoo now.

White: He does, we've come full circle. Yeah, he's now working at the zoo. Yeah, it's fantastic.

Brown: Looking at where you're living now, your list of animals at the beginning, looking at what your son is doing, this wasn't just a fun thing that happened in school, this sounds like this was a touch point in your life.

White: Well, it sure was. He just captured my imagination, and my interest, passion for animals, for sure. It revealed things in me that I never knew, never had any animals growing up. My mom and dad grew up on farms and so on, and dogs and cats generally had a function. They weren't sleeping on couches and whatever, they were actually out doing jobs, whether it be, you know, hunting or whether it be, you know, protecting the farm or whatever. So as soon as I, my first time I moved out, the first thing I did was I built a dog run and went and rescued a dog from the City of Calgary. And ever since then, I've always had a dog and cat, and now I've got four dogs, one cat, three more cats showing up tomorrow.

Brown: And a bunch of curious horses.

White: And a bunch of curious horses, yeah.

Brown: Tom Baines, his name certainly carries on. There's a Tom Baines School in Calgary, and if you cross over the river towards the zoo from the north, you will see his name on the Tom Baines Bridge.

This is former Calgary Zoo curator, Bob Peel.

Bob Peel: Well his soul is in the zoo and, and St. George's Island has a bridge named going into it, St. George's Island, Baines Bridge. There is an educational classroom that was named after him in recognition of all he did, in his outreach. So his legacy is the zoo that it is today, and, but also all the outreach that he did into the education system, and he obviously impacted so many children who are now, like myself, older, and that is his legacy.

Brown: Peter Karsten what do you remember most about him now?

Karsten: You know, as you just said that, I see him coming, walking in the school or leaving the zoo with his gimmick bag and, and Agnes in the other hand, in this small bag, and there he was walking with joy in his face, and that's how I remember him.

Brown: That's beautifully said. Hundreds and hundreds of schoolchildren voted for him to be Calgary's Citizen of the Century in 1975. Do you think he deserved to be the Citizen of the Century?

Karsten: Yes. It's extraordinary what he had done in that, in that context and I think the children were right, they, they, of course, are now adults and look how much they remember it, so, you know, it's very valuable.

Exton-Parder: 100 per cent he should have been Citizen of the Century. I mean, humble man, the fact that there's a school named after him, the Baines Bridge, the Tom Baines Classroom here at the zoo, those are all things he would have felt were an incredible honour, but probably would have been like, am I worthy? Yes, Tom, you are.

Brown: Okay. In that spirit, there is one theory that has been said to me, that the reason so many schoolchildren nominated him is that Tom Baines himself encouraged them to do so.

McLaughlin: I'm not sure why there are essentially almost a thousand nomination forms for him. Now, he was around at the time, possibly, did he ask people to nominate himself during his school visits?

Brown: Do you see that as a possibility?

Exton-Parder: I don't, I really do not. I think Tom just did it for the love of wildlife and the kind of reactions he got from children and knowing that what he set out to do was happening and hopefully would continue to. So no, a very humble man, I really doubt that he would have tried to get any children to vote for him in any way.

Brown: Please join me in a “Devin, how dare you!”

Exton-Parder: Exactly.

Brown: The last word goes to Peter Karsten.

Karsten: If there were more Tom Baines in this world, it would be a better world, I can assure you that.

Brown: So, yeah, if Tom Baines isn't Citizen of the Century, I don't even know what we're doing here.

This has been Episode 5 of *Greetings From 1975: The Calgary Time Capsule*. Thanks to Blair White, to our letter readers and Miss Hayward's class at Hugh A. Bennett School, and to everyone at the Wilder Institute, Calgary Zoo, in particular Laura Glick, Tricia Exton-Parder, Peter Karsten and Bob Peel. Special thanks to the secret stewards of the time capsule, the Calgary Telus Convention Centre. Audio of Tom Banes doing his gimmick bag presentation at St. Michael's School is courtesy of Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

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