



Naming Committee

Honouring People and Places in Our City

THE CITY OF
Edmonton

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Sam Cherniak

If I close my eyes and breathe deeply, I can still smell the popcorn that Sam Cherniak made from his pushcart on the street in downtown Edmonton. Sam was called “The Popcorn Man,” and, credited as the first person to sell it on the street in Edmonton, he most certainly was.

To a child growing up in Edmonton, his popcorn wagon was the stuff of magic. Sam usually set up on 102nd Avenue just west of 101st Street, right outside the historic King Edward Hotel. If the wind was right, I could smell Sam’s popcorn a half a block away down by the old Rialto Theatre on 102nd Street just north of Jasper Avenue.

Following my nostrils, I would round the corner at the King Eddy, and there was Sam, portly and balding, loading the corn into the kettle, filling up bags and smiling at his customers. His contraption used to remind me of the machinery at the summer midway at the Exhibition Grounds and, captivated by the sensations, I could have stood there and watched him for hours.

“Try Sam’s Popcorn” it said on one end of the cart and, for 33 years, thousands of people did just that. Cherniak first popped corn and sold it on the street in 1938 and he was there most every day, year after year, through all sorts of weather.

Well into the twilight of his life, he refused to give up his beloved popcorn wagon and he finally retired in 1971 at the age of 82. Sam had been right there on “his corner” for so many years that it’s hard to think of him doing anything else.

Yet, he had led a full life even before popping corn. In an interview with Journal staff writer Ken Preston in 1963, he talked about the life he lived and the jobs he had done. He was born in Austria and emigrated to Canada early in the 20th century, travelling and working across the continent.

Sam worked in an Ontario foundry for 15 cents an hour. He cleared paths for log hauling horses in British Columbia, fired donkey engines in Washington State, tamped railway ties in Medicine Hat and sold donuts in Duluth, Minnesota.



*Sam Cherniak and his popcorn cart in an undated photo.
Photo courtesy City of Edmonton Artifact Centre.*



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The story goes that he tired of the donut business and sold it to a Japanese entrepreneur for \$1,500 – a significant chunk of change in those days. Using those proceeds, Sam came to Alberta and opened a general store in Mannville and then a pool room in Lamont and a coffee shop in Edmonton.

But when the Great Depression hit, few folks could afford to buy his coffee and so he went broke, too. Sam was on relief for four years, living on just \$3.75 a week.

A chance to mind a popcorn stand got him thinking about opportunity and the rest, as they say, is history. Sam went back to Mannville and either built or had built a popcorn wagon.

It wasn't long before Sam was a fixture there on the street, rain or shine, all year round – even on days so cold that he could barely fire the kettle. Preston's story quotes Sam talking about his best customers, including visitors from Stateside.

“They eat popcorn like cows eat hay. They like it – buy a quarter (worth of) popcorn at a time.”

But Sam never got wealthy selling popcorn. Those who knew him say he made enough to live comfortably. When Preston interviewed Sam, he was selling about \$11 worth of popcorn a day and making just enough to cover his costs. “What else is there to do with time?” Preston quoted him as saying.

Sam the Popcorn Man passed away in 1983, just as street vendors were fighting for the right to sell their wares and increases in the license costs for hawkers and peddlers. For a time, the city administration and council was openly antagonistic to street vendors, citing health concerns about their operations. Fortunately, some wisdom and common sense prevailed and, over time, there's been a gradual increase in the type of business that Sam Cherniak turned into a career.

For years, I wondered whatever happened to Sam's venerable popcorn wagon. Then one day I happened to stumble upon it by chance at the Edmonton Artifact Centre. The bicycle tires were flat, the parts were rusty and the paint worn, but the ingenuity of the contraption was still evident. I could almost see Sam standing there in front of it.

I breathed deeply and the aroma from so many years ago filled my nostrils again. It was magic, just like it was when I was a kid and the downtown streets were my wonderland.

CITATION ON FILE

Information gathered and directly cited from an article by Lawrence Herzog published in *Real Estate Weekly* “Its Our Heritage”: Vol 25, No. 30, July 26th 2007.