

It Took All Kinds

CHAPTER THREE

People who sigh and yearn for "the good old days" probably are not remembering the past as it was, but recalling how they wish it had been. However, even if they argue about the happenings of long gone yesterdays, they will all agree that life was far simpler in times past. Memories, given free rein, do not even have to go back more than forty or fifty years to pick out many of the profound changes that have affected our daily living, especially our behavior, our achievements and failures, in the business forum.

In this half-century chronicle of the Calgary real estate world one finds the pattern in this city at the conclusion of World War II to be incredibly different from that in place today. All one needs is to assemble a quintet of pioneer realtors and let them bounce their reminiscences off the wall at one another. For instance, ask Peter Sandall who arrived in Calgary at war's end, bringing with him some deep-rooted real estate practices from his native English roots in the London area.

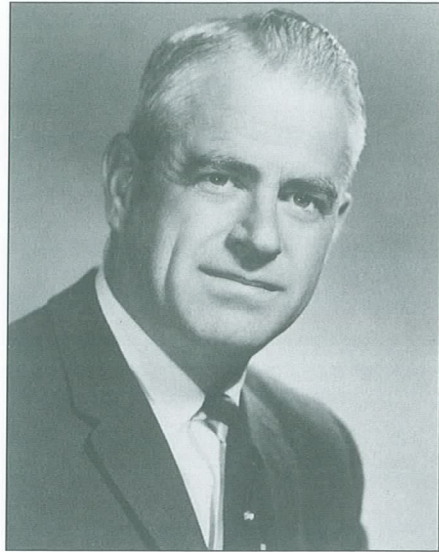
Peter clearly remembers his first impressions of our city when its population stood at a bit more than 125,000. To walk down the street in the downtown area was to experience a succession of hand-shakes and greetings, for you seemed to know most business people you saw. You knew their names, their sports, hobbies and, very likely, the family too. Peter was amazed by the neighborliness, the camaraderie, the friendship that bonded Calgarians without being nosy or cloying. So you ask him when did it begin to disappear, and why did it fade forever

in this town noted for its friendliness? Peter Sandall has a theory, one meeting with complete agreement among his peers. "It all began with paper," he says, and the grey heads nod concurrence. He goes on to explain that during his early years in this new land, to his great pleasure a great deal of the city's business was accomplished with a handshake. But very quickly Calgarians adopted a habit, already established elsewhere, of committing things to paper. "As soon as anything is on paper," he continues, "people start looking for angles." The others concur. Peter goes on to say that the sight of a written agreement begins a churning process that raises questions, and doubts, and hitherto unthought-of meaningless details, deterrents and suspicions.

Around the early 1950's the handshake became a thing of the past, giving way to every comma, and dotted "i" and crossed "t". The next word that bounced around the room was "Trust!" That, it was instantly agreed, was missing and, at the same time, the lack of it spawned a proliferation of pages loaded with "safeguards", "back-ups", "safety-valves", "escape clauses". That reminded the gathering of the pair of psychiatrists encountering one another on Eighth Avenue. "Hello!" said one, as they passed. As he walked, the other muttered "I wonder what he meant by that?"

Jack Leslie, of course, could go back much further than Peter, for he had entered the real estate profession with his father in the days when the handshake was all that was needed to seal even a

complex deal. The money could come later, and it always did, because the buyer and seller trusted the other's word and hand. That is not to say the realtor was a blindly trusting fellow, he had the God-given ability to size up his customer and to act accordingly. That reminded Jack Rich of what has become an apocryphal story but nevertheless is a true one.



Jack Leslie.
Photo-Glenbow Archives, Calgary (NA3585-55)

During the strict gasoline rationing days of World War II such real estate salesmen as Harry Jaynes and Herb McGee could not drive prospective clients out to the suburbs to view property even though Calgary's suburbs were not all that far from the centre of town. It transpired that a "hot prospect" would be handed two street car tickets, for the journey out to the property and back. But it is said that if the potential buyer was sensed to be "only looking" in a lukewarm manner, only one street car fare was offered!

Jack Leslie and his father did not have that sort of trouble, although showing country property, their specialty, presented its own difficulties. Husbanding their meagre gasoline allocation always taxed their ingenuity. They tried to make a habit of showing acreages which had some measure of adjacency. They had some keen prospects in the families whose men had just returned from overseas duty in the armed forces. Unfortunately these young people, eager to make a brand new start were very short of funds, mainly because the federal government was slow to release cash benefits to them, and were tardy in altering legislation to make it possible for a returned man to become a farmer or rancher.

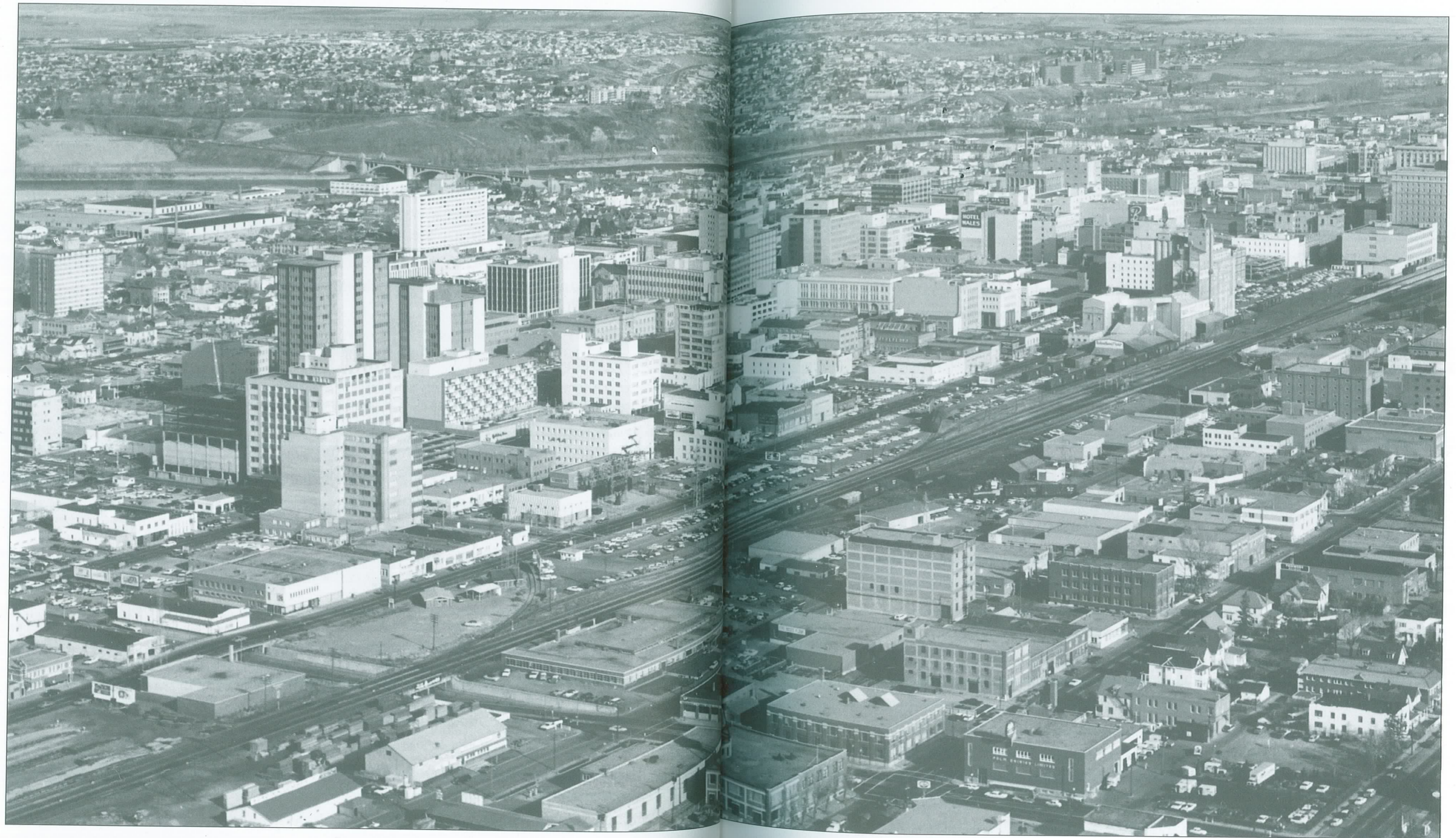
The Leslie men, being acreage specialists, often circumvented regulations and restrictions by buying the acreage themselves, then selling it to the veteran and his family in a private deal at terms the young family could afford. Thus a number of acreages measuring a quarter to a whole section changed hands, especially in the heavy bush country west of Didsbury which was fetching a selling price of about fifty cents per acre. Jack voiced the observation that one reason for major changes in the business in a very few years is that in the 1940's at the end of the war, some 80 per cent of Albertans were living on the land.

A decade later the trend was reversing rapidly as, for example, Calgary's population was soaring beyond the 130,000 mark. Then, of course, the number of urban dwellers in Calgary exploded into the 300,000 category with the annexation of Midnapore in 1961, Forest Lawn in 1963, and Bowness in 1964, all of which additions broadened the scope and challenges for realtors.

Among the old-timers' reminiscences one of the other great changes was the leap in fee prices, in the complication and realignment of roles in connection with real estate deals. Art Dixon clearly recalled the times when a ten dollar fee procured for a Realtor a one thousand dollar license bond whereupon Ervie Jackson, reverting to the topic of the handshake, remembered that the real estate salesperson searched the property title and was charged fifty cents for a transfer of it which, at most, was accomplished in half a day without a lawyer being

Following page - An aerial view of Calgary, on Nov. 11, 1964, with Robin Hood Flour Mills adjacent to the tracks.

Photo-Glenbow Archives, Calgary Herald Collection.



involved in the transaction. The firm of Richardson Pitcairn, it was recalled, in 1952 handled a transfer for ten dollars, an agreement for sale for fifteen dollars, which charges included all the accounting and other paper work. Moreover, Peter Vallance, as did his father, gave the parties a guarantee that all could be completely handled even before any money changed hands. Indeed the name of the game was trust.

Oddly, that diminution of trust was one of the changes in attitude that altered some of the city's future business! It was as simple a situation as mid-town parking! Jack Leslie remembered the day that a businessman motorist no longer was trusted to use an on-street parking space only for the time he had to. Suddenly, to his chagrin, Jack faced a charge of three dollars a month for downtown parking. As a personal protest against such usury, John Clifford Leslie vowed to run for alderman so that he would have a voice in such things. He, and we, were not to know that he would climb the civic ladder and, from 1965 to 1969, be Mayor of Calgary, and a good one, too.

Jack Rich and Ervie Jackson, a couple of very active real estate men in those days of the 1950s were reminiscent about Eastern Trust which, when it found itself short of its quota of pay-out money, could go to the bank for the successful and swift arrangement of a man-to-man bail-out. The security for such a transaction was based purely on a very active, reliable system of business referrals thanks to trust, and personal knowledge and faith in one another.

Art Dixon had no trouble recalling times when one dollar down could spark a deal; when twenty dollars down and a promise to pay at the earliest opportunity was enough to motivate a deal to buy a house.

In those days real estate agents and salesmen really hustled for a buck! It was possible for one of them, for at the time they were all on salary and no commission, to buy a couple of Springbank lots for ten dollars and hustle them for twenty just to make enough for their family groceries. The oldsters began talking of their very much admired hotshot colleague Daryl Tarves who dwelt very sparingly in an attic during his fledgling days as a Realtor. They remembered with some amusement his cavalier way of using his colleagues' offices and telephones in order to keep his personal expenses to a minimum!

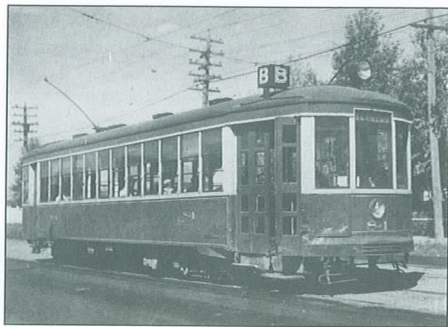
A few years later in Daryl's very successful career a Briar Hill householder was advised to list his house at \$15,998. An appraiser said the price should be \$15,990. It was Grey Cup time but those were the days when a tape of the already-played game was flown to Calgary for showing. The house owner was a football nut who could not take his eyes off the game.

Over his shoulder during a lull in the play he agreed to Daryl's all-cash offer without taking his eyes off the TV set. When the game was over he grabbed the cheque but was angry to find it to be eight dollars short of the sum he had asked. Rather than squabble about it, Daryl hauled the eight dollars out of his

pocket to pay the edgy vendor. Tarves claimed that behavior enabled him for years to advertise his realty services by the two words, "Happy Deals."

We talk of racial sensitivity in these modern times. Maurice Stenson, who everybody agrees is one of the finest real estate salesmen Calgary ever had, closed a deal with a Chinese-born family. The market was very soft but the Oriental buyers offered him a cheque for five hundred dollars which, in those days, was very generous. The neighborhood was of a mood to run Maurice out of town on a rail!

Some real estate experts such as Maurice preferred to walk alone, but Ervie Jackson remembered when he and his partner of Rich and Jackson were able to call themselves "Calgary's Largest Realtors" because they had a staff of 50, of whom 40 were salesmen.



A 1936 photo of a Calgary streetcar inbound from Bowness Park.

Photo-Courtesy Jack Peach, and Glenbow Archives, Calgary

Among the much-admired of the "loners" of days gone by was Harry Kurtz, a street car motorman who discovered himself to be a natural-born real estate salesman. At first he moonlighted as a realtor, then took a three-month leave of absence from Calgary Transit while he gained enough self-confidence to make it a full-time career. When Calgary Transit converted its fleet to buses Harry became one of the drivers but the real estate lure was great. One day in the midst of a shift he stopped his bus opposite The Bay, asked Inspector Sam Poffenroth to have it driven to the garage, and walked away into a new career with Campbell and Halliburton.

Jack Rich and Ervie Jackson were full of stories

about Harry Kurtz' proclivity for doing things wrong but having them turn out right. "His favorite ploy was to walk brazenly into a house and demand of the occupant, "Now, what is the problem?" If one did not exist, Harry would invent one. He made instant offers on property and always seemed to smooth over his mistakes."

Ervie continued, "Such as the time he was showing a house to an out-of-town client at three o'clock in the morning, of all times. His key wouldn't fit the lock so Harry put a fist through a little pane of glass alongside the front door, opened it, and let themselves in. Except in the dark he had taken them to the wrong house. But Harry, as usual, talked his way out of a threatened burglary charge!"

"Don't forget the time," chimed in Jack, "Harry took about four carloads of sales agents to see a newly-listed property. He led them to the house, knocked on the door, impatiently opened it and they all trooped in. Soon they were swarming over the house, peering at everything. The occupant, a pleasant woman in a bath-robe watched the whole procedure and, when the realtors left their business cards and, with polite thanks, streamed out to the cars the woman asked Harry Kurtz, 'Do tell me, what was that all about?' Harry replied, 'This is part of the MLS procedure. Since your house is on the market, these realtors all had to examine it.' However, as Harry learned to his chagrin, he had missed the right house by a whole block! But you know Harry," and the others nodded, grinning.

Jack Leslie added another tale to misadventures of the 1950's. This was another Daryl Tarves story. Jack and his father financed Daryl in building two houses on adjoining lots in Rosscarrock only to have them all find out from Jack Halliburton that the surveyors had goofed and the completed houses were on the wrong property. The rather disturbed absentee owner journeyed here from his home in the State of Virginia to straighten out the problem. It was solved amicably by trading those two lots for a couple of equal value!

It was only the men who made mistakes. For decades the real estate profession had been one for men only. Then along came Evelyn Hinds with her all female sales force, and there was Paramount Realtors, another all-women organization. With a slight lapse into Chauvinism, the oldsters joked about the problems they had at the outset with women in the real estate selling field. They admitted it was mainly because so many of them abandoned housewifery for the income without knowing what they were getting into. The men, they agreed, would usually help them out of a jam once they had burst into tears! Apparently much of the abrasion originated with claims of entitlement to commissions. Such a difference today with so many highly efficient, knowledgeable women Realtors proving themselves to be equal to, or more skilled than, their male colleagues!

Still reminiscing about the 1950's, it emerged that listings were being distributed to all people in the business but co-operation between companies by

way of above-board dealings and ploys was not working. Officially, a scale of commissions existed: 5% on a general listing, 6% on an exclusive listing, 7% on a co-op listing and 10% for sale of an expensive property. It sounded pretty good but, in those days, a property valued \$4,000 could fetch a down payment of \$200. Lyke Brothers had a number of 600 to 800 square-foot homes that could be picked up for a \$500 down payment. The mortgage rate, which had been 4% in the 1940's, had risen, by the mid-50's, to anywhere from 6.5% and 8%.

Art Dixon spoke of Colonel Fred Scott who, "at one time, owned about half of Bowness." He dealt in small properties, houses in the \$6,000 bracket with \$200 down on a rental-purchase basis. At one time apparently he had so many such small houses that he had them listed on a window roller-blind that he could pull down to reveal to a prospective customer the assortment of available places.

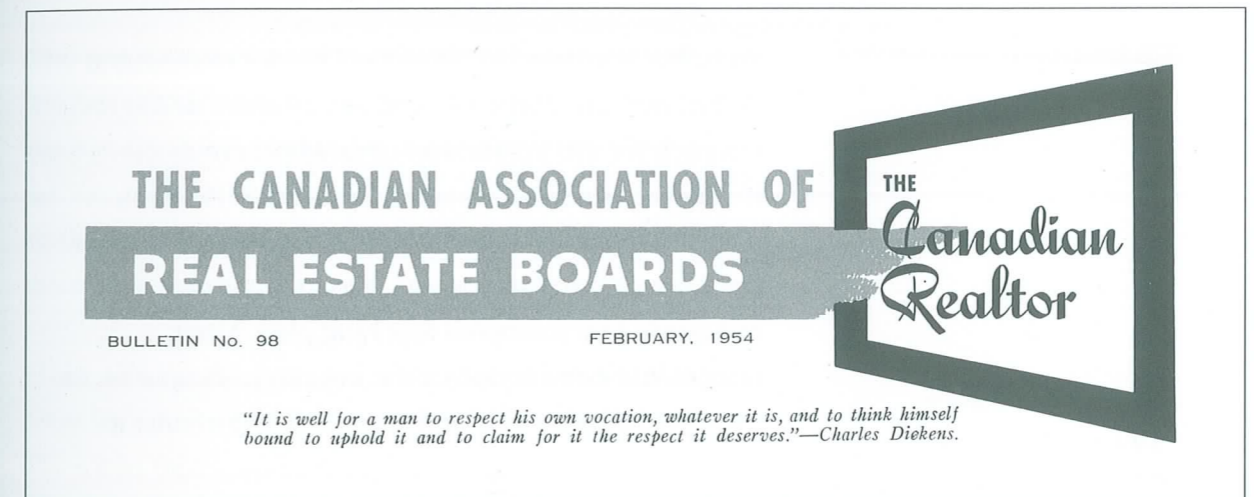
The people with whom the Realtors did business often had their own idiosyncrasies, too. Abe Belzberg, who conducted a great deal of downtown commercial real estate buying and selling, could not read or write but was a business genius. He kept a coterie of staffers who did all the paperwork for him. He could count though, as Jack Rich remembered, citing an occasion when he and Abe completed a property deal after Abe had counted out \$1,000 in one dollar bills!

Peter Sandall had a buyer in his office to clinch an \$18,500 house purchase. He asked for a deposit

until the documentation had been completed. The client said, "But I have no bank account. I don't trust banks, I don't trust lawyers, I don't trust real estate people. But I do have the money here," whereupon he pulled from a trouser pocket \$18,500 in cash saying, "Now do the paperwork." Realtors tried never to be surprised at such occurrences but, in those days of intensive competition they collared the prospective buyers and sellers first, then faced, if possible with a smile, whatever took place once negotiations were underway. Someone recalled a situation encountered by Stan Melton who had a farm couple in his office. They were adamant about avoiding any entanglement with the Income Tax Department in connection with their purchase of a \$150,000 farm property. Stan suggested the deal could be started right then with a down payment of \$5,000. The husband seemed agreeable enough and the wife hauled a tin can out of her shopping bag, and handed it to her husband who pulled out a wad of currency and began counting. Soon he was well past the \$5,000 mark and still had lots of money left. His wife glowered at him and yelled, "Hey, damn you, ya brought the wrong can!"

Although it was no guarantee of an end to such chaotic happenings, Messrs. Crawford Hamilton and Dick Richards tried to tidy the business scene, especially the still troublesome co-operative listing procedure, but they met with skimpy success. The co-op set-up had the money to make it work but the Calgary Real Estate Board had the power and so it lacked cohesion and direction.

The Multiple Listing Service (M.L.S.) was devised to meet the problem head-on, and it did. Crawford, with Aubrey Edwards as president in 1952, put the board back on its feet with the jurisdiction and the strength of the MLS system under its wing. This new regime was one that engendered enthusiasm on the part of the newcomers and, in a vastly changing scene, brought comfort and stability to the business climate for the oldsters.



An early issue of *The Canadian Realtor*, (Feb. 1954)
with an appropriate quote by Charles Dickens.