

# WINTER WONDERLAND

By Debra Cummings  
Calgary Herald

**D**o you hear what I hear? Silver Bells. Frosty the Snowman. Here Comes Santa Claus – all warbling off the banks and bridge at Bowness Park.

The lagoon is frozen and the carols are booming over the snap and hiss of the open fires where chilly skaters gather round for a mug of cocoa.

If an old-fashioned white Christmas is your holiday fantasy, bundle up your family and lace up those skates some evening for a glorious skid along the three-acre, night-lit lagoon that spills into a channel just west of the bridge in this historic northwest park.

If you venture out on a sharp, clear weekend day you may be grazing blades with 2,500 other skaters – typical figures for the No. 1 outdoor skating rink in Calgary, followed by the Olympic Plaza.

But don't just make a beeline for the park and bypass some of this neighborhood's historic landmarks. To help you appreciate the diversity of this enormous neighborhood we've divided Bowness into two walkabouts.

This week's focuses on the area west of the tracks where the prime attraction is Bowness Park. As you plunge down the hill on 83rd Street N.W. look west at the Tudor-style mansion known to most as the Romeo and Juliet Inn, recently converted into a country and western bar. This vantage point was once owned by John Hextall, who scooped up the entire valley in 1909. With plans to develop the hilltop area into a posh neighborhood, Hextall returned to his native England and began selling plots of land for \$1,500 to wealthy Brits. A year later he began constructing the bridge (for a whopping \$75,000) which bears his name (next to the Shouldice Pool on Bowness Road N.W., to be featured in a future walkabout). His dreams fizzled away a few years later, however, and those swanky residences never reached a drawing board, let alone completion.

While coasting down the winding road to the park imagine skating from here to Cochrane, or to downtown Calgary, and you'll



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## BARN-STYLE HOME: At 85th Street and 48th Avenue N.W.

start grasping what life was like for Hextall and the wealthy Shouldice girls back in 1912 (who made the Cochrane trek several times each winter).

Or take a stroll across the park to the banks of the Bow and picture a sanatorium rising out of the treed lot, across the river. Once serving hundreds of people stricken with tuberculosis, this sanatorium was ripped down 10 years ago and plans are now in the works to develop the Crown land into Baker Park.

If you're parking in the central lot take a look at the escarpment that rings the southern border of the park. This steep face caused many a slide for the farmers back in the early 1900s and prior to that had been used by the Peigans as a natural buffalo jump.

Here are a few other archival snippets to tuck into your tuque as you skate or wander the grounds of west Bowness:

- Bowness began as a ranch around 1896. The real-estate boom of 1911 lured 20 wealthy

- British families to set up mink and fox ranches in the area. During the Depression many hungry city dwellers moved here to eke out a frugal living.

- Bowness got its first growth spurt in 1946 when the Soldiers' Settlement of 48 homes was built in Bowcroft. In 1948 Bowness was considered a village and by 1952 it became a town with a seven-man council and a population of 2,100. Today 12,000 people live in Bowness.

- Built on an ancient river bottom, prehistoric animals such as a 50,000-year-old primitive elephant have been dug up by curious geologists such as Mayor Peter Fitzgerald Moore.

- At the western tip of the park's channel where one can skate is a stand of protected Douglas fir trees. David Thompson, back in 1787, is said to have admired the

**ROUTE:** Begin on the escarpment on 83rd Street N.W. (where the Tudor-style Romeo and Juliet Inn sits). Drive down the winding road and follow the signs to Bowness Park which is now lit up at night until 10 p.m. Skate along the lagoon; then follow the frozen channel west into a forested area of ancient Douglas fir trees. After this circuit, hop back in your car and drive to Bowness Shopping Centre at Bowness Road and 79th Street – home to a few tasty, unpretentious restaurants. Either before or after you chow down, take a boo down a few side streets.

**HIDDEN TREASURE:** Several private residences – keep your distance and take a peek at the lovely barn-style home at 8539 48th Ave. N.W., or the handsome historic homes at 8331 48th Ave. and 8904 34th Ave. N.W. Another unusual home boasts Haida art, carved on to the front facade, at 47th Avenue and 77th Street N.W.

**PITSTOPS:** The Dell Cafe in the Bowness Shopping Centre. Owned by the Wongs, who operated the Cochrane Cafe for 18 years, this homey spot has locals lined up on Friday nights for a cheap feed of Chinese grub or western fare. While at the mall pop into the Sweet Home Bake Shop for a loaf of oven-warm bread. And for a platter of fries and a juicy burger, the River Park Cafe at 47th Avenue and 85th Street is pretty hard to beat.

## Bowness Park

