

## Peggy Holmes Banquet – 2003.02.188

### Introduction:

The speaker tonight will be like the subject: very short. As when Peggy stands you will find there is not much of her, but good things come in small packages and I think when you hear Peggy you'll agree that she is a very good thing. I'll let her talk for herself, I'm awfully bad at dates quite obviously, I don't even know the exact year that the society was founded, but Peggy is one of the people that Myrna was talking about, who helped homestead this great province and one of the original pioneers. She came here in 1919 and she's done many, many things. And she'll talk about some of these things tonight, and also you'll find them mentioned, I'm sure, in her book that is coming out (when, Peggy?) (Peggy: May 15<sup>th</sup>) She's got a book coming out on April the 15<sup>th</sup> and I'm sure you'll all look forward to reading that. She came in 1919 and I'll let her fill in the years for herself, but I, yesterday I heard her talk on the radio, and one sort of up-to-date fact was that yesterday she made her 750<sup>th</sup> broadcast, which is really something. And she didn't... [applause] and she didn't even start until she was 77. Now, I'm sure you wonder, how could, she doesn't even look 77, and I'm sure Peggy doesn't mind if I tell her age, she's not like a lot of women that I know, um, who don't like telling their age, and Peggy is 82 and I think she really is 82 years young. So I have great pleasure in introducing Peggy Holmes. [Applause]

### Mrs. Holmes:

(... background chatter)

I was going to say, how kind of you to let me come. Now that sounds stupid, it's the lines of Eliza Doolittle in Bernard Shaw's *My Fair Lady*. I'm sure you'll all remember that. "How kind of you to let me come." No, really, I do mean it sincerely. And do you know, I'm not Eliza Doolittle, I'm Peggy Holmes doing a lot. Don't ask me what, but that's it. Well it's an honour to be invited if you're a guest speaker. You see, I see so many friends and fans and I feel such a warm feeling from you all. I haven't a degree, I'm going to have to refer to Dr. Chalmers, he said, "Don't repeat yourself, Peggy," but I'll have to, because at my age I DO repeat myself and [feedback] (do I compete? [laughter])

I haven't a degree [feedback] (I'm sorry about that) When I left school, World War I started and that was the end of my education at, in the normal way. And so I gave myself a degree, I don't think Dr. Chalmers will mind. I'm a D.O.P.E. A D, O, P, E. And that's a Doctor Of Personal Experiences. [applause] Well of course you can all go home and give yourself that degree. You can all qualify. To me, that's what it's all been about. A day at a time, and accepting opportunities and challenges that came along. My life was never planned or structured. Everything I've ever done came into focus when I was 77 years. After 5 years of regular broadcast, well Rene told you, I just finished 750 scripts. Most of them I have to thank pioneers for, because when I first went on the air, my program was "The Way it Was." Then of course we get some very bright young people and they say they want to update it and I have to change

my image. Well, you know I like to go along with whatever they want, so I've had, this position has opened up many more avenues. Open lines, guest appearances on radio and TV programs, and speaking engagements. In my wildest flight of imagination I couldn't have believed that all this was possible. People say, you should have been doing this years ago. I say, no, it was not the right time. Timing is so important. All the things I've done in my life was just a part of my apprenticeship. Possibly I could be called an opportunist. Well, what is wrong with that? One man said, "Peggy doesn't live in the past." And the third party said, "no, she just makes money out of it." But I can take all that. Touché. When a door opens, go through it. If it's not your bag, gracefully retreat. But I'll bet on it that you'll learn something from that experience.

Humour. That's a wonderful asset. When one is living alone it's not easy to be funny and laugh aloud, even if you find yourself talking to yourself you're considered ... odd. (Well I was going to say queer but I mustn't use that word [Laughter] Right?) Well, then humour, it is an asset and you consider yourself odd. But Dr. Lawrence Peter, the author of *Peter's Prescriptions*, gave 66 formulas for improving the quality of your life. He wrote the 67<sup>th</sup> prescription for me, which was quite an honour. "Live and laugh each day." He's the author who wrote, "We rise to the level of our own incompetence." A few months ago, I came across a priceless old volume. It was written in 1898 called "Vitology." I did refer to it on the air once, so forgive me if you've heard it before. Here's a chapter I heartily endorse, and that's "The Hygiene of Laughter."

"2 doctors suggest laughter as a cure for most ailments and state 'Gloom is a fool to health.' I've always felt I needed a straight man, someone to share a joke with. According to Vitology, that is not so. Mirth can be cultivated. We cultivate the sober part of our nature and we neglect to keep our cheeriness, and after a while mirth becomes feeble. And the remedy is, practice mirthfulness until it become second nature to you. It will add years to your life and will help enormously to keep off sickness, and especially anything in the nature of epidemic diseases. I quote, 'the shaking of the side in hearty laughter loosens the particles of partly decayed matter in the muscles and facilitates the discharge through the lymphatic and/or the veins. The result adds strength to resist the encroaches of the disease germs. They are more easily carried away and do have no harm to us at all.'

In this book they also warn against "commiserating with the sick,"

"And when visiting a patient in the hospital, you must cheer up the sick person. It's not... it's as well to go armed with funny yarns to tell, or have some bright, cheerful things to say. If you have any mirth-provoking songs, you could burst forth (provided they're not too boisterous)." (You can just imagine a whole hospital with everybody singing) "Well this may shock the conventional devotees of society, but it will ease the bruised heart." (Remember that, now, Bill. It will... ha, right?) "And it's also, um, gives you

renewed courage and mitigate and shorten the duration of the malady, whatever it may be.”

Or, well, um, of course it may just pop them off, of course, and in that case they're still right. It will have shortened the malady.

They gave details of bronchial trouble cured by no other medicine than that of laughter. Purposely provoked for the purpose of the shaking of the chest, aided the expulsion of the secretion, permitting the oxygen of the air to dry up and heal the diseased cells. The doctors writing this 900 page hilarious book must have had a lot of laughs together, and I have no doubt, in the end, they died of laughing.

All joking apart, I do think health is one of the most important things in life. Retirement seems to be a topic which is pertinent today. I'm often asked to talk about retirement. Well, it's hard for me to do so because it doesn't look as if I've retired. So I'm really not the person they should ask. I'll give you a short run-down on a script I did a few weeks ago. I have to be topical these days. In the first part of my career, I did the pioneer stories, now it's "Change your image, Peggy. And we want throwbacks to topical events." Years ago, I read Norman Collins' book, *London Belongs to Me*. The opening is a little 65 year old man who, after spending a lifetime at a dull job in the city, is trudging home after his farewell party. He has a presentation clock under his arm. He's grumbling about the clock, "I could have done with this thing while I was working. The darn thing's no good to me, no use to me now at all!" And with that, he dropped the clock, and he broke it. This seemed to be an omen, and the end of everything. He'd evidently not been processed with pre-retirement courses. The first few weeks of his retirement, he went into a deep depression and felt it was the end of the road. He was useless around the house and always seemed to be in his wife's way. A few months later, the startling announcement that Hitler had invaded Poland and England had declared war changed everything. Our little hero had a ray of hope. Soon he had a job again working in a munitions factory and serving as an air raid warden at night. He was as happy and needed, and I think that's what we really all need to be, is happy and needed. He took a new lease on life. Um, we don't want to look forward to anything as drastic as a war to rock us out of our deep slump of depression. Life is so unpredictable. Many people are so busy they wonder how they had any time to work. I'm sure the busier one is, the less time one has to think of oneself, and the result is health and happiness. You would know by my introduction that I am the oldest regular broadcaster in Canada, in fact they even call me the Grand Dame now. Now, I um, I hope, sometimes when I'm introduced they say "BROAD-caster," and I think I wish they would come in with the -caster a little bit quicker because it sounds as if I'm the oldest broad in Canada. [laughter] I'll leave that to you. Well, even Gordon Sinclair conceded to be as I am older than he is, and he calls me "That Woman in the West." And, anyways, we are good friends.

Now, time is a strange thing. It goes on and on, and you don't realize it's passing. The other day, I was driving my Datsun over the High Level Bridge and it was 20 below zero (I should say Celsius or something) Anyway, it was cold. I swept about 6 inches of snow off the car and I talked to it nicely, and I'd threatened it for about 15 minutes before the takeoff. I thought, Peggy Holmes, how has this all come

about? From a protective existence as an only child in a Yorkshire home, in England, to this exciting life in Western Canada. I hardly need tell you I've seen great changes. And from digging cars out of the mud on the St. Albert Trail from Edmonton to Alberta Beach where we had a cottage, to the splendid highways we have today. St. Albert seemed a long way off in the early 20. What a wonderful vision.

Now I'd, er, like to come into a little more sober key, and that is about your Father Lacombe. I hadn't realized, they were catching me up on the coast for this being the guest speaker, and I really wasn't briefed too much, as you will know Rene, about your society, and I didn't realize that tonight is honouring Father Lacombe but I had thought of him and what a wonderful vision Father Lacombe had when he established the first mission on the beautiful hill with a superb view of the countryside. I visited the oblate priest retirement home a few years ago, and over a cup of tea Father Letour gave me so much history, not only of St. Albert but of the whole province of Alberta. He told me of the famous mission bell and when it rang, how the Indians camped below near the river heard the bell and walked up the hill to the service. Well that was marvelous and I think you still have the bell, have you not? It's still, the... um. Well it's a horror story today that our beautiful churches are being desecrated by hooligan arsonists. This is not the kind of history we want to be responsible for. Beautiful things should be happening this 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary year in our province. We certainly don't want a pall of smoke hanging over our sacred places of worship.

Speaking of smoke, you know, possibly I was married to an arsonist. On the homestead, Harry came in one day (Harry was my husband), came in one day with a bright idea. If he set fire to the bush, he could accomplish in 20 years work in 20 minutes. Well I was already to listen to shortcuts. He plowed a fireguard around the house and the building and assured me the fire wouldn't jump and it was the right time of the year, and off he went on horseback gaily throwing matches behind him. I sat home horror-stricken in the log shack, and we rarely had callers in that part of the world. This day there was a loud knock on the door. As I opened it, a huge man in uniform threw open his coat and flashed a badge, just like the sheriff on the movies. He said, "H'I'm a fire ranger, I am. Where's your 'usband?" The smoke was bellowing out of the bush. I said, "Mr. Holmes is out working." [laughter] "Looks as 'e's got a right blaze goin' there." He thought for a minute and said, "Did you say 'Olmes? Not 'Arry 'olmes of the 31st battalion." "Yes," I said. "That's different. 'Arry was a father to them boys. Harry was the Sargent Major." So when Harry came in looking like a smoked haddock, the ranger threw his arms around him and stayed a week, and we, uh, fed his horse and his colt and we couldn't afford to feed him and his livestock. We signed his expense sheet and he ended up by giving us free advice. "H'I never work, H'I negotiate." I said to Harry, "Why don't we negotiate?" Harry could have burned the whole township.

It's just a great pleasure. I'm going to cut off now, I don't know what the time is, have I spoken too long? (crowd: No, no, carry on) Well, I don't know, 20 minutes, I don't know. Well, anyway, I was going to dry up now. [laughter] (crowd: drink a glass of water, we should give you something strong so you would last longer!) I think it'll be alright. But anyway if you have any questions I don't want to overstop my time (crowd: you're doing okay, Peggy) Well now listen, have you any questions

you would like to ask me or have anything you would like me to say that would interest you? Please... feel free to ask.

(Question: \*inaudible\* ... was it in 1919... )

Well I was the first woman in the bank in the north of England. You know, banks had never been invaded by females. They were very sacred in those days, only the males. And of course as the men were taken to the um, to the war they had to do something about it, and I was walking along the street one day and a man came up to me and he said, "Would you like a job in a bank?" I said, "A bank?" Yes, well I said, "I'm sorry, I'm very bad, I can't add, I don't know how to add very well." So he said, "Oh you'll soon get onto it." So I was the first woman taken in and (I think I took men in actually) but [laughter] and, uh, you know I couldn't add for nuts! And I was so glad I had ten fingers, I wished I'd had more, but uh... I was working these very hard. You see, we had no adding machines and, well, there was one typewriter, an ancient typewriter that some old man had been using, but um, there was, it was just like going into something like Dickens' times. The ledgers were enormous, you would get a hernia lifting them, and um, they um, they didn't want us, the men that were there surely didn't want us but they had to go to the war, and it sort of became a matrimonial bureau. The men used to come back and see all these girls in the bank which they had to take as staff then, and of course there was a lot of romance which of course was really nice. But, um, you can hardly believe it when you see today's sophisticated banks, they had this, um, a very dingy old place, very big, and they had a rostrum, a high rostrum, and on this sat a horrible creature. A man that hated women and he wore collars like that he would choke himself, and he used to look at us and he was spying all the time. It gave you a terrible feeling you know. But, um, this is how they worked in the bank those days and you had to, and every night you had to balance and if you didn't balance, and I mean balance, not like the checkbooks today, and uh, you had to stay until that happened. It was really very, very good discipline and of course I soon learnt to add up very fast. So that was my banking experience. And, uh, of course now who runs the bank? It's just like a harem. You get one manager and all the rest... [laughter] and all the rest are women as far as I can see. And um...

(Question: Why did you come to Alberta?)

Well, I didn't, first of all I came to a ranch near Strathmore, Alberta, and it was a millionaire's ranch, he owned 10 square miles. Well, when I got there I was absolutely lost, you see. I didn't know anything. I thought that Canada was just full of Indians and wild people. You see, we'd never been taught anything and, um, the manager of this ranch, they were American people, and they, I was such a fool. They didn't understand me at all and I'm sure I didn't understand them. And I really felt sorry for them. But I did get on with the Chinese cook. He was very homesick and so was I, so, [laughter] So they said, "Can you milk?" I said, "No!" I mean, I knew nothing about milking a cow, and "can you make bread?" "No, I never made bread, we never had any flour or anything to make bread with." And "Can you make butter?" Butter I hadn't seen during the war. And, uh, I was just a total misfit. I felt sorry for them and I felt very sorry for myself. But, um, they taught me to ride, they gave me an Indian pony and I soon learnt to ride and that was my salvation. You know, riding around the Prairies. Well my mother sent me out, the war was over and they were selling off

the uniforms of the, what they called Clippers in England. That was the women who had been on the busses clipping the tickets. And they had very smart uniforms, they were navy blue with bright silver buttons. Very smart. Well Mother sent me one of those outfits so that's what I had a riding habit, you know. With that and a huge cowboy hat I, well I looked like Custer's last stand, you know. [Laughter] Really awful. But, uh, I did learn to milk. 'Course when I first learn to milk I had a terrible time, I didn't know you had to bring the milk down, I thought you could put it up! [Laughter] and when I got a few drops onto the Prairie I was delighted. But, uh, I soon learned things. You do, you know. And then the owner, the manager of the ranch came and he said, I had a friend come out to me them from Calgary, another war bride, and um her husband was working on the ranch with my husband, and we were just living together in a small place, they gave us a little place, they couldn't tolerate us in the big house because we were so stupid. And so, they uh, we got this little place, then the uh, manager came and he said, "Could you girls help me out? My cook is left." He was left in harvest time, and he had to get ready for, and lunch had to be served for these harvesters in the cook car. Well I'd never seen a cook car so we said, "Well we'll do our best." "Just until I go to Strathmore to get another cook." We thought, well we can manage a meal or two alright, but we neither of us cooked anything but just an egg or something like that for our husbands, you know, we weren't cooks at all. So we, um, we get to this cook car and they said, "well there's meat underneath the cook car, you'll get plenty of meat, and all the men want are, will be meat and potatoes and pies." Well my friend thought she could whip up a pie that was alright. Pie, she could handle. So I said, "I'll get the meat," you see. Well I was horrified when I got to the back of this cook car to find half a cow, you know. [laughter] I said, "Thank God it was dead!" And, uh, I had to take a saw and saw this cow and I came, trying to get into the cook car. Well, we couldn't get it in the oven, you know, but when we looked [laughter] when we looked at the why, why the other woman had left, there was a stew pot full of buzzing flies, you see, that she'd left on the stove. This was supposed to be the dinner, I suppose, and my friend said, "What shall I do with it?" I said, "Well, throw it out!" She said, "Well give me the pot and everything." I said "Certainly you can never clean a thing like that up." It never dawned on me that you could clean a pot, we just threw the whole thing out, flies and pot and everything. So you know what I mean, we just had to learn and um, so then, the men liked us. There were all different kinds of nationalities but they were very nice men and we were there for a day or two and he didn't go for another cook and we ended up cooks! And, uh, [laughter] we learned a lot in that episode. It was quite fun, really. So, uh, there was a lot more.

(Question: \*maybe what St. Albert was like?)

Well St. Albert was a very, very small place. As a matter of fact I near became, nearly became a neighbor. Do you remember a lovely property on the road, and I think it later turned into the Macombo Club, not this one but it was a beautiful property with rolling land. Do you remember that? On the road, between here and Edmonton. Remember that? A beautiful property. Well Harry and I, we always are trying things and wanting tom you know, get into the country and that sort of thing. And we went to, this place was up for sale very reasonably, ever so cheap, and we looked it over and we thought we could manage to buy it. And we were very, very

keen, and then Harry said, "But how are we going to get into Edmonton? I have to be in the courts every morning. We'll never get on this mud road." And it was the mud roads that stopped us from buying that property. We might have been, almost, well you know how life is. When you look back you could have been this, that, and the other. That was just one of the things we missed the boat on. But he couldn't see commuting at that time, and we used to come through here and, oh we had some time digging ourselves out of the mud, believe me. And we had no beautiful bridge or anything like that. I just don't quite remember, I know, we used to have to watch the sky, and when it looked as if there was going to be a storm we used to high tail it from Lac Ste Anne. Half the time we'd have to carry the car. [laughter] There are some awful episodes. So, uh, St. Albert was a very small place. I always brought guests from England out to see the mission and the history, I felt this was very important and I always remember bringing them out here. Anymore questions, or?

(Question: How did your husband... **inaudible**)

Oh, well, that's a good question. He um, originally, to give it to you as quickly as I can, originally, when he left school he was a secretary to the editor of the whole *Daily Mail* in England, in Hull. And um, in those days they had bad lighting, just a candle, and they overworked him as he was the only one, and they really, um, it was just again like Dickens' time, and eventually his eyesight gave out, and the doctor said that he must get away from that awful office, otherwise he'd lose his eyesight. So it was sort of a time when he had learned to write shorthand, by the way, Pitman's, so he had Pitman's shorthand. Well, then he, um, he was just at a dead loss for a while trying to work out in the open so that his eyes would get better, and it was at the time, now here's history reviving itself, it was at the time when roller skating was very, very much the thing. That would be before World War I, it would be about 1909 or something like that. And he started to roller skate just to pass the time. Well the Americans came in and they wanted to open a big roller rink in London and they were going around scouting for men who were 6 feet tall and who could roller skate and Harry was one chosen. Well he had to have, say he was American and they dressed him up in a blue uniform and put on the whole bit. Well he was in London in the Olympia and um, he's told me all about that which was very exciting, and then he got into the Actress' Club. Well when that closed down for the boat show, he went to Paris, where they opened in Paris, and then when Paris closed he decided to come to Canada, and he came from Canada, and he had a dollar when he got into Calgary, and he said to the man at the railroad, "I want a ticket," no he had a dollar and a quarter, "I want a ticket for a dollar into some farming district." And the man said "well, you can go to Alderside." So, he uh, got a ticket to Alderside, and he went into the store there, and the big notices were up: *No Englishmen Need Apply*. That was the first thing that hit him. So he just stood in the store and bought some biscuits and he thought, well I don't know where I go from here. And then a man came in, an American, and he said uh, "I want a man to help me." And the storekeeper said, "Well there's a fellow here but he's English." "Oh," he said, "well I suppose I'll have to take him. I'll soon Yankee him over." [laughter] You see? So anyway, Harry was really so happy there because they were very, very nice people and he said, he always said he was the first white man to fish the high river. They weren't, uh, you see in those days they were all working hard, they didn't have time

to go fishing, and Harry had been a fisherman and his father was in England, and he's learnt to trout fish and all that sort of thing. So he sent home for fishing lures, and they thought he was a miracle man, I think, and he loved that. And then from there, he met up with three more, an American, and I think it was three more Englishmen. And they built a covered wagon and they, um, they decided they wanted to go moose hunting, so they started from Alderside and they got into Calgary and there was practically no trail through the Edmonton, they had to chop their way through practically then, just a rough trail. And uh, it took them a week to come from Calgary to Edmonton. And then they went on into the north country to Vegaville and uh, Elk Crossing, and then they went on to uh, the district, well they finally got up to \*St. Lina\*. I don't know whether any of you know the district of \*St. Lina\*. Mhmm. So that's how he, and then when they got up there to moose, uh the, the people up there said, "Why don't you all file on homestead?" And of course they thought this was a good idea, 160 acres for \$10 I mean, where could you get a better deal? So of course all these fellas filed on homesteads. Well Harry was the type of man that, he wanted land, he loved land and um, then the war broke out, so he packed it all in and he enlisted in the 31<sup>st</sup> battalion in Calgary and went over to England and that's where we met, I came back. But he wanted that homestead. So that's how we got into that country. After I'd been on the ranch, he wanted me to find out if I liked the country before he took me into the bush, and when he got there he started to set fire to the bush. So that's really about... Does that answer your question? And so then when he came into town broke, absolutely broke, the *inaudible* I don't know, Robert Anderson, the clerk of the Legislative Assembly, does that name ring a bell? Well, he became friends of ours, and he said they needed court reporters and from then on Harry went writing, he was in the Supreme Court for 45 years, and he wrote his last case when he was 80. So don't talk to us about retirement. I can't tell you anything about it. Yeah. Any more questions or is that time?

(Crowd: Uh, Peggy, maybe you could tell people when they can listen to you on the radio and hear some more of these experiences of yours?)

Well, it's, I'm on now. I used to be on 5 times a week, then it was 3 times a week, then 2. Now they haven't bounced me exactly but I'm um, I'm on once a week and it suits me very well, once a week, I'm on twenty minutes to nine on a Friday morning on the morning show. They're very kind to me, I'm very happy there, but I have other commitments. The Edmonton Public School Board, I'm working for them now, sort of freelance, they're doing what they call the "homes of heritage" and I am re-doing my scripts that pertain to history and they're going to use them in the new curriculum, some of them, whatever they want, and they've sent me a marvelous cassette and everything, very professional, and I can interview people I think that are interested to contribute to uh, the uh history of the province. And that's another job I'm doing, you see. I must tell you that, uh, they did mention the book, but I had a collaborator. Without her, I could not have done my book because it would have been too much, absolutely. So um, I really have a lot to thank her for so that, um, you know, I'm not Superwoman. So I think that's about... any more questions? Well I was going to finish up quite nicely and uh, and I was going to say something. And it's a



great pleasure for me to come to your banquet and I do say thank you to you all, and do have fun, but to not play with matches.

[Laughter and applause]

Speaker:

Thank you very much Peggy for telling us about your experiences when you first came to Alberta.