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## Howdy's Photo Album

**H**owdy operated McPhail Air Services until 1981 when he sold the business and disposed of most of his planes. He continued to fly, but a heart attack the following Christmas, followed by triple by-pass surgery the next year, cost him his licence. It was a cruel blow to be grounded, after nearly four decades in the air, even more so since he had just acquired a Beech Bonanza, a plane he had always admired. But the sixty-eight-year-old still had his flying stories and gladly recounted them whenever he had an audience, including hitchhikers he picked up on the road.

Howdy had been an ardent supporter of the Progressive Conservative party since the early 1950s and continued to serve as a fund raiser and campaign worker in retirement. Whereas his mother had been a delegate at the founding convention of the socialist Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party in Regina in 1933, Howdy preferred the politics of prairie populist John Diefenbaker and almost stood as a candidate in the 1958 federal election that delivered a stunning Conservative landslide. As it was, he ran in the 1964 Saskatchewan provincial election in Wadena, which included his home-

town of Bankend, and placed a respectable but distant third in the riding. The experience never dampened his interest in politics and he was always ready and willing to debate the issues of the day.

The McPhails bought a section of land west of Meota in the mid-1970s, where Howdy dabbled in farming for a brief period before renting it out. He loved nothing better than walking the land, probably because it was reminiscent of his prairie childhood. And he would read, mostly literature and poetry, until macular degeneration forced him to give it up. There was still music, though. He and Mary would regularly visit London, where they owned a house in Chiswick, to take in operas and concerts—just as Howdy had done during the war—before travelling on to a villa in Lanzarote in the Canary Islands for the winter sun. This passion for fine things was balanced by his life-long interest in sports, especially football. Howdy was at Toronto's Skydome in 1989 when his beloved Saskatchewan Roughriders won the greatest championship game in Grey Cup history. He also had the good fortune to watch the Riders win their first cup in Vancouver in 1966.

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Howdy's aviation career was formally recognized in 1995 when he was among the first inductees into the new Saskatchewan Aviation Hall of Fame. Four years later, he was named to the Saskatchewan Agricultural Hall of Fame, largely for his pioneering aerial spraying. Nor was his war service forgotten. When North Battleford set aside a park to recognize the contribution of local men and women to the century's wars, it was named after Howdy. These honours fortunately came before his March 2001 death, just two weeks after his eighty-sixth birthday. But what would have probably pleased him even more was the central place of his aerial farm photography in an exhibition that toured ten western Canadian galleries beginning in the fall of 2002.<sup>36</sup> His obliques were considered some of the best of the genre—for several reasons.

Howdy would have been the first to admit that he initially started taking aerial photographs for purely selfish reasons. He needed to find something to do after his spraying work was over and commercial photography seemed the answer. At least, he hoped it would help pay the bills. He consequently tried to shoot each place as pleasingly as possible so that people would want to buy



*Cando, Saskatchewan*

the picture. In a way, it was a form of flattery, putting the best “face” on the subject. And those individuals who bought one of Howdy's photographs played along. Farmers asked for specific colours for their buildings and then proudly hung the framed picture in their home in a prominent place. Storekeepers were no different. One person who ordered an aerial view of Laird for a batch of calenders asked that the leaves be put on the trees if possible during the hand-tinting process.

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It would be easy, then, simply to dismiss Howdy's aerial photographs as a collection of manufactured pretty pictures and nothing more. But unlike other competitors who also worked on spec at the time, Howdy was determined to photograph all the farms in a particular district, even those places that had known better days and a sale was unlikely. He seemed to understand the future value of what he was doing—beyond selling a few pictures—and that history would best be served by as complete a record as possible. That's why he worked so diligently from township maps, as if he was on another mission, only now in peacetime. He brought the same careful preparation and structured organization to his photographing of urban centres. No village, town, or city was more important than any other, and he captured literally hundreds on film. The result is one of the most comprehensive pictorial collections of the farms of west-central Saskatchewan and urban centres from the Lakehead westward. Not only that, but because the photographs are taken from the air, they offer a refreshing or unusual perspective.

*When* Howdy was taking pictures is also important. The Battlefords region was not heavily settled until the

early twentieth century when tens of thousands of prospective homesteaders invaded the new province of Saskatchewan. Some fifty years later, Howdy was documenting what had become of this agricultural colonization and how two generations of farming had transformed the environment. Many settlers had successfully met the challenge of turning 160 acres into a commercial operation, as evidenced by the neatly cultivated fields and grid roads in place of the unbroken prairie landscape. The sense of order is only disturbed by the frequent reminders of the pioneer past in some of Howdy's photographs—old structures, sometimes first shelters, discarded machinery, and rock piles about the farmsteads. Several farmers had also clearly learned the importance of conserving moisture on the prairies where evaporation exceeds precipitation on an annual basis and planted shelter belts along the edge of their fields and around the farm yard. Those in the northern parkland faced a quite different challenge. Many of these homesteads were not settled until the Great Depression and seemed to be in a constant struggle with the bush, so much so that a good deal of the land had still not been cleared. The presence of so many trees in some

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of the photographs confirms that much of the land was never meant for wheat cultivation, as originally promoted, and that settlers had to find other ways to make a living.

Equally prominent in Howdy's farmstead images are the gardens, chicken coops, and occasional orchard, which underscored how self-sufficient farm families continued to be into the 1950s. Electricity would not reach the Saskatchewan countryside until that decade, while indoor plumbing, including flush toilets, was still several years away. The poverty of some operations is plainly visible in the photographs, suggesting that success was often elusive and that dreams never matched up with reality for some farm families. It is no wonder that the rural way of life in post-war Canada was seen as backward, lacking in opportunity, but worst of all, in decline. High school, radios, movies, even all-weather roads introduced young people to another world beyond the farm. A woman who grew up in the Marsden area in the 1950s found "the isolation ... incredible. I just couldn't wait to get away from that lifestyle."<sup>37</sup>

Howdy's photographs of towns, villages, and cities, on the other hand, speak to a time when agriculture served

as the engine of the Canadian economy. The vast network of railway lines and country elevators were all part of a grand design to deliver wheat to the international export market. The other striking feature in the photographs is the rigid similarity of the small prairie towns and villages. Since these communities essentially existed to provide a shipping point for grain and to distribute merchandise, the railway station and freight yards, along with a row of elevators, serve as the focal point in many of Howdy's scenes. The main commercial street, in the meantime, either fronted on the train station, or, more commonly, ran at right angles or perpendicular to the tracks, thereby forming a T. Most of the commercial buildings along Main Street—from a hotel and bank to a general store and café—tended to reinforce the sameness of the towns by adopting a generic style for their structures, including false wooden fronts. It is as if they had been made with a cookie cutter.

The flip side of the story captured in Howdy's aerials was a Canada—but especially a rural Canada—on the cusp of fundamental change. The end of the Second World War had ushered in a period of accelerated urban-



*Howdy McPhail (right, with camera) with Panis Antoniadis outside the North Battleford hangar.* HUGH J.D. MCPHAIL

ization and industrialization that would profoundly alter the character of the country. Agriculture, meanwhile, was troubled by instability and had been displaced from its favoured position in the national economy by other resource industries. These developments translated into a steady depopulating of the countryside and fewer but bigger farms in western Canada. A good many of the

places photographed by Howdy were consequently consolidated into large, heavily mechanized operations, or more likely, abandoned within two decades. A similar fate befell many small villages and hamlets, which can no longer be found today on a road map. Urban centres, at the same time, benefitted from this population shift, as young people fled the family farm at first opportunity and headed to the city for a job that in many cases had nothing to do with agriculture. So, while Howdy is often credited for photographing Saskatchewan farms before out-migration had taken its toll on rural society, he also created a visual record of towns and cities before the resource and industrial boom of the post-war period and accompanying population growth had brought about a large-scale, physical transformation of these centres and the nature of their economies. They are historical artifacts, documentary evidence of a time and place seemingly light years away.

What really distinguishes Howdy's work is the simple artistry of each composition. His aerials are not in any sense generic, or for that matter, sterile. Even though he was both flying the plane and using a hand-held camera,

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his photographs are amazingly sharp. They are also surprisingly detailed, especially given the distance from the subject, and this textual richness provides a window to the material culture of the period. Howdy had a keen sense of the landscape and tried to capture the rhythm and patterns of daily life by including people and their activities in the scenes whenever possible. The pictures are effectively saying that this is their home ground. Nothing

delighted Howdy more during his picture outings than spotting individuals waving at him as he flew overhead and pressed the shutter. That moment—that intersection of plane, camera, and subject—can never be duplicated again given the transitory nature of photography.<sup>38</sup> It's what makes Howdy McPhail's pictures so special, so valuable, but most of all, so reflective of a truly remarkable pilot who took aerial obliques to the level of an art form.