

CHAPTER 13

**Renewing the Calgary Stampede for the 21st Century:
A Conversation with Vern Kimball, Stampede Chief
Executive Officer**



Vern Kimball (centre) with Dr. David Chalack, vice-chairman of the board of directors (left) and George Brookman, president and chairman of the board (right).

The Calgary Stampede's history began in 1884 when the Calgary and District Agricultural Society was formed. The success of the first fair in 1886 set the stage for what would become annual summer fairs. In 1912 the first Calgary Stampede rodeo took the town by storm, and in 1923 the rodeo and the exhibition merged, creating the annual Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. The following decades saw the organization grow beyond the annual celebration to include many programs and venues at Stampede Park. A new brand introduced in 2007 simplified the organization's name to the Calgary Stampede and unified the many aspects of the organization, all focused on preserving and promoting western heritage and values year-round.

The Calgary Stampede is a volunteer-supported not-for-profit organization with a vision to build Stampede Park into a world-class, year-round gathering place. In 2004 the organization unveiled a fifteen-year plan to revitalize Stampede Park. The plan is more than just another construction project – it's about building a better community. Stampede Park will include new trade and entertainment facilities, expanded green space, a youth campus, a new agriculture arena, a hotel, a retail marketplace, and a riverfront heritage park.

Without a doubt, the Calgary Stampede is a best known for its annual ten-day city-wide community celebration. It is the highlight of the summer for Calgarians and their guests. Known as "The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth," the event has become part of Calgary's culture and attracts over 1.25 million people to Stampede Park each year.

Beyond the July celebration, Stampede Park hosts 1.2 million people each year for trade and consumer shows, weddings, meetings, and a wide range of entertainment options.

As Calgary changes, the Calgary Stampede continues to adapt to its surroundings and contribute to the city's quality of life. For many reasons, it has earned a place deep in the heart of the community.

The following interview was conducted in the spring of 2007 with Vern Kimball, the organization's chief executive officer, who provided a candid perspective from inside the Stampede organization at a time of enormous change and growth.

Q: The Calgary Stampede in many ways has remained remarkably faithful to its roots, with the elements and spirit of the earliest events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still present today. What is the

significance of this historical legacy, and what stories from those early days inspire you the most?

Vern Kimball: Right from the start, the Stampede was more than just a local fair. It was a celebration of the unique character of the people who live here. The entire community participated in making the event come to life. The symbols and traditions clearly represented something meaningful to the community.

When I think of those early years, what really stands out for me is the story of Guy Weadick. He was the inspiration behind most of the vital elements that we associate with the Calgary Stampede today.

Guy was the American impresario who organized a “Calgary Stampede” rodeo in 1912. It was a tribute to the vanishing open range era and cowboy culture – which at the time was thought to be at risk of vanishing. He came back to town to stage a second Stampede in 1919 to celebrate the end of the First World War.

When the agricultural fair and rodeo merged in 1923, Weadick’s genius for showmanship came to the forefront. He built up chuckwagon racing as a marquee event, and he attracted the best cowboys in the world for the rodeo. Just as important, he engaged the entire city in Stampede activities. Shopkeepers decorated their storefronts in old western style, people vied for prizes for dressing western, and the street breakfasts and barbeques were a big hit.

This community involvement – continuing to this day – is what makes the Stampede unique.

For sure, Guy was building on a mythology of the untamed West, but his ideas were rooted in the history of the North American West. His Stampede was a real reflection of the excitement and unpredictability of life in the West, and man’s relationship to the land and his animals.

Guy Weadick was also remarkable for his foresight in involving the Treaty Seven First Nations. In the early days of settlement of the West, the Canadian government permitted First Nations people to leave their reserves for a maximum of three days at a time. When Weadick conceived of the first Stampede in 1912, he and a few influential Calgary politicians successfully petitioned the federal government to allow the people to come off their reserves for the entire festival. This was enormously important because it meant they were able to practise and showcase their culture at a time when those traditions were at risk. For this reason, this first Stampede is a significant milestone for

the Treaty Seven people. Nearly a century later, our Indian Village continues to be a vital component of the annual festival, and it traces its roots to Weadick's vision in 1912.

Q: We are now halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century and the Calgary Stampede is in the midst of its most exciting period of change since the days of Guy Weadick. However, there's an old saying – “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.” Given the Stampede's considerable success historically, why did the organization decide in 2000 it was time for change?

Kimball: It's true that by 2000, we had enjoyed tremendous growth and success. The annual Calgary Stampede had grown to become one of Canada's most important tourist attractions. And in the rest of the year, Stampede Park was busier than ever with hundreds of activities.

However, it was also clear that our community was changing around us. Thousands of people were – and still are – moving to Calgary each year from all over Canada and the world. The population in the community was becoming younger and more diverse, and the city's population was drawing ever closer to the one-million mark. As an organization we needed to ensure we were growing and changing in step with the community.

The board of directors commissioned a reputation survey in 2002 to help us understand how the Calgary Stampede was perceived by the community. We hired research consultants who surveyed a cross-section of the community, including a large number of Calgarians, community and business leaders, neighbours around Stampede Park, and our employees and volunteers.

The results were both encouraging and revealing.

Respondents really valued the economic and tourism benefits we generate for the area. They told us they loved the annual celebration in July, but they didn't know much about what we did the rest of the year. Many didn't know we were a not-for-profit organization – in fact, a good number thought we were a for-profit company. We also found that the demographics of our volunteer group did not reflect the “new Calgary” – in other words, we needed to bring in a younger and more diverse group of volunteers.

Most important, the research – which has been reinforced by subsequent surveys – found that Calgarians connect to the Stampede at a deeper level.

The Stampede represents a key set of community values...values that are important to them. They told us we did a good job preserving and promoting western heritage and values, and they wanted us to do more.

It was the first time we had ever looked at ourselves formally from the outside in, and the feedback had a tremendous impact on our thinking. It challenged us to remember our roots and reinforced our desire to be more than just a ten-day event in July.

In response to this research, we have set into motion a range of fundamental changes, from how we're structured, to how we operate and communicate.

We established a formal core purpose – “To preserve and promote western heritage and values” – to clarify our mandate for everyone across the organization. We reorganized our board and management structure. The board of directors invited several outside community leaders – people who bring diverse skills and backgrounds – to join the board and other subcommittees. And the board has updated and enhanced our governance policies and processes.

We also took a hard look at our volunteer structure. As a not-for-profit organization, our volunteer system is extremely important to us. Volunteerism is an important legacy from our earliest days. These are people who believe deeply in their community. Volunteers made the first event happen in 1886, and they continue to support the event to this day. Currently we have more than 2,200 active volunteers, and through the years there have been tens of thousands more who have contributed to our growth and success. We have one of the most successful year-round volunteer systems in Calgary, if not the country.

We challenged ourselves to provide volunteer services that would be second to none, and to integrate the volunteers with our paid employees so everyone would function more cohesively as a team.

This assessment resulted in a whole new approach and a new way of thinking. We created a new full-time staff position of volunteer services manager and a professional volunteer management group. Now when we talk about our “human resources,” we mean both our paid employees and our volunteers. It's a new, holistic approach.

We also recognized that focused, regular communications would create more transparency with how we make our decisions and how we interact with the community. People wanted to understand us, so there was a need for us to tell our story much more effectively.

So, we created a corporate communications department and hired professionals who are effectively communicating the Stampede's stories. We've taken a new, open approach to two-way communication with our internal

and external stakeholders. We're open to new ideas. We're listening and responding. This has had a positive effect throughout the organization and has been well received in the community.

One of the most satisfying things for me is to see how soon after we introduced these changes the organization responded positively. People will tell you that they are functioning on the same page, asking "How can we do things better?" and "How can we work together to build a better organization?"

We are also approaching our partners in the community, asking them the same questions, and they are helping us find ways and means to improve our participation in community life. As we have reached out, the community has reached back to us.

Q: Did this research lead to the Stampede's plans for expansion?

Kimball: Actually, we expressed our desire to expand Stampede Park in the 1980s. We finally put forward a plan that Calgary City Council approved in 1998 that called for the expansion of the Park by an eight-block area, extending north to Twelfth Avenue SE, between Macleod Trail and Elbow River. In the years that followed, we had laid out some general priorities for expansion, but the reputation research really caused us to stretch our thinking.

We challenged our architects to think not just about the eight-block expansion zone, but to think in terms of the potential for the entire Stampede Park. In turn, our architects challenged us to think big.

Rather than simply expand by 40 acres, we agreed to consider how we could redevelop all 193 acres so Stampede Park could be a gathering place where western heritage and values were celebrated 365 days a year.

All this led to the creation of a sweeping 15-year vision for redeveloping Stampede Park, which we unveiled for the community in 2004. There are about twelve distinct projects within the overall plan, but each piece works as part of the whole. For example, we're working with our Treaty Seven partners to relocate Indian Village to a site physically closer to the original encampments, which were adjacent to Fort Calgary, and restore and enhance access to the Elbow River. This will allow us to create a wonderful inner-city park that will complement other heritage components while also providing

a unique destination that will answer people's needs for natural spaces in their lives.

We feel very strongly about our role as stewards of this historic land, including the river that flows through the park. We want Stampede Park to be a green oasis in the middle of a busy metropolitan core. Our comprehensive set of environmental programs protects the natural beauty of the land and the Elbow River and makes us an environmental leader in Calgary. That commitment will continue to guide how we approach projects such as the new trade and entertainment facilities, a youth campus, hotel, new agriculture building, and a retail marketplace.

Q: Every organization has its unique challenges and issues, and the Stampede is no exception. Western Canada is highly urbanized, and our population is more ethnically diverse than it was twenty years ago. What is the Stampede organization doing to address these changing realities and to stay relevant?

Kimball: The changes we are making are about ensuring that the Stampede – as an organization, as a year-round gathering place, including the annual ten-day celebration – remains an integral part of the social and economic fabric of Calgary and southern Alberta.

We are a not-for-profit organization, so our bottom line is not about making money. Our bottom line is about bringing people from all walks of life together and building a better community. This is what the Stampede has done from its earliest days. We continue to represent the community values – western hospitality, integrity, pride of place, and commitment to community – that people define as being fundamental to Calgary's culture and values.

In the spring of 2007 we introduced a new brand identity that integrates the Calgary Stampede name across all parts of the organization, across all events in all times of the year. This will help us communicate who we are, what we do, and what we represent. Most important, this brand communicates that we're more than the annual Stampede – we preserve and promote the community values that lie at the heart of the southern Alberta community.

We are taking many other steps to stay relevant. We are putting a big effort into recruiting more youth and members of Calgary's diverse communities to

our volunteer ranks, as well as newcomers to Calgary, whom we are finding to be some of our most enthusiastic supporters.

The board is recruiting more women and representatives of Calgary's corporate and diverse communities, as well as adding more people with governance and financial expertise, which will stand us in good stead as we build out the development plan.

We have also built new bridges with governments at all levels – municipal, provincial, and federal – to the point that our lines of communication with governments are now wide open. As a result, government members now better appreciate the economic and social value of the Stampede – and our still untapped potential.

Q: Agriculture has always been a priority for the Calgary Stampede. What are you doing to ensure that remains the case, particularly given the changing demographics and the increasing urbanization of western Canada?

Kimball: Our commitment to agriculture goes back 120 years and is unwavering. Stampede Park is home to one of the most diverse agriculture showcases that exist anywhere. Each year, we host more than 75 agriculture events and programs for commerce, trade, sports and entertainment, celebration and learning. By connecting people from rural and urban communities, this park continues to be a vital gathering place for southern Alberta.

However, we recognized the agriculture industry is changing, and we are adapting our thinking in response. A major part of our Stampede Park Development Plan is to provide new and innovative ways to link agricultural producers and consumers and rural and urban audiences. For instance, we have partnered with Olds College to create a thriving agriculture college campus right at centre of the city.

Another key development project is a new agricultural facility to replace our nearly 100-year-old barn – this will help us better showcase the industry. This will be a centrepiece of our effort to support Alberta producers as they introduce their products and services to the wider Canadian and international marketplace and to educate and engage diverse audiences about agriculture.

Another unique reputation challenge we face is communicating our care for our animals. Animals were a vital part of the development of the West,

and we think it's important that we continue to showcase that heritage. We are very proud of how well we take care of our animals. We work directly with the Calgary Humane Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to identify and implement new ways to enhance our animal care measures for the Stampede rodeo and chuckwagon events. As a result, for years we've been the leader in setting stringent rules to ensure the safety of the animals for these events.

Ultimately, however, we will use all 193 acres of the Park to support agriculture-related programming. Olds College, for example, will use the river frontage as part of its environmental stewardship programs. And the expanding Roundup Centre facilities will continue to host national and international industry conferences and meetings that are so important to sharing agriculture knowledge on a global scale.

Q: What do you hope the Calgary Stampede will be in five, ten, twenty, or even one hundred years from now?

Kimball: Today, the organization is in growth mode as we implement our development plan, so I'm expecting that over the next ten years we will, working with our partners, spend \$600 million to improve our facilities and programs for the benefit of all Calgarians. That expenditure will encourage subsequent developments. Our \$350 million annual economic impact will also increase, and I wouldn't be surprised to see it double in the next few years.

However, even though the physical manifestations of the Stampede will change over time, more important for me than bricks and mortar is keeping the spirit of the Stampede alive throughout the community. We have created a renewed sense of purpose across our organization and a new level of connection with Calgarians. I think these will help the Calgary Stampede to continue to flourish in the decades to come.

We are proud of our success, but we recognize that to maintain our relevance and importance in the future, we have to continue to nurture what has been created. Enduring brands must have a powerful combination of reflecting their past and tying themselves to the future. The Calgary Stampede is very fortunate to have both. However, we are at a pivotal stage in our history, with the opportunity to integrate the power of the Stampede brand across all that we do, 365 days a year.

I said earlier that as we reach out to our community, the community is reaching back. I believe this reflects the enormous change Calgarians are experiencing as their city continues its rapid growth. People want to protect Calgary's unique spirit and identity. Our research finds they consistently talk about a set of values – western hospitality, integrity, pride of place, and commitment to community – that are essential to the character of their community. Calgarians don't want to lose these values. And they are looking to the Stampede, as they have for 120 years, to represent those values. We intend to fulfill that expectation.