

“Charging Down the Field For All to See”  
The Edmonton Eskimos and their Impact on the Identity of the City of  
Edmonton\*

By

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The city of Edmonton has a proud history of success in the realm of sports. Although given to the city for different reasons, the title of “The City of Champions,” has become a reflection of this proud history. Whether it’s the Commercial Grads basketball team that dominated between 1915 and 1940 or the Edmonton Oilers that dominated the National Hockey League in the 1980’s, Edmonton has seen a substantial amount of sporting success and is exceptionally proud of this history. However, too often sporting successes are looked upon as isolated events that have little or no meaningful impact on the development of a city. In the cases of the Grads and the Oilers, there is significant evidence to suggest that both teams did more than just win games. In fact, the impact of these teams goes well beyond field of play as both teams contributed to community identity, and thus helped shape the Edmonton that we know today. Outside of the Grads and the Oilers, there is another team that has an equal or possibly greater impact on the city of Edmonton. That team is the Edmonton Eskimos football team. Unlike these other teams, the Eskimos<sup>1</sup> have existed in one form or another for a large portion of the history of the city of Edmonton. While the Grads faded out of existence in 1940 and the Oilers only sprang onto the scene in the 1970’s, the first form of the Eskimos emerged shortly after the turn of the century and, despite short disappearances, are still active today.

Throughout their existence, the Eskimos have had a substantial impact on the identity of the city of Edmonton and many of the citizens therein. First of all, the Eskimos have played an important role in the boosterism related activities of Edmonton. Secondly, they have acted as a

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\* This paper is dedicated to my Grandfather, long-time Edmonton resident, and Eskimos fan Doug Astley. On October 11, 2010 I discussed my thoughts on this paper with Grandpa and he had many helpful insights. This would be my last conversation with Grandpa. The next morning he suffered a stroke and he died in hospital a week later. Grandpa was always very supportive of my educational endeavours and for this and many other things he did I am very thankful.

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of simplicity from this point forward I will refer to the Eskimos football team as simply the Eskimos. While other Edmonton sports teams including (baseball and hockey) have used this name they will not be focused on in this paper.

link which was able to bring the divided communities that exist within Edmonton together. And thirdly, they have contributed to the identity of the city by acting as a launching platform for people who would become significant members of the community in areas outside of sport. Before we continue to assess the impact that the Eskimos had on the identity of Edmonton and its citizens, we must first outline the background and context in which this impact developed. First we will look at a brief history of Edmonton followed by an equally brief history of the Edmonton Eskimos.

Edmonton was incorporated as a city in 1904 and one year later became the provincial capital, when Alberta joined Confederation. The choice of Edmonton as the capital was a controversial one. Naturally, other cities within the province, including Calgary, felt that they deserved the honour. Around the turn of the century Edmonton experienced steady growth. In 1897, the population was a mere one thousand people, but by 1905 the combined population of Edmonton and Strathcona was 11,400. The population continued to grow and by 1911 the combined population of the two cities was 37,000.<sup>2</sup> A year later Edmonton and Strathcona would be joined into one city. In the 1920's the prosperity that Alberta had been experiencing since its inception as a province began to slow down. A drop in wheat prices drove Alberta into a recession and this in turn led to a decrease in new settlers moving to the province.<sup>3</sup> Edmonton was no exception to this province wide downturn. In 1914 the population of Edmonton had been over 70,000 but by 1921 the population had fallen to around 59,000.<sup>4</sup> From there the population slowly began to grow again, and in 1931 the population of Edmonton was 79,000 people.<sup>5</sup> The Great Depression then struck Alberta and ultimately Edmonton, followed by World War Two,

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 137, 139.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 198.

<sup>4</sup> Betke, "Sports Promotion in the Western Canadian City" *Urban History Review* 12:2 (October 1983):47.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 209.

both of which limited the amount of sporting activity in the province. However, the post war years proved to be an altogether different story, as new economic prosperity and affluence led to a revival in the popularity of professional sports.<sup>6</sup>

Football, or rugby football, emerged in Edmonton prior to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but a team by the name of the Eskimos did not appear until 1903. Ironically the name was given to the Edmonton team by a reporter from the Calgary Herald who referred to the team as “the Esquimaux [sic] from the frozen north.”<sup>7</sup> In 1910 the name was first used officially and in 1911 the Eskimos joined the Alberta Big Four League and the Western Canadian Rugby Football Union.<sup>8</sup> In this period, the Eskimos were coached by Deacon White who arrived in Edmonton in 1906 from the United States. Under White, the Eskimos’ began to recruit American players and in 1912 the Eskimos had three American players.<sup>9</sup> Football was almost entirely interrupted by the First World War but after the war ended, football, and the Eskimos, once again became a priority. In 1921, after winning the western championship, the Eskimos became the first team from the west to challenge the eastern champion for the Grey Cup. The Eskimos lost that game to the Toronto Argonauts, but they refused to give up their dream of being the first western team to win the Grey Cup. The following year they challenged once again, this time losing to Queens University.<sup>10</sup> Following these defeats, the Eskimos suffered through a series of losing seasons which, along with the great depression, led to the team disbanding between 1933 and 1937.<sup>11</sup> However, the story of the Eskimos would not end here.

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<sup>6</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 311.

<sup>7</sup> Cashman, *The Edmonton Story*, (Edmonton: The Institute of Applied Art Ltd., 1956) 183.

<sup>8</sup> Redmond, *Forty Years of Tradition*, (Edmonton: ESP Marketing and Communications Ltd., 1990), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Cosentino, *Canadian Football: The Grey Cup Years*, (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited) 1969. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Redmond, *Forty Years of Tradition*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

In 1938 the Eskimos reappeared briefly and joined the Western Interprovincial Football Union. That same year the Eskimos had a new stadium to play in, as Clarke Stadium was completed.<sup>12</sup> However, this reincarnation of the Eskimos was cut short as World War Two broke out and decreased the public's appetite for football. In 1949 a football team by the name of the Eskimos once again called Edmonton home, and this time the team would remain for the long term. This franchise continues to exist today; The Eskimos still experience a great deal of success. The team won three consecutive Grey Cups in the 1950's beginning in 1954, and the team boasted some of its greatest players at this time including the now legendary Jackie Parker. In the 1970's and 1980's Edmonton won seven Grey Cups including a streak of five in a row beginning in 1978. In total, the Edmonton Eskimos have won thirteen Grey Cups, the second most in the history of the Canadian Football league, and have played an important role in the development of the identity of Edmonton.

Having outlined the background and context that is necessary, we can now move forward with our discussion of how the Edmonton Eskimos have impacted the development of identity in the city of Edmonton. The first way in which the Eskimos affected the identity of Edmonton and Edmontonians, was through their contribution to local boosterism. Boosterism can be described as activities undertaken by those whose primary goal is to ensure the sustained growth and development of a community.<sup>13</sup> In other words, it is the goal of those who partake in boosterism to promote their community and encourage its growth. In the early 1900's boosterism played an important role in nearly every community in Western Canada because all the cities and towns were competing for new settlers and new businesses. While there were many different ways to engage in boosterism, one popular avenue was through sport. The role of sport in boosterism is

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<sup>12</sup> Redmond, *Forty Years of Tradition*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Lightbody, *City Politics Canada*, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), 545.

explained quite well by Gruneau and Whitson, who state that the presence of community life was an important aspect of boosterism. Sports had the ability to demonstrate community life and, as a result, were able to portray the image of a growing and vibrant community.<sup>14</sup> Also, sports teams proved to be very useful when it came to spreading the reputation of a city or town.<sup>15</sup> By travelling and playing teams in other markets, sport teams were able to garner attention for the city it represented. For example, by simply competing against a team from Eastern Canada, a Western Canadian town would almost certainly get mentioned in large eastern newspapers. This publicity was thought to increase the chances of attracting people to the young, growing western cities.

There are numerous examples of sports related boosterism playing an important role in the development of western Canadian towns and cities. In Vulcan, Alberta baseball played a crucial role in boosterism as it gave towns a chance to prove their superiority over their neighbours. In fact, the competition was so important to these communities that when they felt their team was not good enough to win, they would opt to not play rather than risk the humiliation of defeat. However, if a town boasted a strong team they would play as many games as they could and take any opportunity they could to beat their rivals and neighbouring towns.<sup>16</sup>

Much like many other developing western towns and cities of the time, Edmonton was looking to boost its image by any means possible in the early 1900's. Like in Vulcan, and other prairie communities, sports proved to play an important role in Edmonton's boosterism. For Edmonton, the Eskimos proved to be an important part of this boosterism. The best examples of the Eskimos supporting Edmonton boosterism come from the Grey Cup challenges made by the

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<sup>14</sup> Gruneau, *Hockey Night in Canada*, (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993), 210-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Voisey, "Boosting the Small Prairie Town, 1904-1931," In *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, Ed. by Alan F.J. Artibise. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1981) 155.

team in 1921 and 1922. These two instances demonstrate the Eskimos effect on boosterism in a number of ways. First of all, in both 1921 and 1922, the Eskimos had to pay for their own travel to Ontario in order to play for the Grey Cup. In order to finance their trip in 1921 the Eskimos borrowed \$1,800 from the Rotary Club of Edmonton.<sup>17</sup> In 1922 the team was sponsored by the Edmonton Elks club and the team temporarily changed its nickname from the Eskimos to the Elks as a result.<sup>18</sup> The fact that these groups opted to sponsor or loan money to this team, is indicative of the fact that they felt this trip could have a positive impact on Edmonton. Neither of these groups had any specific ties to the Eskimos but likely recognized the positive attention that this Grey Cup challenge could bring to Edmonton.

Another indication of the Eskimos' role in boosterism can be found when considering the economic situation around the time of the Grey Cup challenges in the 1920's. The early 1920's were difficult years in Alberta's history. Falling grain prices and drought led to an economic recession that forced many Albertans to relocate. This recession led to a decrease in people moving to the province as the prospects in Alberta seemed dim.<sup>19</sup> However, out of this context we find Edmonton willing to spend money to send a football team to Toronto to play in games that they would most likely lose. This demonstrates the role that Edmonton's boosters felt the Eskimos could have in adding to the prestige of the city. Clearly, they considered the Grey Cup to be important enough to warrant exhausting valuable resources to make it happen. Perhaps it was a response to the decline in newcomers as a result of the recession that led them to this idea, but nevertheless the Eskimos were seen as a tool to help boost the city.

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<sup>17</sup> Cosentino, *Canadian Football: The Grey Cup Years*, (Toronto: The Musson Book Company Limited) 1969. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Betke, "The Social Significance of Sport in the City," In *Cities in West: Papers of the Western Canada Urban History Conference*, ed. by A.R. McCormack and I. Macpherson (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975) 222.

<sup>19</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 198.

The third way we can see that the Eskimos played a role in Edmonton's boosterism through these Grey Cup challenges, is by looking at the response of Edmonton media after the games. The Eskimos lost their first Grey Cup challenge in 1921 to Toronto by a score of 23 to 0. Based on this fact one would generally assume that the media would not look upon the defeated team very highly when they returned home. However, in this case the opposite was true. On December 7, 1921 the *Edmonton Journal*'s front page contained an article entitled "Eskimos Trip was financially very successful." Clearly, despite the loss, the Edmonton media considered the trip a success for reasons outside of the football game. The article goes on to state that "publicity, which could not be purchased, was gained through the trip, and Edmonton benefited to the extent of thousands of inches of newspaper space in papers located across the continent."<sup>20</sup> Also, the author of this article takes time to mention the fact that the Eskimo players were well behaved on the trip and did not break any rules.<sup>21</sup> This provides us with an amazing example of the importance the Eskimos' trip east and the Grey Cup challenges for boosterism. The fact that the article pays little attention to the final score of the game and instead focuses on the newspaper space that Edmonton received in the major newspapers, demonstrates that boosterism was the primary reason for this trip.

The Eskimos' contribution to Edmonton's boosterism is one of the many ways that the team helped to shape Edmonton's identity. In this case the Eskimos added to the identity of Edmonton by helping construct the notion that Edmonton qualified as a top level Canadian city. By going to Eastern Canada and gaining the attention of many eastern newspapers the Eskimos brought recognition to Edmonton that it would not have otherwise gained. This attention encouraged the boosters of Edmonton and likely inspired other projects that would attempt to

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<sup>20</sup> "Eskimos Trip was Financially very Successful," *Edmonton Journal*, December 7, 1921. Accessed December 7, 2010. [http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/newspapr/np\\_page2.asp?code=nklp0818.jpg](http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/newspapr/np_page2.asp?code=nklp0818.jpg)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

achieve this same goal. Whether successful or not, this boosterism altered the identity of Edmonton and contributed to the way that Edmontonians saw their city.

Outside of boosterism the Eskimos also impacted the identity of Edmonton in many ways. Another way was by bringing the many ethnic or religious groups within Edmonton together and uniting them as a community. According to Carl Betke, Edmonton in the early 1900's was a community with many divisions. He states that in 1921 only one quarter of the population had lived in Edmonton for a long period of time and only half of the population had been born in Canada.<sup>22</sup> Also, the community was divided across religious denominations with "eighty percent of the population divided among Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists and Roman Catholics."<sup>23</sup> Looking beyond the 1920's we can see that Edmonton has remained a very diverse city. In the 1970's and 80's Alberta's prosperity resulted in a substantial influx of newcomers to the province from other Canadian provinces and other countries.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this, Edmonton needed structures to bring community members together, give newcomers an opportunity to easily get involved, and unite the community.

The question then becomes, can sports fulfill this need within a diverse community like Edmonton? Carl Betke addresses this topic in his discussion of the social importance of sports in Edmonton in the 1920's. He raises the example of the Edmonton Grads and their ability to unite Edmonton. The Commercial Grads was a women's basketball team in Edmonton that dominated within Canada and internationally between 1922 and 1940.<sup>25</sup> One example Betke gives to demonstrate the Grads ability to unite the city, comes from a banquet held to honour the Grads achievements in 1930. At this banquet Betke states that they sang a song titled "O Town of

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<sup>22</sup> Betke, "The Social Significance of Sport in the City: Edmonton in the 1920s," 211.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 330-334.

<sup>25</sup> Mills, "100 Years of Sports," In *Alberta: A State of Mind*. Edited by Sydney Sharpe (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2005) 216.

Mine” which ended with the lyrics “You’re the best town in the world, O town of mine!”<sup>26</sup> Here we can see the community pride that surrounded the success that the Grads experienced. It is significant that such a song was sung at a banquet honouring the Grads because the song does not contain any mention of them, but instead honours the city that they represented. The Grads had given community members a common theme to celebrate; the successes of their city. Later on in his discussion of the Edmonton Grads, Betke argues that “urban loyalty might have been something less without the Grads’ exploits.”<sup>27</sup> He argues that the outstanding responses that they got from the community, were reliant on the successes they had experienced and not a pre-existing community pride. In fact, the community pride was a response to the teams amazing success.

In order to demonstrate the Eskimos’ ability to unite Edmonton let us compare Betke’s argument in favour of the Grads ability to unite the community to the case of the Eskimos. The Eskimos’ accomplishments in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly do not compare to those of the Grads, and as a result they did not impact local identity to the same degree as them. However, the Eskimos did have a noticeable impact on local unity in Edmonton. Betke uses the Grads public support as part of his argument that they created unity in a diverse city. Although not as well supported as the Grads, the Eskimos received substantial community support. When the defeated Eskimos’ side returned home from their first Grey Cup game on Tuesday, December 6, 1921, a crowd had gathered at the train station to meet them and a parade ensued. While we do not know the exact number of people who waited at the train station for the team to arrive, we do

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<sup>26</sup> Betke, “The Social Significance of Sport in the City: Edmonton in the 1920s,” 227-8

<sup>27</sup> Betke, “The Social Significance of Sport in the City: Edmonton in the 1920s,” 229.

have accounts that refer to it as a “huge crowd assembled on the platform.”<sup>28</sup> This may seem rather unimportant, but when we consider the circumstances we can see that this was actually quite meaningful. First of all, it must be considered that the team arrived in Edmonton at 11:25 in the evening. This, combined with the knowledge that they arrived December 6, informs us that the weather was more than likely not pleasant and under normal circumstances would discourage such a gathering. However, like the Grads, the Eskimos had given their community a common theme to celebrate and thus gave Edmontonians a reason to be proud of their city.

This is not the only example of how the Eskimos were able to contribute to community cohesiveness in Edmonton. While the last example demonstrated this in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is also evidence that this continued later in the history of Edmonton. When the Eskimos re-appeared on the Edmonton sporting scene in 1949, the team also contributed to increased community cohesiveness in Edmonton.

Again, let’s consider the aspects of Betke’s argument in the case of the Eskimos of the 1950’s. The support for the Eskimos in this period can be seen through attendance at the team’s home games. The average attendance at Eskimo home games at Clarke Stadium was roughly 16,000 between 1954 and 1956.<sup>29</sup> Considering the city of Edmonton was home to 209,353 people in 1955 and that the capacity of Clarke Stadium was 20,000, these attendance numbers are fairly impressive.<sup>30</sup> Thus, like the Grads, the Eskimos of the 1950’s received a great deal of public support and if we follow Betke’s logic, this would indicate that the Eskimos had an effect on community cohesiveness in Edmonton. However, there is more to consider with the 1950’s

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<sup>28</sup> “Rousing Reception Given Local Gridiron Squad on Their Return From East” *Edmonton Journal*, December 7, 1921. Accessed December 7, 2010.

[http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/newspapr/np\\_page2.asp?code=nk1p0837.jpg](http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/newspapr/np_page2.asp?code=nk1p0837.jpg)

<sup>29</sup> Redmond, *Forty Years of Tradition*, 115. (The regular season consisted of 16 games and the average attendance has been calculated based on the assumption of 8 home games within the 16 game schedule.)

<sup>30</sup> City of Edmonton, “Census History,” Accessed December 7, 2010.

[http://www.edmonton.ca/city\\_government/municipal\\_census/census-history.aspx](http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/municipal_census/census-history.aspx).

Eskimos. In the Fifties the Eskimos had some advantages that allowed them to have a greater effect on community cohesiveness than the Grads did.

Through much of the 1950's the Eskimos' roster contained a number of players who would be considered representatives of minority groups. Players like Johnny Bright, Rollie Miles, and Normie Kwong all played on the team in the 1950's. Also, the ownership group that controlled the team in this period contained members of other cultural groups within society. All of these men were members of Edmonton's first Grey Cup winning team and played during one of the most successful periods in Eskimo history. To properly understand how these players and owners united the community of Edmonton, we must understand the history of these racial groups within Edmonton. African American immigration into Alberta started around 1910 as many began to flee the racial policies of the state of Oklahoma. Approximately one thousand African Americans came to Alberta in this period and were met with a racial backlash in the province. While they often chose to settle in their own separate communities, many white Albertans feared the potential implications of a large black population and submitted a petition to the federal government asking them to bring an end to this immigration from Oklahoma.<sup>31</sup> While no legal action was taken, black immigration was discouraged and the population of African Americans in Alberta remained consistent around one thousand into the 1960's. Over this period of time the population of African Americans did shift from being predominantly rural to becoming more urban. In 1911 only 30% of Alberta's African American population lived in an urban setting but by 1971, 80% called a city home.<sup>32</sup> This shift was especially important in Edmonton which has traditionally housed a larger African American population than other major provincial centres like Calgary. Prior to the 1950's there were few employment options available

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<sup>31</sup> Palmer, "The Black Experience," In *Peoples of Alberta*, ed. By Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985) 371.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 381.

to African Americans within the province and many served as porters on the railway or in other low paying, labour intensive positions.<sup>33</sup> There were also some examples of racial violence including a riot in Calgary during World War Two. However, after World War Two things began to change and African Americans were slowly presented with more opportunities. The exposure of Hitler's racist policies heightened racial sensitivity and the fact that black men served in the military during the war, contributed increase awareness of racism and attempts to lessen its presence. While equality was a long way off, more opportunities were available and athletes like Rollie Miles and Johnny Bright helped to contribute to further inclusion of African Americans in society.

Johnny Bright is an excellent example of an African American who faced harsh racism, overcame it, and as a result was able to help build unity within Edmonton. In 1951, during his college football career at Drake University in Iowa, Bright was the subject of a violent on field attack. During a game against Oklahoma A&M, his opponents took numerous liberties on Bright because of his race and ended up breaking his jaw.<sup>34</sup> Because of this incident and fears of further racism, Bright chose to play professional football in Canada rather than play in the National Football League. Bright's first Canadian stop was Calgary, but after only two seasons he was traded to the Edmonton Eskimos. In Canada, Bright again faced substantial racism. According to an article in the Edmonton Journal after Bright's death, Bright could "tell [...] stories of racism that would make [a person] cringe" from his early time in Alberta.<sup>35</sup> However, Bright's on field success quickly translated into respect within the community and eventually the country. Bright was a part of three Grey Cup winning Eskimo teams, rushed for 10,909 yards, and became the

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<sup>33</sup> Palmer, "The Black Experience," 382.

<sup>34</sup> Soutar, "CFL Legends: Johnny Bright," Accessed December 6, 2010. [http://www.cfl.ca/page/his\\_legends\\_bright](http://www.cfl.ca/page/his_legends_bright)

<sup>35</sup> Horton, "Pride, Courage Bright's Legacy," *Edmonton Journal*, December 15, 1983.

first black player to win the CFL's outstanding player award.<sup>36</sup> After his football career ended, Bright became a teacher in Edmonton and eventually became the principal of a junior high school in the city.

Much like Johnny Bright, Rollie Miles' career as an Eskimo contributed to community cohesiveness in Edmonton. While he was not the victim of a famous racist act like Bright was, Miles undoubtedly faced prejudices that were very similar to those endured by Bright and other black athletes at the time. Miles joined the Eskimos in 1951 and along with Bright helped lead the Edmonton Eskimos to three Grey Cup victories. Miles played both offensively and defensively for the Eskimos and was recognized for his excellent play on both sides of the ball. Three times Miles was named the most valuable player for the Eskimos.<sup>37</sup> Both Johnny Bright and Rollie Miles faced substantial racism during their careers, but as a result of their success on the field, they were able to gain the respect of the community. Additionally, their strong play earned respect for the community that they represented within Edmonton and Alberta. According to Howard Palmer both Bright and Miles "had a positive impact on attitudes toward blacks already in the province."<sup>38</sup>

In addition to African Americans like Johnny Bright and Rollie Miles, the Eskimos of the 1950's also featured a player of Chinese decent. In 1910 the Chinese population of Edmonton was approximately 140 people.<sup>39</sup> While further immigration from China would be restricted, the Chinese population of both Edmonton and Alberta would continue to grow. Chinese people faced a substantial amount of persecution prior to World War Two in Edmonton. For example, in

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<sup>36</sup> Soutar, "CFL Legends: Johnny Bright."

<sup>37</sup> "Rollie Miles," Canadian Football Hall of Fame, Accessed December 6, 2010.  
<http://www.cfhof.ca/page/milesrollie>

<sup>38</sup> Palmer, "The Black Experience," 389.

<sup>39</sup> Dawson, *Moon Cakes in Gold Mountain*, (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1991), 59.

the 1920's Chinese girls were not allowed to train to be nurses.<sup>40</sup> After WWII the situation began to improve for Alberta's Chinese population because China had acted as an ally of Canada's in the war, and the actions of Hitler's Nazi government increased the amount of attention that was paid to racial equality.<sup>41</sup>

Out of this context Normie Kwong emerged as a fullback for the Eskimos and helped unite the community of Edmonton. Kwong was born in Calgary and was the son of parents who had emigrated from China. Despite his Canadian birth, Kwong was identified by his parent's heritage and was nicknamed the "China Clipper." Kwong quickly became a very popular player within Edmonton and twice won the league's outstanding Canadian player award.<sup>42</sup> Kwong's career is an excellent example of how success in professional sports can lead to respect for a cultural group. Kwong states that at times he was not made to feel welcome in public places early in his career, but he says "when people learned I was a first-string player and had made some of the all-star teams [I began] to earn their respect."<sup>43</sup> Kwong not only earned this respect for himself with his on field success, but he also elevated the status of Chinese members of the community. Brian Dawson states that "the respect and esteem generated over the years by Normie Kwong [...] considerably enhanced the image of Chinese-Canadian residents."<sup>44</sup>

We have seen that the Eskimos contributed to the cohesiveness of Edmonton in the 1950's because the team featured players of many ethnic backgrounds. However, the Eskimos have also done this through off field positions as well. When the Eskimos reappeared in 1948, the team was community owned. This may seem insignificant until one considers who was included among this group of owners. Moe Lieberman, Joe Shoctor, and Henry Singer were all

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Dawson, *Moon Cakes in Gold Mountain*, 211-13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>43</sup> Herman, *Kickstart: How Successful Canadians got Started*, (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2008) 28.

<sup>44</sup> Dawson, *Moon Cakes in Gold Mountain*, 215.

included within this initial ownership group and all three of these men were active members of the Jewish community in Edmonton.<sup>45</sup> In 1931 Alberta was home to 3,722 Jews and a majority of these people lived in the urban centres of Edmonton, Calgary, and Lethbridge.<sup>46</sup> The discrimination faced by Jews around the world prior to the Second World War is well documented and was also at play in Alberta. After the war, Jews gained greater acceptance into society and they worked hard to cement their place within the community. For Lieberman, Shoctor, and Singer, a stake in the ownership of Edmonton's new football team served precisely this purpose. As owners of a professional sports team, they were important members of the community and as part of the community ownership group; they were connected with other important Edmontonians.

Johnny Bright, Rollie Miles, Normie Kwong, and these three members of the original ownership group each represented a cultural group that had been on the fringes of the Edmonton community and by being involved with the Eskimos, they gave the team a chance to increase unity within Edmonton. According to Palmer, Bright, Miles, and Kwong helped "provide a new, positive image of Chinese and Blacks" and Lieberman, Shoctor, and Singer helped integrate Jews into Edmonton society.<sup>47</sup> We do not have records of the racial origins of those who attended Eskimo football games but it is a fairly safe assumption that whether or not they attended games, minority groups within Edmonton would have been drawn to the Eskimos because of these men. Thus, unlike the Grads, the Eskimos were able to attract the attention of minority groups within Edmonton and as a result had the opportunity to further decrease the divided nature of Edmonton. Therefore, we can see that the Eskimos did help to decrease the

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<sup>45</sup> Rubin, "Alberta's Jews," In *Peoples of Alberta*, ed. By Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985) 345.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 342, 340.

<sup>47</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 311.

divisions within the community in Edmonton because they received substantial public support and they were able to draw together different ethnic groups because the players on the team came from various ethnic backgrounds.

We have discussed the ways in which sports can help generate cohesiveness in a community by giving its members unity, and how the Eskimos have filled this role in Edmonton in the past. The Eskimos of the 1920's received broad support based on their success within their league and their challenge for the Grey Cup. Also, in the 1950's the Eskimos experienced success on the field and drew substantial crowds for their home games. Additionally, the team featured a trio of players who had the potential to draw ethnic groups together and increase community cohesiveness within Edmonton.

We have already seen that the Eskimos influenced the identity of Edmonton through boosterism and uniting the community. The next form of influence that the Eskimos have had on Edmonton relates to both of these ideas. One of the most apparent ways the Eskimos have impacted Edmonton is through developing and extending Edmonton's rivalry with Calgary. The Edmonton-Calgary rivalry has played a prominent role in the development of the two cities and football has been one of the largest expressions of this rivalry. This rivalry has existed as long as Edmonton and Calgary have, but it gained intensity in 1905 with the creation of Alberta as a province within Canada, and the debate over which of the two cities would become the provincial capital. In 1905 the populations of the two cities were essentially the same so the decisions came down to political allegiances. Edmonton tended to support the Liberal Party while Calgary was generally closer with the Conservative Party. As a result, the Liberal

controlled federal government chose to name Edmonton as the capital city.<sup>48</sup> From there the rivalry has grown and transformed into one of Canada's greatest sporting rivalries.

The football rivalry between the two cities has some early roots as well. One of the first examples of the battle of Alberta in football comes from 1913. In that year the two cities' football teams faced off in the provincial championship. However, the game was not played in Edmonton or Calgary but in Red Deer. A neutral site was necessary for this game because previous meetings between the teams were filled with controversial officiating. The first issues arose when the two teams faced off in Edmonton earlier that year. The referee of the game was from Edmonton, and with the game all tied with less than a minute left to play he allowed the Edmonton players to pile on top of a tackled Calgary player and push him back over the goal line in order to score a single point and win the game.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, a game held in Calgary that year resulted in controversy. In that game, the Edmonton team arrived with only two substitutes, so the game's timekeeper each quarter to be longer than it was supposed to be.<sup>50</sup> Also, the yardsticks were worked by Calgarians and, as a result, Edmonton needed to get substantially more than ten yards in order to pick up first downs. These issues led to the 1913 provincial title game being played in Red Deer. But this did not stop Edmontonians from supporting their team, as three hundred fans took two special trains from Edmonton and watched their Eskimos beat the Calgary Tigers ten to seven.<sup>51</sup>

Thus the football rivalry between Edmonton and Calgary was well established in 1913 and continues to this day. One of the highlights of the Canadian Football League season for many Albertans is the annual Labour Day games. Every year the two teams meet in Calgary on

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<sup>48</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 138-9.

<sup>49</sup> Cashman, *The Edmonton Story*, 184.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

Labour Day and renew acquaintances in Edmonton just four days later for the Friday rematch. However, this leaves us with the question of how this rivalry with Calgary has effected Edmonton's identity and what role the Eskimos have played in this. Boosterism is an integral aspect of many rivalries and in many cases it is the driving force behind the rivalry. Scott Wilson discusses the historic role that sports have played in the development of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. He points out that Moose Jaw used sports as boosterism and this led to a rivalry with Regina. Much like the Edmonton-Calgary rivalry, Moose Jaw and Regina were both considered potential sites for the provincial capital.<sup>52</sup> However, Regina was named the capital in 1905 leaving Moose Jaw desperate to prove its claims of greatness.

Much like Moose Jaw, Edmonton has developed its identity in opposition to its provincial rival. The provincial capital debate ignited a competitive fire between the two cities. As a result, an important part of Edmonton's identity has been separating itself from Calgary and asserting its dominance within the province. Much of Edmonton's boosterism has focused on attempting to make Edmonton seem superior to Calgary. The capital city debate is only one example of Edmonton and Calgary competing with each other for superiority within the province. The re-emergence of the Eskimos in 1949 is also an excellent example of this. In 1948, the Calgary Stampeders won the Grey Cup and thus became the first Albertan team to accomplish that goal. Edmontonians could not let themselves be out done by their provincial rivals and in 1949 they assembled their own football team to attempt to match Calgary's feat. Thus the Eskimos were created as a tool with which to compete with Calgary, and throughout their history the Eskimos have been used to continue this battle for provincial supremacy.

Through this rivalry Edmonton's identity has been unified. Betke, in his discussion of community unity in Edmonton, uses the example of boxing to illustrate how competition with

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<sup>52</sup> Wilson, "Forever Taking the Field," (In class course pack) 3.

rivals can unify a community. He states that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Edmonton's boxing promoters aimed to match local fighters against out of town challengers in order to give spectators a "hero to hail and a villain to vilify."<sup>53</sup> This led people to identify with the Edmonton fighter and thus unified the community. In football, these same principles applied and the ultimate "out of town" challenger proved to be Calgary. Simply put, when the opponent was Calgary, the choice was simple, root for the home team, leading to an increase in identification with the community of Edmonton.

So far we have discussed how the Eskimos have impacted Edmonton's identity through boosterism, community unification, and the extension of the rivalry with Calgary. In addition to these factors, the Eskimos have also impacted Edmonton in another way that is fairly unique. Over the years many players have played for the Eskimos, but one of the most interesting things about Edmonton's professional football team is that many of these players have gone on to fill positions of importance within the city and the province. This was especially true of the players from the 1950's. According to Howard Palmer, "professional football in the 1950s proved to be something of a training ground for many Alberta politicians."<sup>54</sup> The list of former Eskimos who went on to political careers includes Peter Lougheed, Don Getty, Bill Smith, and Normie Kwong.

Of all of the Eskimos players to go on to political careers, Peter Lougheed is likely the most well known. Peter Lougheed played for the Eskimos in 1949 and 1950.<sup>55</sup> In 1971 Lougheed and his Progressive Conservatives won the provincial election and brought an end to the Social Credit dynasty in Alberta. Lougheed benefited less from his time as a professional athlete than the other Eskimos politicians did. Lougheed's family had played a large role in the development of Alberta from its very beginnings and his grandfather was a Senator and Cabinet Minister

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<sup>53</sup> Betke, "The Social Significance of Sport in the City: Edmonton in the 1920s," 214.

<sup>54</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 311.

<sup>55</sup> Redmond, *Forty Years of Tradition*, 140.

during R.B Bennett's government. Also, Peter Lougheed entered Harvard's Masters of Administration Program after completing his undergraduate degree at the University of Alberta.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Lougheed was well positioned for a career as a politician before his time with the Eskimos. However, this is not to say that Lougheed's time with the Eskimos had little impact on his political success. To be sure, playing for the Eskimos allowed the future Premier to gain notoriety and contacts within Edmonton, that would help further his political career.<sup>57</sup>

The second and perhaps best example of the Eskimos acting as a launching pad for political careers is Don Getty. Getty played ten seasons for the Eskimos as a quarterback between 1955, and 1964. Getty was a member of Lougheed's Progressive Conservative government in 1971 and served as Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs. In 1985, following Lougheed's resignation, Getty put his name forward for party leadership and won, becoming the eleventh premier in the history of Alberta.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Lougheed, Getty did not come from a prominent Alberta family. Originally from Quebec, Getty moved to London, Ontario to attend the University of Western Ontario where he was a student athlete.<sup>59</sup> Getty joined the Eskimos in 1955 and the team won the Grey Cup in his first two years on the team. Getty's football career proved to be a vital part of his future political success.

Through the Eskimos, Getty gained name recognition within Edmonton and Alberta which contributed greatly to his electoral success. It is widely acknowledged that in electoral politics name recognition greatly increases the chances of a candidate's success. When the voters recognize a name on the ballot this can have a significant impact on the decision that the voter

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<sup>56</sup> Tupper, "Peter Lougheed, 1971-1985," In *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, Edited by Bradford J. Renne, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), 204.

<sup>57</sup> Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 311.

<sup>58</sup> Lisac, "Don Getty, 1985-1992," In *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, Edited by Bradford J. Renne, (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), 233-4.

<sup>59</sup> Lisac, "Don Getty, 1985-1992," 232.

will make. As the team's quarterback, Getty played the most prominent and glorified position on the football team. During radio broadcasts Getty's name would have been mentioned nearly every time the Eskimos ran an offensive play, because the quarterback is the central player in the offense of a team. Thus, by playing for the Eskimos as a quarterback, Getty gained enormous amounts of name recognition. One might argue that the parliamentary system that is used in Canada and Alberta would limit the effect that Getty's football career had on his successful bid to become premier, because citizens do not vote specifically for the premier. However, it is highly unlikely that the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party did not recognize Getty's potential based on name recognition when they selected him as their leader.

Also, Getty's football career put him in contact with many key business people within Edmonton. The Eskimos, since their reappearance in 1949, have been a community owned organization. This means that the team is owned by a group of prominent local business people rather than one single owner. In the case of the Edmonton Eskimos, this is a closed group because anyone who wishes to become a share holder must be approved by the group. A good example of the type of business people found in the Eskimos' organization is Rick LeLacheur. LeLacheur serves as the President and C.E.O of the Eskimos and has an extensive business career in Edmonton. He was President and C.E.O of the Economic Development Edmonton from 1992 to 1998 and has served on boards for major Alberta companies like Telus.<sup>60</sup> While LeLacheur was not part of the Eskimos' organization during Getty's career, other people of similar pedigree would have been. By rubbing shoulders with men like LeLacheur, Getty would have gained the respect of many prominent business people capable of financing electoral campaigns and building local support. The community ownership of the Eskimos would allow a

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<sup>60</sup> "Rick LeLacheur," The Official Website of the Edmonton Eskimo Football Club. Accessed December 7, 2010. <http://www.esks.com/page/profile-rlacheur>

player to gain more contacts in the Edmonton business sector than would be available if the team was owned by a single individual. Thus the ownership model of the Edmonton Eskimos can also help explain this phenomenon.

In addition to Getty and Lougheed, other Eskimos players have gone on to political careers. Bill Smith played eight seasons for the Eskimos between 1956 and 1963, and later went on to become mayor of Edmonton in 1998. Normie Kwong played ten seasons for the team and he went on to become the lieutenant governor of Alberta in 2005. This phenomenon is another way the Eskimos have had a profound impact on Alberta and Edmonton. First of all, the Eskimos have given notoriety to people who might not have otherwise been successful, and thus have given these men the opportunity to pursue political careers. Through this, the Eskimos have shaped their community and their province. Without the Eskimos, Don Getty may not have ever moved to Alberta and without the attention he received as the team's quarterback he would have had a more difficult time gaining political power in the province. It is a bit of a stretch to state that the Eskimos have influenced policy making in Alberta, but it is arguable that by acting as a launching pad, no matter how unintentionally, the Eskimos have had an influence on politics in Edmonton and Alberta. Perhaps the most telling aspect of the Eskimos' influence on politics is the fact that very little has been written on the subject. When one considers the number of politicians that have emerged from the Eskimos organization, it seems logical that both political scientist and historians would have written something on the subject. However, almost no work has been done on the subject. This may be an indicator of the effect the Eskimos have had, because having a former quarterback serve as the provincial Premier has come to be seen as ordinary.

The Edmonton Eskimos have existed in Edmonton on and off for the last one hundred years. Throughout this time, they have experienced extraordinary amounts of success on the field, but their importance does not stop there. They have also had a profound impact on the identity of their host city. Edmonton's identity has been affected by the Eskimos in many ways. The Eskimos have served as a form of boosterism that has contributed to the way Edmontonians see their city and the way outsiders see Edmonton. Also, they have unified a city which is home to many different communities. Through success on the field and players from various ethnic backgrounds, the Eskimos have served as a gathering point for Edmonton's many communities. Also, Edmonton's rivalry with Calgary has been expressed through its football team thus adding to the unity of Edmonton's identity and helping to support local boosterism. The Eskimos have served as a launch pad for political careers in Alberta. Numerous former players have gone on to successful political careers as a result of the notoriety and contacts they gained, by playing professional football in Edmonton. This has impacted the city by altering who was in power, thus having an effect on the identity of Edmonton. Clearly, the Eskimos are more than a football team for Edmonton. They are a community, an identity and building organization that has had a profound impact on the city of Edmonton.

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