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MANSOOR LADHA
Left: Residents greeted their home team, Calgary Flames, with enthusiasm. **Above:** A First Nation chief rides majestically in the parade.

Parade a highlight of subdued Calgary Stampede

MANSOOR LADHA
Special to the News

Every July, Calgary stages the Greatest Show on Earth — the Calgary Stampede. This is the time when Calgarians proudly don western wear and display western hospitality for thousands of visitors and tourists who flock to the city to enjoy and experience the world-famous event. Everywhere you go, you're bound to see residents dressed in jeans, boots and hats, transforming themselves into cowgirls and cowboys.

One highlight of the Stampede is the Stampede Breakfast hosted by private companies for employees, public and invited guests who devour free pancakes, hamburgers and juices. For Calgary's corporate elite, this is their time for networking and building business contacts. However, this year the Stampede festivities took a rather subdued atmosphere due to the fact that thousands have been unemployed due to layoffs and declining oil prices. Alberta's unemployment rate is 7.9 per cent, and 36,500 jobs have been lost this year alone, according to provincial statistics. Bars and restaurants across the city have felt the effects of lower corporate spending from the oil and gas companies. Local businesses have also cut down on decorating material and Stampede flair such as even decorating their windows with colourful cartoons.

The Stampede Caravan Committee, in charge of the official pancake breakfasts, is expected to host 14 official functions, feeding 100,000 people and serving 200,000 pancakes. Pancake breakfasts have become a symbol of western hospitality.

As a prelude to the 10-day festival, a mammoth Stampede Parade is staged with more than 4,000 participants and approximately 125 entries comprising public, private and communal

floats, horse entries and other various entities. Every major company tries to make its presence known.

This year's parade co-marshals were songstress Jann Arden and country singer Paul Brandt, both Calgary-born well-known musicians.

Residents, visitors and tourists prepare themselves to view Alberta's premier spectacle by lining the parade route, some placing their chairs the previous night so as to get the best view of the parade. For hoteliers, restaurateurs and operators of tourist attractions, this is the time to do brisk business in hard economic times. The Stampede brings a sigh of relief to them.

For some local residents, Calgary Stampede is like Christmas and Easter, giving them an opportunity to get together as families and enjoy the festival. They are seen in the wee hours of the morning, saving their spots to view the parade.

Tourists see parade

Among those lining the street was a couple from Arizona who had taken advantage of the low Canadian dollar to attend the Stampede and undertake a holiday in Banff. "We have heard a great deal about the Stampede

from our friends who have been here before and we thought it would be a good idea to combine it with a short holiday," Jack Bodie said.

"We have enjoyed what we have seen so far. I am sure our visit to the Stampede grounds won't disappoint us. It's great to see the whole city taking a festive and friendly atmosphere," added his wife Jane.

Also enjoying their first Stampede parade was a group of Syrian refugees who have made Calgary their home. Najma and Khalid Jamal and their three children were among the crowd of onlookers witnessing the parade. "We have loved our stay in Calgary and the hospitality and friendly spirit shown during the Stampede matches with friendliness shown by city residents throughout," said Mr. Jamal. "We are grateful to Canada for opening its doors and are looking forward to participating as full citizens in due course," he added.

The parade depicts Canadian diversity, pluralism and multi-cultural mosaic as the city's ethnic communities participate with enthusiasm and vigour to showcase their colourful costumes, dances and culture. This year's parade participant included groups from Mexico, Philippines, China, Thailand and members of Ismaili

Muslims. First Nation groups, including Sarcee Tsuu T'ina, and Stoney Nakoda marched in the parade, dressed in traditional attire and headdress. Calgary's favourite hockey team, Calgary Flames, received deafening cheers from fans, no doubt boosting their morale.

Alberta, B.C. towns represented

Several Alberta and B.C. towns participated in the parade including Red Deer, Cardston, Grande Prairie and Vulcan while B.C. was well represented by Penticton, Kimberley and Cranbrook. The City of Fort McMurray took the advantage of the parade to express its appreciation of the assistance that Calgarians provided during the great fire in that community. Calgary and Fort McMurray have a special bond as Calgary battled back severe floods while McMurray fought off beastly wildfires.

Calgary's essential services, firefighters and RCMP marched in the parade with their bugles, flutes and engines. The loudest cheers were given to Canadian soldiers who marched in their fatigue outfits, displaying tanks and fire power. The crowds went wild whenever the soldiers swung their tanks around in a display of power and efficiency.

Some soldiers broke their lines to shake hands with enthusiastic and grateful onlookers while others posed for pictures with them — a testimony to the fantastic performance of the Canadian military.

The parade provided an excellent opportunity for politicians. No local, municipal and federal politician leaves the opportunity to participate in the parade and this year was no exception. All of them were well represented in the parade, smiling and acknowledging cheers from the crowds.

Credit goes to thousands of volunteers who have generously donated their time and effort to continue the 104-year-old Calgary Stampede. Some things have changed over the years, but what has remained the same is the generous spirit of volunteerism, western traditions, horses and participation of indigenous people. The Calgary Stampede is a testimony of the city's voluntary spirit, residents' friendliness and western hospitality.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based journalist, travel writer and author of Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims. Another book, Memoirs of a Muhindi is scheduled to be published by University of Regina Press.



SUBMITTED PHOTO
MANSOOR LADHA
The RCMP contingent during a march past.

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