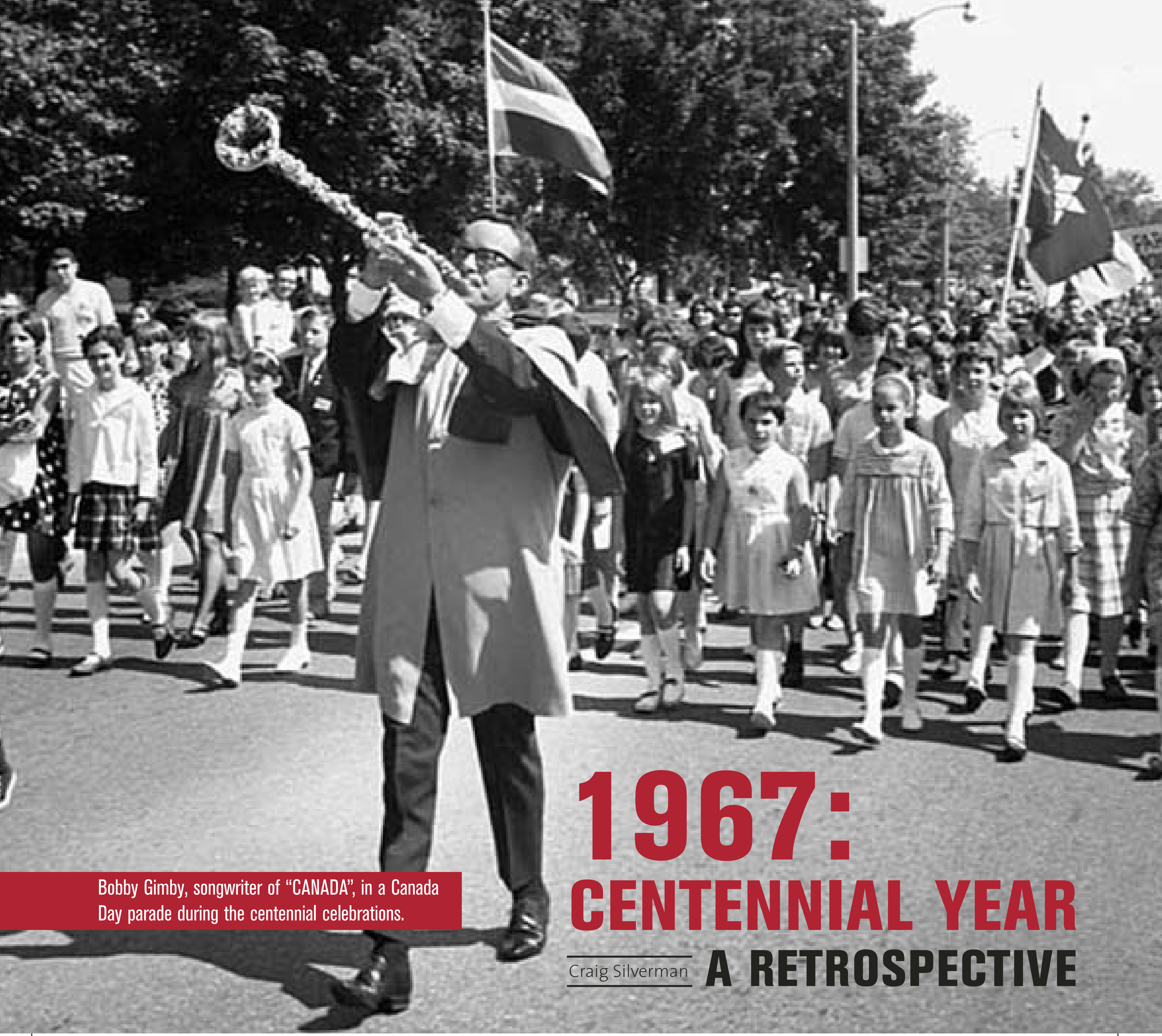


Bobby Gimby, songwriter of “CANADA”, in a Canada Day parade during the centennial celebrations.

photo: Malak/Library and Archives Canada

1967: CENTENNIAL YEAR

A RETROSPECTIVE

Craig Silverman

In 1967, Diane Brandson was a third grade student at the newly opened Centennial School in Selkirk, Manitoba. At the time, she recalls, the school was set out on its own, surrounded by “bush and brush” with nary a house in sight.

And she remembers the singing. Practising in class for endless assemblies where the whole school belted out that year’s smash hit “CANADA–A Centennial Song,” a ridiculously catchy tune penned by Canadian Bobby Gimby. Though “O Canada” had just been enshrined as our national anthem, it was no contest. Gimby’s song, written especially for that year—Canada’s centennial year—ran away with the country. Music stores sold 85,000 copies of the sheet music and 200,000 45-rpm recordings were also snatched up.

“It’s an all-time smash record-breaker for a Canadian song,” Ed Lawson, the promotion manager for the songs distributor, Quality Records, told a magazine at the time. “On some radio station charts, it’s even running ahead of The Monkees!”

“We all learned the CANADA song and we sang it at assemblies several times that year,” Brandson says over the phone from her office, the principle’s office in that same Centennial School, nearly 40 years later.

That song was one of the many surprises that the centennial celebrations had in store. One hundred years had passed since the British North America Act and the nation was ready for a yearlong celebration of 100 years in the life of Canada.

The Centennial Commission, the government-sponsored birthday planners, spent four years prior to the big year planning and attempting to build anticipation and excitement across the country. They called upon communities to hold their own centennial celebrations and planned events such as the Confederation Train—a rail-bound mobile museum of Canadiana. They hoped Canadians would embrace their collective birthday, but they weren’t sure it would take. Canadians, after all, have supposedly never been much for patriotism.

photo: Joe Sallmen

> “TONIGHT WE LET THE WORLD KNOW THAT THIS IS CANADA’S YEAR IN HISTORY.”

“We were slaving in the dark four years before the event, with no recognition,” Peter Aykroyd, director of public relations for the Centennial Commission, told Pierre Berton in his book *1967: Canada’s Turning Point*. “No one seemed to know what we were doing. And it was just drip, drip, drip, waiting for the rock of unknowingness to break.”

Aykroyd’s rock did break. By the end of that year, it was crushed to dust. 1967 was arguably the strangest, most unabashedly patriotic year in our history, thanks in large part to the centennial celebrations.

What remains of Canada’s big year today?

Across the country there are libraries, schools, art galleries, arenas and retirement homes that still bear the name “centennial”. Spurred by the federal government’s promise to match any provincial dollar for centennial buildings, 2,860 sprang up. There were 520 recreational facilities, another 67 museums and art galleries were opened or improved, and, as the crown jewel, the National Arts Centre.

Today’s Yellow Pages lists 458 “centennial” businesses and organizations. Some are named for other centennials within Canada (this year marks Alberta’s centennial), but most are likely remnants of that year.

Yet there are few books in those centennial libraries that recall the year. Brandson says the centennial isn’t taught at Centennial School. I played hockey at the Centennial Arena in Halifax for most of my youth but had no idea what the rink was named for.

“It is curious, isn’t it, that it should be so difficult to trace the effects of 1967,” says Robert Bothwell, who holds the May Gluskin Chair in Canadian History at the University of Toronto. “Plaques, sidewalk markings, a few decaying buildings on Nun’s Island or wherever in the St. Lawrence. That’s probably the nature of celebrations, games, visits, Olympics. They engage emotions, mobilize civic pride, go off with or without a bang, and then are gone. All this is to say that it’s in the nature of celebrations. They mark a break, an excuse to get away from the rhythms of daily life, to show that we are different, better, from what we are or were. But the rhythms reassert themselves after the crisis has passed.”

Say “1967” today and most Canadians respond with one word: Expo.

“I was in Winnipeg in 1967 and that’s what I remember,” says Annalee Greenberg, the editor of *The Beaver*, the magazine of the Canada’s History Society. “It was remarkable because everybody found a way to get to Expo—rich or poor.”

The truly Canadian irony is, of course, that Quebec initially refused to have any part of the centennial, and Expo was incorporated late in the planning. Today you can find Web sites, books and archives on Expo. As for the rest of that year? There is Berton’s tome and not much else easily available.

One of the biggest years in Canadian history seems to have been compacted into Expo, which was, of course, a triumph. What began as an expression of Montreal Mayor Jean Drapeau’s *nonpareil* ego became a global success. The world came to marvel at the manmade islands floating in the St. Lawrence and 5 million people passed though the gates of Expo.

That there is so much more to tell about Canada’s centennial year is perhaps the best expression of just how special it was.

At one minute past midnight on January 1, 1967, Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson officially rang in the centennial year with the lighting of the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill.

“Tonight we let the world know that this is Canada’s year in history,” he told the crowd. “We have laid a strong foundation

1967
CENTENNIAL
CANADA
CENTENAIRE
1867 - 1967
MONTRÉAL
expo67
1967
9P-7642
QUÉ.

The federal and provincial goverments issued special license plates in ‘67, like these shown here.

QUÉ.
9P-7642
1867
CONFÉDÉRATION
1967

“IT WAS A GOLDEN YEAR, AND SO IT SEEMS IN RETROSPECT.”

on which to build our second century. If we have the will and the goodwill there is no limit to our progress.”

Leading the centennial charge was John “Mr. Canada” Fisher, the head of the Centennial Commission. He was the face of Canada’s birthday, and an uncommon champion of what he saw as Canada’s greatness.

“Each corner of Canada stabs at my soul for I am in love with the whole,” he said.

As for his vision for the centennial: “I am a Canadian trying to develop a strong Canadian spirit so we can show the world a beautiful new way of life, the Canadian way, and my job is to hit at this strange Canadian disease of apology and non-support for things Canadian.”

At the same time, the Prime Minister was lighting the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill that year, there was another celebration that gave a hint, albeit a foul smelling one, of the strange delights that the centennial had in store.

Bowsman, Manitoba lit its own flame that night—a giant bonfire presided over by a United Church reverend. To serve as fuel, the town’s outhouses, rendered instantly obsolete by a new sewage treatment plant, were gathered up and sent smoking into the night sky.

The local Rev stuck his tongue firmly in cheek and, according to Berton’s account, told the crowd and CBC cameras:

“The time has come to destroy friends who have held up their ends through the years. They have fulfilled their duties under fair and foul conditions they have always stood ready to meet the needs of anyone and give them support as well as providing a good place to read the most recent catalogues. As the blaze kindles and these outmoded buildings go to their final rest, shed not tears, for they have served us well and the light they provide as a final service is fitting as we enter our centennial year.”

Bowsman’s biffy bonfire was, however, not the strangest centennial event.

The town of St. Paul, Alberta took $11,000 and built the world’s first UFO landing pad in honour of the centennial. It weighed 130 tonnes and inspired a local restaurant to sell Saturn Salads and Martian Burgers. One man donated a bus to the town to help transport the Martians once they landed. Until that fateful day, however, the Martian Express Bus was put into service ferrying humans around the festivities.

“Brotherhood,” the town’s mayor told a CBC crew, “is what we think the centennial is all about.”

In the Yukon, a group of climbers proposed to scale 14 never before climbed mountains in the North, and succeeded in reaching all but two of them.

“Despite some bad weather and dangerous conditions, the climbs were made without a serious incident,” read an October 1967 report in *Weekend* magazine. “The month-long expedition took place above the 6,000-foot level, a strange world of ice, snow and rock where no plant or animal life exists. The only forms of life the climbing teams spotted were two hummingbirds which one day mysteriously appeared, perhaps attracted by the colour of the climbers’ clothing.”

In another daring feat, a caravan of 10 canoes retraced the path of the *voyageurs* who braved the wilds, rapids and rocky edifices of this country to deliver their cargo of furs. The trip, which took its toll on some of Canada’s best paddlers, was 3,283 kms long, and included grueling sprint races when the group arrived in each port.

In communities small and large, there rose up a feeling of wanting to belong to the year. Of wanting to celebrate being Canadian.

Bringing centennial fever everywhere was the Confederation Train, which featured entire cars filled with Canadian cultural and historical artifacts. Canadians lined up for hours to pass through.

All told, there were an estimated 6,000 centennial events in 1967, many of them unconventional and quirky. Others were more personal.

In 1967, Baldur Bogenseerger was a 27 year-old man with five years of Canada under his belt.

“I came into Canada legally,” he says, still with a trace of his Austrian accent. “We still had to have a visa at that time.”

Bogenseerger remembers the centennial year not for what he saw or did, but for what he stopped doing.

“Everybody had to have a project [for the centennial] and mine was to quit smoking,” he says. “I never had a puff since. I might not be around today, the way I smoked.”

As for other memories, he isn’t sure.

“Wasn’t that when they had the Expos?” he asks.

Yes, it was.

“I didn’t go,” he says. “My dad died and I had to go to Europe. That was my centennial year.”

Sixteen years later, in 1983, Bogenseerger opened Centennial Tire in North Bay, Ontario. (That was North Bay’s centennial year.)

Most other “centennial” businesses, it seems, sprung up in 1967. An Italian immigrant founded the Centennial Barber shop in Thunder Bay. Karl “Charles” Beck, a wealthy lumber magnate in Penetanguishene, Ontario, donated a building and had it turned into the Centennial Museum.

“He decided to donate it to the town for a dollar because of the celebrations,” says Nicole Jackson, who works at the museum today. “He also felt like the town needed a museum.”

Aside from a plaque commemorating the donation, the museum is mostly about lumber and the Beck family and not the centennial—another example of that year’s lack of staying power today.

The names remain, but the spirit of optimism and patriotism has waned.

“It was kind of an amazing time,” says Greenberg. “...you felt the world was your oyster.”

It was, in the words of Pierre Berton a “golden year” and “Canada’s turning point”:

“It was a golden year, and so it seems in retrospect—a year in which we let off steam like schoolboys whooping and hollering at term’s end. We all thought big that year. The symbolic birthday cake on Parliament Hill stood 30 ft high: ice cream and cake for 30,000 kids and hang the expense! Over and over again we showed the world what Canadians could do: Nancy Greene grabbing the World Cup for skiing; Elaine Tanner, the aquatic Mighty Mouse, taking four medals at the Pan-American Games; Marshall McLuhan on every magazine cover.”

> “WE GREW UP TO BE 100 TOGETHER, AND WE ALL SHARED THAT EXPERIENCE. THE YEAR 1967 CHANGED US ALL PROFOUNDLY, AND WE WILL NEVER LOOK BACK.”

It was also the year that the maple leaf became an official Canadian symbol. It was the year that the CBC was directed by the CRTC to “contribute to the development of national unity” and offer “continuing expression of Canadian identity.” Hello Canadian content.

It was the last time the Toronto Maple Leafs won a Stanley Cup, which, depending on what part of the country you call home, is either good in the sense that the Leafs won, or great because it was for the last time. Almost none of these events were directly connected to the centennial, but they were all part of making it an unreal time in Canadian history. There was an almost magical confluence of events that year. We spoiled ourselves.

Contrast that with Canada’s 125th birthday in 1992, where even the newsletter of the Canada 125 committee read: “Showing our feelings doesn’t come easy to Canadians. You don’t see us waving flags or letting our pride show.”

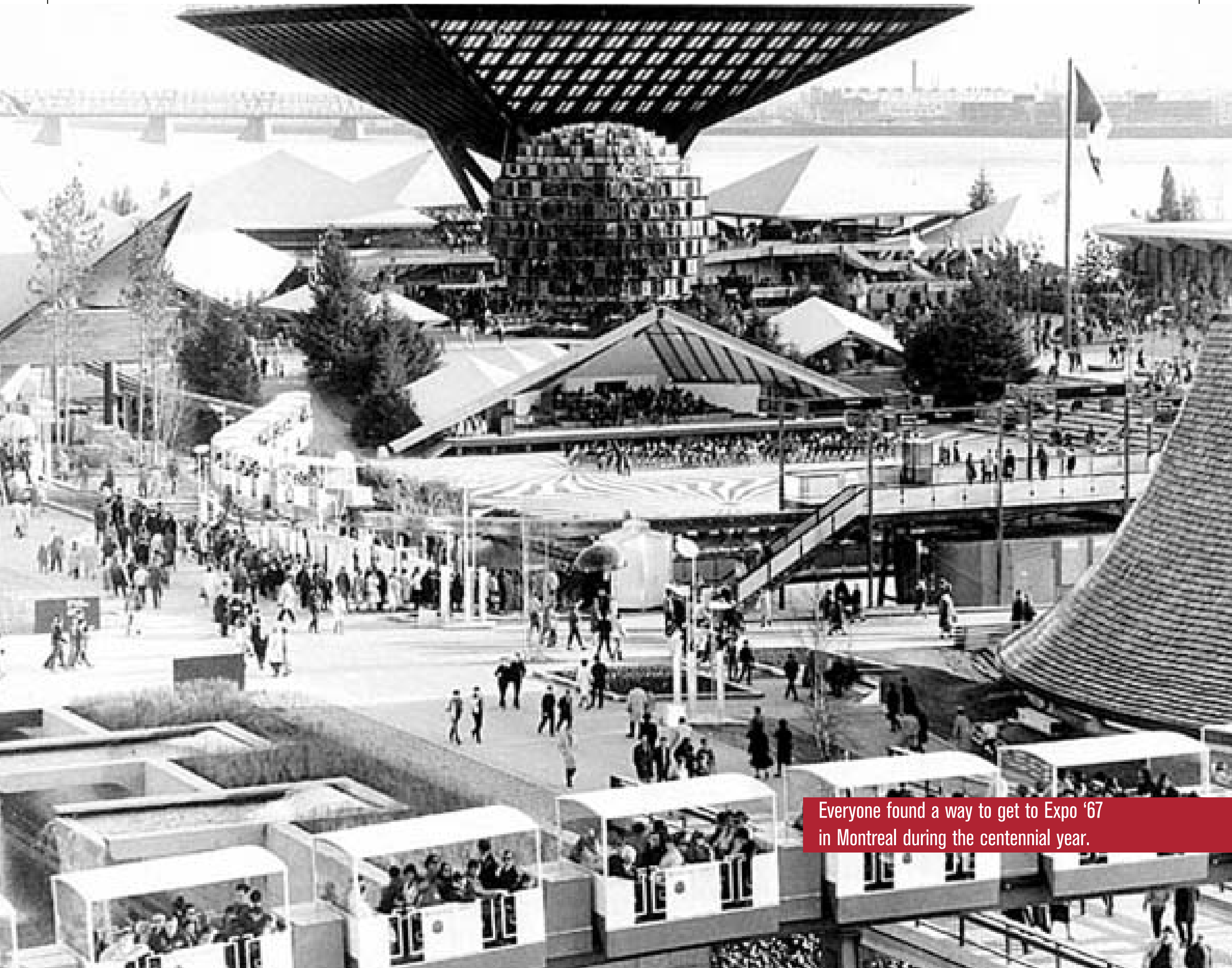
Gimby wrote another patriotic song for 1992. It, like much of the celebrations, bombed.

Judy LaMarsh served as Secretary of State in the Pearson government and was the minister responsible for the centennial. Of the celebrations, she wrote: “...we grew up to be 100 together, and we all shared that experience. We learned to have our own style...We cast off the bonds of our conformity, and slipped out of our cloak of grey anonymity forever. The year 1967 changed us all profoundly, and we will never look back.”

Her final sentiment rings true today. We don’t look back, except to gape at the spending and vision of Expo. We don’t bat an eye at an awning hung out with “centennial” in the name. We have moved on.

The saying holds that those who do not pay attention to history are doomed to repeat it.

We should be so lucky.



Everyone found a way to get to Expo ‘67 in Montreal during the centennial year.

photo: Frank Grant/ Library and Archives Canada