

# A farewell to Armfelt

*Larry Armfelt reflects on 14 years on council*

**ATHABASCA** — He is still the reeve and an Athabasca County councillor until new councillors take their oaths Nov. 1, but Larry Armfelt is winding down his time in the public sphere and looking forward to new projects much closer to home.

Sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee Oct. 22, Armfelt and his wife Margaret looked back over their years, raising children and horses, working, and contributing to the community Armfelt grew up in, just like his father, Hans, before him.

"I used to play baseball and had lots to do with a guy by the name of Edgar Koehler," Armfelt said. "And Edgar Koehler was the council member and the school board member here and she stopped in one day and said the council and the school board were splitting and we should have one council member and one school board member."

Because he had spent 33 years teaching, 24 of them in Athabasca, ending his career in 2000 as principal of the old Edwin Parr Composite School, he presumed Koehler meant for him to be trustee, but no.

"And so that's how I got into politics."

But it partly likely came from his father Hans, who arrived in Canada from Denmark in 1928 and by the summer of 1931 the elder Armfelt was homesteading in the Baptiste Lake area and soon to be raising six children with wife Hel-

en. Hans became a councillor for the M.D. of Grosmont and when the M.D. of Athabasca was formed, he was elected but only served a year before quitting and taking a job with what would become Athabasca County.

It was a long road before Armfelt followed in his father footsteps, or became a teacher though. His mother sent him to school two months before his fifth birthday so he graduated young and took a couple of years off not feeling ready for university just yet, but also unsure what to study when he got there. Until a chance encounter.

"I had the marks to go to university but I just wasn't sure, a typical thing at that age, but (Don Course) said to me, because he was drinking his coffee, 'No, you should become a teacher, you'd be a good teacher.'"

And that is how Armfelt relates a lot of his memories, tying it to something, like the coffee which became important because that coffee chat sent him to the University of Alberta where he met Margaret while they were both living at Lister Hall. Armfelt became the teacher and Margaret became a pharmacist and she left the bright lights of Calgary to move to the remote land west of Baptiste Lake.

"Certainly different because of all the trees and stuff," Margaret quipped, because southern Alberta is known for its lack of forests.

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HEATHER STOCKING/AA

Margaret has a few chores for husband Larry Armfelt to cross off the list now that he's finally retired from politics. Armfelt decided not to run in the recent municipal election ending a 14-year career.

MARGARET ARMFELT/SUPPLIED

One of the things former councillor and reeve Larry Armfelt liked to do was ride on his prize Morgans in a parade and carry the Athabasca County flag. Armfelt grew up in and has a deep love for Athabasca County and followed in his father's footsteps when he first ran for council.

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"All the pine and everything that you see here - we built this house, and this is all Edgar Koehler's lumber," Armfelt said. "Margaret still can't believe this was how we did business, but I took a plank with me, a one-by-10, and when I took lumber, I wrote it down."

In September, the Armfelts and the Koehlers would visit and a few weeks later Veronica Koehler would call with the total.

"And I went up there and we had a little more coffee, and I paid my bill and by that time I'd already started another board," he said. "And we did that for, oh gosh, we did that for five years."

So Armfelt built his second house, this time for his bride, on the land where he would eventually raise two children, Mardel and Cory, and his prize-winning Morgan horses long before he ever considered politics, but when he chose to run, he ended up on council with some powerhouse names.

"Charlie Ashbey, Larry Spears, Brian Bahry, Jack Dowhaluk, Doris Splane," he said, listing off some of the people on his first council.

Ashbey eventually became CAO for the Village of Boyle; Spears is heavily involved in his own community of Perryvale; Bahry and Dowhaluk both ran, although unsuccessfully, in the Oct. 18 election, and Splane has also recently retired after 20 years of municipal service.

When asked of his proudest achievement Armfelt didn't hesitate.

"See, those kind of all fall into place like the Athabasca Bridge, the Multiplex, although I didn't have a lot to do with the groundwork for the Multiplex, that was going on before my time," he said. "However, those aren't the things that I'm most proud of, because they're big; everybody is a little cog in the wheel there. But the thing that I am most happy with is when somebody phones me and says, 'Larry, I've got an issue and can you help me out?'"

While it may be a minor issue overall, to that person it is important so, helping the ratepayer, that is what he is most proud of.

"So, when that person then phones up and says, 'Hey, thanks

man' then that's more gratifying to me than the Athabasca Bridge or paving of some piece of the road or whatever because you're actually helping out a family and an individual."

But he does have a couple of regrets - the condition of Highway 55, no affordable housing, and how campgrounds were handled especially in the Wandering River area.

"I don't think we've kept up to creating the desire for people to go camping in Wandering River and then followed up the other side of the coin," said Armfelt. "So, I think we've excelled on one side, but we haven't kept up on the other side, which has then caused a rift between the people that like to go out camping with their quads and the year-round residents. That's bothered me that we haven't been able to get a handle on that."

And while he laughed and said he won't consider anything political "for at least 10 years" the one project he would love to see get started and would sit on a board for is affordable housing.

"I do have a multitude of contacts here, there and everywhere and so I might do that," he said. "I'm not going to start it. I'm not going to be president of it. But I would contribute if asked."

The future will look very equine though, as Armfelt points out a photo of a dog who loved leading the horses around. Or maybe it was chewing the lead shank, but either way, if Armfelt was walking a horse, the dog was leading one too.

"Margaret keeps telling me I'm not getting any younger, so that hurts," he chuckled. "But yeah, whatever I can handle. We're only going to have two (horses) not 10, 11, 12 like we used

to."

"Job jar. It's still quite full so, when he's having a silent moment that he wants filled, he just needs to ask," laughed Margaret.

They also want to be able to travel and see family, but he leaves knowing Athabasca County is better off than when he started.

"We are leaving them with a fair cushion and I think they're gonna need it because I think the major thing that this new council has to look at is a post-pandemic budget," he said. "There's a whole different kettle of fish that they're going to be dealing with this year and in 2022 compared to what we've been dealing with. Five years ago, there was a bit of normality so this budget is going to be a major, major concern for them."

He feels the rookie council will do fine though, confident in the strength of the staff in guiding them and with the varied backgrounds they bring.

"And the last thing I'll say is that it's a councillor's job to ask the tough questions. Don't let things slide. I don't know if I can put this politely, but both from the private sector and the government sector, we have still a fair number of snake oil salesmen," said Armfelt. "They're smooth, they've got lots of marketing skills and you're elected to ask the tough questions of these guys that want to sell you anything."

He also has a word of advice for the incoming council.

"What I've lived by is when you're wrong, and there'll be those times, suck it up, learn from it, turn the page and put your nose back to the grindstone."