

**DENNIS  
BRAITHWAITE**



**Oh, Saskatoon  
I love (hate) you**

“AND HERE she is — Joni Mitchell, of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada!”

This ringing introduction by Johnny Cash on his new television show the other night, had a strange effect on me. Particularly so when Johnny went on to say — “claim” is a better word — that he had once played in Saskatoon, oh, about 11 years ago.

Could it really be that after all the years of shame and ridicule, my home town has become the place to be from? Up until now, Saskatoon has been an international joke. Remember Bing Crosby in A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court? When he was trying to prove himself a more potent necromancer than Merlin, Bing uttered a number of what he thought were magic-sounding phrases and — that's right — one of them was “Saskatoon Saskatchewan.”

I guess the most venerable of the Hub City gags is about the Englishman travelling across the prairies by train. When he got to the station he asked one of the local loungers: “What's the name of this town?”

“Saskatoon, Saskatchewan,” came the reply.

“Imagine that,” said the Englishman to his wife, “they don't even speak English here.”

**Plaintive**

There has always been something plaintive, almost pathetic about Saskatoon's search for an identity. For some reason the city has never ceased trying to impress the world with its importance. When I was a kid, the Star-Phoenix was bent on interviewing visitors and getting them to say things that could be put into headings like, “Finds City Busy, Booming Place,” or “Saskatoon's Growth Compared to Chicago's.”

Then, as now boosterism was the principal local industry. The paper made a good thing out of extra editions to mark the opening of everything from a new bowling alley to the magnificent and improbable Bessborough Hotel which the CNR built during the Depression but couldn't open for nearly a year because there was no business. When it did open, with a Shriners' convention, Saskatoon went right out of its mind with pride.

The other two great events that I remember were the opening of the first talking-picture theatre, the Capitol — a dream in California Spanish, featuring a simulated sky with stars and clouds that sailed by — and the time the Saskatoon Quakers made it to the finals in the Allan Cup.

**Nowhere to go**

Yet, despite these moments of grandeur, Saskatoon was to me a harsh and unstimulating place during the 30s, cold in winter, hot and dry in summer, a town with nowhere to go, nothing to do. I had only one plan and that was to get out which I finally did in 1936.

It was seven years before I was sufficiently affluent to go back for a visit. I have been going back more or less regularly ever since, but find it increasingly hard to impress my family with the fact that I now live in the East, in Toronto no less, and have met all sorts of celebrities. If I mention, say, Juliette (whom, as a matter of fact, I never have met) my brother is likely to say, “Oh, yeah Juliette, she sang at our annual do at the Kinsman's this year.”

Now, with Joni Mitchell not only coming from Saskatoon but telling the world about it, and with the new O'Keefe-type centre they have out there and Sid Buckwold, the mayor, almost making it to the Cabinet, if he could have gotten elected to Parliament — well, how can I lord it over Saskatoon now?

I might just as well never have left home.