

# The Saskatchewan roots of Elon Musk's conspiracist grandpa

Sam Maciag & Geoff Leo

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Tech-utopian, conspiracist and apartheid fan, Elon Musk's grandpa was shaped by politics in Saskatchewan. The CBC's Geoff Leo offers us a fascinating look at Joshua Haldeman and Musk's Canadian roots.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvqYh5hDwCY>

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**Sam Maciag:** I'm Sam Maciag and this is Saskatchewan. Your mask is one of the most polarizing people on the planet the tech billionaire was born in South Africa and lives in the United states but his family spent many formative years in our Prairie. Evans it led to Musk getting Canadian citizenship but some Canadians want it revoked there's actually a petition about it the reason because of his attempts to quote attack Canadian sovereignty in response to that petition Musk tweeted Canada is not a real country it even led to a back and forth with then Prime Minister. Justin Trudeau over ex all of this prompted the CBC 's Jeff Leo to take a deeper look at Musk 's Canada. In roots and they go deep in Saskatchewan many people here already know that Musk 's mom may was born in Regina in 1948 but Jeff started looking into her dad, Elon's grandpa.

He was actually a pretty big deal in the province about 80 years ago just like Musk he was very involved in politics. He tangled with Canadian prime ministers and he got into fights about Canadian sovereignty.

Jeff spent months combing through the archives and talking to people all over the world, welcome to the podcast.

**Geoff Leo:** For having.

**Sam Maciag:** You so Jeff where does one start.

**Geoff Leo:** I got started on this late last year because some colleagues of mine back east in Toronto. We're working on a story about Elon Musk just because of the incredible power all the power he's been given by newly elected president Donald Trump so my colleagues were looking into Musk 's Canadian routes specifically they asked me for my help because they knew he was. From here and I mean I knew that we knew that right moms Musk 's moms from Regina but I didn't know much else so I started digging around in old newspaper archives and I was shocked by what a big deal Musk 's grandpa was here in Saskatchewan especially in the 1940s so in that decade. We looked at the Regina leader post and found you know from 1940 to 1950 he was mentioned no fewer than 500 times in the Regina leader post he ran political parties here ran in.

**Sam Maciag:** Oh wow.

**Geoff Leo:** Elections against some famous Canadians folks might have heard of guys like Tommy Douglas John diefenbaker William Lyon Mackenzie king. And so I

decided to take a look into Elon Musk 's grandpa Joshua Haldeman and found a pretty remarkable life.

**Sam Maciag:** So, she asks while stroking her chin, who is Joshua Haldeman?

**Geoff Leo:** Yes, so we need to rewind the clock a fair bit back to 1902 where he was born in a log cabin in a small town in Minnesota and then not long after he and his family moved to Saskatchewan to a small town near Swiftcurrent the community by the name of Waldeck and he was raised as a Prairie boy on a farm here in Saskatchewan involved in wrestling and boxing and horseback riding in the early 1920s when he grew up a little bit he went off to chiropractic school in the US and he was following in his moms footsteps Anita, who was apparently Canada 's very first chiropractor. So, but when he graduated instead of going into chiropractic he decided to take up farming? Initially and so this was in the late 1920s which it turns out if you know your history was not a super good time to get into farming.

**Sam Maciag:** No, because late 1920s early 1930s, dust bowl hits right.

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah, so this is the Great Depression, this is stock market crash that was prompted by you know massive tariffs and there was the Prairie Dust Bowl that extended throughout the 1930s and it led to a horror show here in Saskatchewan people were losing their farms. 2/3's of Saskatchewan people were on social assistance people were dying of starvation and scurvy and rickets and so I reached out to Elon Musk 's father about this Errol Musk who lives in South Africa to ask him you know his own recollections about talking with Joshua Alderman, who was his father-in-law. And Errol Musk said that for Haldeman, the problem you know the experience of the Great Depression was horrible but he thought there was much more behind it than just bad weather.

**Errol Musk:** It's all from little construction on one step. She drinks sour and being ruined because the phone is get it to the station during the depression and there's no train to take it to the to the people who want to buy it for their food you know and and things like that that you know you pointed out to me about. How the depression was sort of man made you know in other words it was planned or something you know and and you know he was very much onto that? Sort of thing you know that. There's a plan to. You know screw up the world in favour of certain people.

**Sam Maciag:** So if I'm hearing this correctly yeah he thought there was some kind of conspiracy behind the Great Depression.

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah so we know from Haldemann's writings that he believed that there was a global communist conspiracy. This evening that was controlling everything the banks the media the universities even to healthcare so he thought the conspiracy was so widespread that it was behind the government mandated vaccinations it was behind the fluoridation of water it was behind the pasteurization of milk he thought all these things were designed. To you know assert control on the population and weaken the

population we talked about this in a book that he wrote the international conspiracy and health quote from that book he says the invisible government working to carry out the objectives of the international conspiracy is operating. In every country and he also wrote only by following the example and guidance of Jesus Christ will man be able to successfully combat the evil forces of the international conspiracy and achieve greatness for himself and for his country and so he you know dedicated his own life to fighting this. International conspiracy.

**Sam Maciag:** So a lot of those issues a lot of that language yeah sounds like the sort of conversations that are happening today.

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah for sure, the distrust, the conspiracy theories. You think about the pandemic we just came through, that's been referred to as a plan-demic, it's also a government plot of some sort and so it is pretty striking I talked to a fellow by the name of Kevin Anderson about this so he's a history professor at the University of Calgary he's studied and written books about conspiracy theories. On the prairies in and around that time.

**Kevin Anderson:** You could read what you just read to me by Haldeman. I could read it in class and I&I would say what when do you think this was written and I bet you the more aware students would say oh 2 years ago this year.

**Geoff Leo:** Anderson says the tendency to look to conspiracies to explain what was going on at that time was perfectly understandable he said you know people had been overwhelmed by all of these world forces that were well beyond their control the stock market crash the Dust Bowl you know the lingering effects of World War One and interestingly. Immigration as well there had been mass immigration here to Saskatchewan. This one and he said so people were understandably rattled by this world that was changing all around them.

**Kevin Anderson:** Saskatchewan grows more than any other part of the country. In that time. And most of that immigration is central or southern or Eastern Europe I I can't believe someone growing up in a Saskatchewan of a certain era wouldn't have been impacted by global forces that feel completely out of everybody's control and they're right this that's the other thing. It's not a total. Crazy idea right that that why don't why can't I figure any of this out why am I working hard and losing you know why? That's a good question.

**Sam Maciag:** So Haldeman believes in this conspiracy idea what does he do about it?

**Geoff Leo:** Well he dedicates his life to exposing it and that's why he got involved in politics, he started getting involved with the CCF which is the forerunner of the

NDP here in Saskatchewan, now this was a party founded in the 1930s founded on the principle of getting rid of capitalism and and establishing a socialist state and so he was connected to this party for a while even took on leadership roles but eventually there was a shift in his thinking in and around 1936 that's when he moved. To Regina he set up his chiropractic office here and he joined up with a new movement called Technocracy Inc.

So this was being led by this very charismatic fellow from New York, his name was Howard Scott, this 6 foot 5 inch man, with this very enigmatic personality, he was an engineer. And his basic idea was the government should be run by experts by engineers and scientists and not by politicians and so what he said was he was noticing that you know technology had developed so fast and was developing so fast that it was no longer necessary for everyone to work as long and as hard as they were and if we could just get you know the incompetent politicians out of the way the experts could figure it out and here's an interview with Howard Scott from 1958.

**Howard Scott:** Where you call the technocracy and conquered distinction? To autocracy the rule one and plutocracy the rural wealth and democracy supposedly the rule of the money technocracy would be the rule of science there's no future in the. You're beginning to find it out but you still do not want to admit it. That's from that old moral cliché of centuries back that the devil would find evil for idle hands to do. So you still believe in the nonsense of working for a living and yet technology is displacing more and more of you all the time.

**Sam Maciag:** That's wild when you consider AI and its place in the world right now.

**Geoff Leo:** Right, yes.

**Sam Maciag:** OK, so a government run by experts not politicians, how would that work?

**Geoff Leo:** So he wasn't super clear on kind of how the society would have to change in order to get there he did hear he was not a big fan of democracy. But what he said was you know because when technology advanced again fewer people would need to work so in his vision in a technocratic society people would only work between the ages of 25 and 45 and he says that would be enough you know to to run society and hauled them and bought into this view he became a leader. In technocracy led the Regina branch wrote an article about it saying that society was about to face a major smash up and technocracy would be there to pick up the pieces he wrote. No other country has anything that the North American people either want or require adding that it's possible to build this new order of mankind this new America, right here and now.

**Sam Maciag:** Hmm, so very much pushing for a North America only solution.

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah, so technocracy did have an isolationist bent. And not long into World War 2 the federal government became concerned about this movement and actually declared that technocracy was illegal, that happened in 1940.

**Sam Maciag:** That's quite the move. Yeah, so what did Haldeman do about it.

**Geoff Leo:** So, within weeks of that declaration he placed an ad in *The Regina Leader Post* defending technocracy, saying the government was making a big mistake by declaring it illegal and a few months after that he was paid a visit by the RCMP and he was arrested and charged with stirring up disloyalty. Specifically related to placing that ad. So, he eventually left technocracy, and had a bit of a change of heart about the whole movement. He ended up calling technocracy a scientific Frankenstein.

**Sam Maciag:** So from loving it to hating it, pretty harsh transition there. What was his concern?

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah. So he says that in 1940 the technocracy took a radical shift and they started pushing for the United States to take over Canada and Greenland and other parts of the United States by purchasing it, or by negotiating for it, or by force of arms. In other words military action against Canada and Greenland. So this was in 1940 and he warned Canada about this and he was standing up for Canadian sovereignty, for British sovereignty, saying we need to do something about this, this movement is a problem.

**Sam Maciag:** So we're 80 years later but Jeff where have I heard this concerns about sovereignty of Canada and Greenland she asks tongue in cheek.

**Geoff Leo:** Yes. I know well I mean honestly you know many of the things in doing the research for this story you know the cyclical nature of history and so many of the things that I'm reading feel like echoes of the stuff we're going through right now. So Haldeman ended up leaving technocracy and he ended up joining a movement called Social Credit.

So this was a party that was advocating for lower taxes and less government regulation and free markets and Christian social values so sounding much more like a more of a standard sort of conservative right wing political party at that time and Haldeman became a leader in social credit.

**Sam Maciag:** Of course he did. He likes to be in charge.

**Geoff Leo:** Well this was his pattern, he joined something and then he ended up leading it. He ran the provincial party, so the Social Credit party of Saskatchewan for years, he also became the chairman of the National Party, so he had power you know right across the country.

In and around that time he decided to purchase a plane and take flying lessons. So, he was running his chiropractic business at the time, he was also taking a leadership role in moving chiropractic practice forward in Canada. So, he was doing a lot of that, and then his politics, and family, so he wanted to make himself more efficient, so he took up flying, and the family came to be called the flying Haldemans because he would take his kids with them sometimes and they're so they were the flying Haldeman.

**Sam Maciag:** Sounds like a circus act, I'm just saying.

**Geoff Leo:** So, in 1948 he ran against Tommy Douglas and the NDP, and there are newspaper ads, you can see them if you go to our story where it says 'make him your premier'. He also ran for the federal social credit party, in one election he ran against Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.

**Sam Maciag:** That's a notable name.

**Geoff Leo:** That was in a in a Prince Albert riding, and then he ran here in Regina against John Diefenbaker. And that was just a few years before John Diefenbaker went on to become Prime Minister so he was like rubbing shoulders with you know some Canadian royalty right.

**Sam Maciag:** Very close to people of influence.

**Geoff Leo:** Yeah it's quite something.

**Sam Maciag:** So what happened with those connections how did he do?

**Geoff Leo:** So yeah his party didn't do super well in the polls he...

**Sam Maciag:** That's why we don't know his name and we know the others I suppose.

**Geoff Leo:** Exactly, Social Credit did very well in Alberta and became the government and was the government for about 40 years under Earnest Manning, but here it didn't really catch on. But he was certainly active in promoting it's views.

Now according to a paper written by Haldeman 's son Scott who is himself a chiropractor, Haldeman always blamed the banks for his experience of losing his farm. Kevin Anderson, again the historian from University of Calgary, he studied social credit and he told me that the movement Social Credit shared Haldeman 's suspicion of the banks and his general conspiratorial view just like Haldeman they talked about the conspiracy that was controlling things.

**Kevin Anderson:** The conspiratorial reading of history where all history all events everything is part of as you said the capital T conspiracy capital C which is an international conspiracy headed by Jews almost always in these theories in these ideas, Jewish people or people who have become lack of a better term fellow travelers with this population of hidden elite essentially and they are trying to weaken the Christian nations of the world. However they do that, the key the key way they do it is through banking and control finance to crush people under increasing debt and desperation that they are cowed and essentially become a sort of easily controlled population.

**Sam Maciag:** So this concern about Jewish bankers, what can you tell me about that.

**Geoff Leo:** So, Social Credit did develop a reputation around that time of tending towards anti-Semitism there are quotes by social credits founder referring to Jews as parasites, that sort of language is out there. While Haldeman was the chair of the national Social Credit Party he found himself in the midst of a national scandal related to these anti-Semitic concerns so in the social credit wing of in Quebec the organization

published a document known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. So, this is a pretty infamous document that claims to reveal a plot by a secret wealthy group of Jewish people to take over the world, as I said it's notorious it's fake it was found by courts to be fraudulent but a social credit wing published this document and then Haldeman was because he's the national chair. He was the one who was fielding the criticisms about all this.

**Sam Maciag:** So I guess the criticisms would be why is a wing of your party publishing this anti-Semitic document.

**Geoff Leo:** Exactly, so he replied to this in a letter to the editor of *The Saskatchewan Star Phoenix* and he said so; first of all Social Credits not anti-Semitic we support all Jewish people he said there are bad people running the banking system but not all of them are Jewish so there are people other than Jews who are running the banking system. Finally he'd actually as he said the protocols of the elders design he said whether it's an authentic document or whether it's a fraudulent document it doesn't matter because what it shows it shows what's really going on. In the world in other words we can see that reality playing out in the world.

**Sam Maciag:** So he didn't condemn the Quebec wing for publishing the document then?

**Geoff Leo:** No he didn't and a Jewish rabbi from Saskatchewan picked up on this he wrote a letter to the editor himself and he said doctor Haldeman's over interest in clearing the party and himself from the charge of anti-Semitism and anti-Canadianism will not fool the people and he added that doctor Haldeman must have a short memory if he does not remember his own speeches shot through with anti-Semitic talk.

**Sam Maciag:** So, it sounds like Haldeman did a lot politically quite the political career. But he didn't really get anywhere in terms of success.

**Geoff Leo:** No, exactly it was somewhat futile in terms of you know no elections won that sort of thing but it did build quite a life.

He married a young woman from Moosejaw named Winifred, interestingly used to be a reporter at the Moosejaw Times Herald. They went on to have 5 children together including twins May and Cane, who were born in 1948 and of course May would go on to become Elon Musk's mother, so the year they were born or the year after they were born rather there was a big turning point in Haldeman's life so he lost the federal election against John Diefenbaker and right around that time he heard a prophecy from an Anglican minister while he was at an international tradefair in Toronto.

**Sam Maciag:** What does this minister say that that hooks him?

**Geoff Leo:** He actually talks about this in in a book that he wrote while he was in South Africa the book was called the international conspiracy to establish a world government. And the book opens with this quote; "South Africa will become the leader of white civilization in the world", and he says that's this prophecy that he heard in 1949, this is from a South African man who lived for many years in that country. And it was that prophecy that at least in part was pivotal to making helping haul them



and make the decision to move his family to South Africa and this was also a pivotal time in South Africa in 1948 the the very year that Elon Musk 's mom was born that's the year that the National Party was elected to office in South Africa and it's the party that started implementing apartheid. Essentially the policy of racial segregation in South Africa where white people ruled.

**Sam Maciag:** What do we know about what he thought about apartheid, knowing that he took his whole family there?

**Geoff Leo:** Well so we do have some idea shortly after he arrived he was interviewed by a newspaper reporter and he said quote; "instead of the government 's attitude keeping me away from South Africa, it's actually encouraged me to settle hear." And about a year after Haldon moved to South Africa he wrote an article that was published in the *Regina Leader Post*. So, this is a big article talking about his... it's a letter back home saying here's what our new life is like in South Africa and in that he described living arrangements and the weather he also described how they had some hired help several of what he called native boys and girls. And he wrote quote the natives are very primitive and must not to be taken seriously, "we get quite a bang out of them and they are really quite useful," but he also said "it takes 3 natives to do the work of one white man".

**Sam Maciag:** Ooof.

**Geoff Leo:** That was in *The Regina Post* in 1951.

**Sam Maciag:** OK, so Haldeman arrives in South Africa. Does he quit politics or does he keep trying?

**Geoff Leo:** Aside from his writing I don't have any evidence that he was particularly involved in politics in South Africa but he and in terms of what keeps him busy aside from his chiropractic work, it's a very strange story.

So, apparently not long after he arrived in South Africa he read about a fellow by the name of the Great Ferrini, so this was William Hunt who was a Canadian he was a Circus Performer in the mid to late 1980s. And he was quite famous at the time, famous for walking on a tightrope across Niagara Falls with a man on his back or in another case a washing machine on his back, he's the guy who invented and patented the human cannonball.

**Sam Maciag:** Yeah I mean someone had to do it.

**Geoff Leo:** Right. So later in life William hunt known as the Great Ferrini goes to South Africa and he travels across the Kalahari desert and he claims that he found a lost city the lost city of the Kalahari and he actually writes a book about it and this generates over the next few decades a cottage industry of amateur explorers hunting for this city and the chief amateur explorer. Were among them it turns out was Joshua Haldeman his wife and his children, they would take regular trips into the desert looking for this.

**Sam Maciag:** So, May Musk, with her twin, and her siblings, and her parents, went hunting for a lost city in the desert.

**Geoff Leo:** That's right, that's how she spent most of her summers, they would go out into the desert, either flying, or driving, and she writes about this in her book, the encounters with lions, and all sorts of things. In all Haldeman took 16 separate expeditions into the Kalahari over his lifetime, which is far more than any other explorer.

**Sam Maciag:** So why was he so taken with this particular search?

**Geoff Leo:** Well, there's nothing really specific in any of the articles or texts that I read, other than his passion for adventure. But there's nothing really discusses his reasons. What we do know is that he was not operating in a vacuum. The whole lost city phenomenon, it was a craze in Africa. He was part of a large movement of white explorers looking for ancient ruins, now in some cases, there were real ruins out there. Ancient civilizations that were quite impressive. And in some cases imagined or rumored civilizations, like the lost city of the Kalahari.

So I spoke with the fellow who studied this whole phenomenon, Herman Wittenberg. He's a professor from South Africa. He's looked into this phenomenon. He said; "all the researchers, even the more liberal or progressive ones, the explorers from that time, they all assumed that these great ancient civilizations could not have possibly been built by the black African population by the indigenous people who were there."

**Herman Wittenberg:** They thought there was a hole. String of these things in southern Africa, including that Kalahari thing which was obviously triggered by the farini story. You know, you know, because Africans just basically built only with with mud and and and and hatch grass. You know, that was the. The idea so. This couldn't have been Bantu or African Providence.

**Geoff Leo:** And he said the motivation for why many of these folks were looking for, you know, the these lost cities was to give some level of legitimacy to the claims of the white people who were there to say, you know, we actually have a history here. White people have a history here to give legitimacy to their. Claims to the land.

**Herman Wittenberg:** Yeah, at that time there was in essence this interest in, in legitimizing whiteness in South Africa, white civilization. And also giving it a a deep historical dimension sort of. This is an intervention of tradition, you know, sort of the the term by historians. So history wasn't invented.

**Sam Maciag:** So did Joshua Haldeman and his family. The flying hollemans? Yeah. Did they ever find? This law city, has anyone ever found this law?

**Geoff Leo:** No, and many of the researchers, most of the researchers who believed in it have abandoned the story, either as a hoax or a misunderstanding that he thought things were ruined that weren't actually ruined. But Haldeman did believe in it to the very end. Even after Ferrini died, he wrote a letter to Ferrini's family, assuring them

that he still believed in the city and believed that it would be found someday. But he never did find it, and in 1974 he was out flying with his son-in-law in South Africa. And he was killed in a plane crash. He was 72 years old when he died. Elon Musk was three years old when he died, so he did not have a lot of time with his grandfather. The Haldeman's death was on the front page of the newspaper. And the newspaper praised him as one of the country's great explorers.

**Sam Maciag:** What a wild ride. Jeff, thanks so much for your work on this, yeah.

**Geoff Leo:** Happy to do it.

**Sam Maciag:** That's it for us this week thanks to our team behind the scenes on this one Nicole Hawk, Kareem Larson, Paul Dorn's daughter and our technician Chris Haines. Don't forget to click follow so you don't miss an episode and if you like what you heard please, share this with a friend. I'm Sam mccagg, talk to you next week.

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