

# Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan

Book Review by Gordon Fulton

There are 492 cities, towns and villages in Saskatchewan, a province of only one million people. Contrary to popular myth, the typical resident of this prairie province does not live on a farm, miles from his or her nearest neighbour; home to more than 3 out of every 4 Saskatchewan residents is a community of some significance. These communities are at once predictable (grain elevator, "Railway" Street, curling rink) and unique. Unfortunately, Saskatchewan, for too many travelers in the rest of Canada, is not its cities, towns, and villages. It is the empty space between destinations east and west. Drivers use mental tricks to stave off boredom while motoring down the Trans-Canada highway: fixating on a wind-break on the horizon and seeing how long it takes to reach it (maybe twenty minutes on a clear day); guessing which roadside crop is barley, which is wheat, and which is flax. *Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan* takes the armchair traveler off the monotony (Saskatchewan natives prefer "subtlety") of the Trans-Canada highway and into Saskatchewan's built environment, which is anything but monotonous.

*Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan* is an impressive book, both in presentation and content. More important, perhaps, it is timely. Between the two covers of this book is eloquent evidence of — and, one would hope, impetus for developing a serious plan for preserving — the rich variety and high quality of Saskatchewan's built heritage.

*Historic Architecture* is a thematic compilation. Chapters deal with natural and native structures; pioneer constructs (log and sod buildings, the Mennonite house barn, farm wind-breaks); so-called touchstones (the clichés of Saskatchewan, including the grain elevator and railway station); the institutions of civic maturity (governmental, mercantile and cultural buildings); hotels; churches; schools; and homes. There is also an overview of architectural styles and, curiously, the founding of the Saskatchewan Association of Architects (SAA). There is a democracy to the presentation: big city and small are fairly represented, as is the professional architect and the dedicated amateur. The latter is no better embodied than in farmer Albert Johnson, who built a stone wall seven feet high, six feet wide at the base ... and more than half a mile long. Said Johnson: "I'd hate to think of leaving this earth and making no mark on it."

The layout of each chapter is dominated by large-scaled photographs of individual buildings, usually in full colour. The quality of the images is very high, even though a high percentage were non-professional "in-house" photographs taken by Culture and Recreation staff. The layout is clean and crisp. The text, for the most part, is limited to brief accounts of the circumstances surrounding to the construction of some featured buildings, and to the photo captions. While not expansive, the text does present a pleasant counterpoint to the photos. The images demonstrate that the pioneer spirit was strong in this, one of the last areas of southern Canada to be settled by Europeans. The round barn west of Drake, the Sunrise School near Kenaston, the crenelated Holmes' residence in Herbert ("Many husbands promise their wives a castle. Agnes Holmes' husband, Tom, delivered") all give evidence of the strength of the pioneer folk tradition in Saskatchewan.

Yet (and this is perhaps where the surprise lies in *Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan*) the province's high-style architecture is equally impressive. Provincial architect Maurice Sharon's American Colonial-mode court houses, of which Weyburn's is featured on the book's slip-

cover, provide evidence that Saskatchewan was on top of current trends in world architecture. Even little-known architects such as C. C. McAlpine and George Reid of Moose Jaw could design with the best of them: witness their Public Library, a classical gem in brick, stone and marble.

What is *Historic Architecture* not? As Alex Hermann, the doyen of preservation architects in Saskatchewan, qualifies in his preface, *Historic Architecture* is not "a definitive catalogue of early construction in Saskatchewan. Nor is this book meant to serve as an authoritative guide to the sociology, economics and early politicization of the new province as revealed in the architecture of its buildings." Fair enough. I think that, given the superb groundwork done in awareness-raising by *Historic Architecture*, the next book published on Saskatchewan's historic architecture must give at least a sense of the links in the province's built environment; that is, *why* it looks the way it does.

The book is also not a contextual study. Individual buildings are shown in splendid isolation — literally and figuratively — in this book. We almost never glimpse the whole picture, the streetscape, the setting, the urbanism of Saskatchewan. It is as if the province was a series of discontinuous monuments. This discontinuity is reflected in both photos and text. This may not be an issue in the rural settings (the farms, barns, and outbuildings), but it can be confusing for those not familiar with the urban buildings portrayed. Does the immense St. Peter's College in Meunster (population 385) stand alone from the town, or is it a part of the community? Is splendid isolation the essence of our second-most rural province's architecture? This, with certain exceptions (witness the Sanatorium near Fort Qu'Appelle), is a question *Historic Architecture* does not answer.

The tail of the pup in *Historic Architecture* is a brief journey into the world of architectural styles, and into the birth of the SAA. Architectural styles are a minefield for the armchair architect. Each step is taken fraught with the knowledge that it might be off *terra firma* and into the unknown, the incomprehensible, the silly. Describing Moose Jaw's CPR Station as *especially* Italianate, for example, is bafflegab. With a little luck, this five-page morass will not scare the architectural categorizers away from the rest of the book. The birth of the SAA is covered succinctly in two and one-half pages. Two distinct groups of pioneer architects, pre-1906 and 1908-1913, are profiled: many of the first came primarily to homestead, and fell back onto their architectural skills in response to demand; the second came specifically to practice architecture. By 1912, the year of the Saskatchewan Architect's Act, there were almost 100 architects practicing in the province.

Much of the creative moxie behind *Historic Architecture* was supplied by Culture and Recreation's resident architect, Wayne Zelmer. For three and one-half years he provided the personal link between the two "publishers," The SAA and Culture and Recreation. The SAA must also be credited for its commitment to this project, as must Focus Publishing. It is a timely and ambitious book, worth owning.

● *Historic Architecture of Saskatchewan*, Alex Hermann, editor-in-chief, published by The Saskatchewan Association of Architects with support from Saskatchewan Culture and Recreation (Regina: Focus Publishing Inc., 1986). 184 pp., illus. Cloth. \$42.95. ISBN 0-919781-13-6.