

THE PROCEEDINGS PART I

Port Arthur's Tourist Pagoda: Attracting Attention With A Unique Building

by *Patricia Vervoort*
Lakehead University

In the spring of 1909, the city of Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) initiated a campaign to promote the city to tourists. Capitalizing on its location at the head of the Great Lakes, the city intended to capture the attention and dollars of the travellers arriving and departing by ships and trains. A transfer point for travellers heading both east and west, Port Arthur received eleven passenger ships weekly in addition to the daily trains.¹ The docks and stations for both the C.N and C.P.R. were located on the waterfront at Water Street and at the foot of the Arthur Street (now Red River Road) hill. Although the tourism campaign included numerous schemes and one-time events, the idea which initially excited the most enthusiasm was the proposal to build a permanent Publicity Pagoda. (Fig. 1) Launched with a design competition, the Pagoda was built in the middle of the intersection, directly opposite the docks and between the train stations. Its purpose was to boost the city and provide information for tourists.

Today, the Pagoda continues to function as a tourist bureau in the summer months. Over the years it has suffered from make-shift repairs, threats of demolition, and the indignity of having its roof painted with multi-coloured polka dots. In 1979, the Pagoda was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act as the oldest municipally-owned tourist information centre in Canada. Thus, the Publicity Pagoda which originated as a means of informing the public about the qualities of Port Arthur has itself become a tourist attraction in its own right. This presentation will investigate the aims and motivations behind the 1909 tourism campaign in Port Arthur which led to the construction of a permanent building and its subsequent history.

BACKGROUND

The publicity campaign in Port Arthur originated with the city council under Mayor I. L. Matthews, but its implementation was greatly spurred by E. B. MacKay, the editor of *The Daily News*. In April, the campaign was introduced with the headline "Citizens Will Combine To Boost Port Arthur." It announced a "series of meetings that will launch every citizen of Port Arthur out on a publicity campaign for boosting the city . . ."² Mayor Matthews called the open meetings for citizens to come and make suggestions for promoting the city. A few days later *The Daily News* in an editorial, "A Simple Method of Boost", suggested that each letter leaving Port Arthur include "an assortment of literature descriptive of Port Arthur's advantages and resources" and that "the venture might result at least in bringing in a few tourist visitors . . ."³

Another element of the campaign was the improvement of the city's general appearance. An editorial titled "Improve the Main Entrance" appeared in April:

Arthur Street in the neighborhood of the C.P.R. depot is in need of some sort of treatment that will give the hundreds of passengers passing through the city daily a better impression of the public taste of Port Arthur.

The locality referred to is the city's chief gateway, and it is in every aspect an uninviting entrance.

Without going to the expense of erecting an arch of Triumph or a statue of liberty it is possible that a few dollars might be expended in improving these surroundings with profit to the city.⁴

The appearance of Port Arthur's chief entrance was a bone of contention with the editor judging by the number of remarks printed about the topic. Of course, *The Daily News* had a vested interest in this locale, its offices were located on the southwest corner of the intersection of Arthur and Water Streets.⁵

Suddenly, without any prior notice, on April 21st, the front page of *The Daily News* announced a contest for the design of a Publicity Pagoda. Specifications included the name of the structure, its site as the intersection of Water and Arthur Streets, and the size as approximately 20' by 20'. Further details were:

The Pagoda is chiefly to attract to the city the attention of tourists and the general travelling public. The existence of the pagoda will furnish a reasonable cause to warrant investigation of every traveller.

Something of the spirit of progressiveness today manifest in the citizens should be evinced by every line and curve of of this structure.

It should breathe publicity, radiate hope, and shriek P-O-R-T A-R-T-H-U-R!

A prize of \$25.00 was offered by "a number of citizens" and not by the city council. The contest was announced on Wednesday and competitive sketches were to be submitted "before Monday next."⁶ This provided potential contestants with only five days in which to come up with a design.

Enthusiasm for the pagoda scheme was stimulated by *The Daily News* and in particular by the column called "The Notebook" which

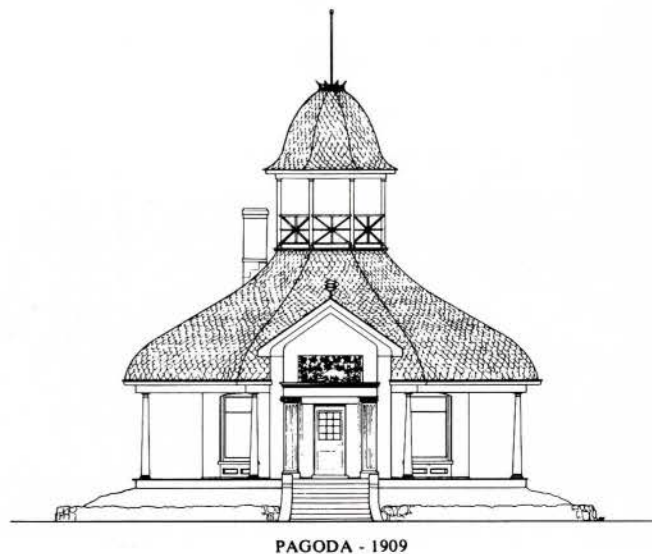


FIG. 1. Pagoda, elevation drawing by Larry Fogolin, Thunder Bay Architectural Inventory, 1977, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.

featured one and two line slogans relating to new items, but also inducing civic spirit. A sample of these in relation to the Pagoda included:

Push the Port Arthur Publicity Pagoda Proposition.⁷

The "Publicity Pagoda" idea deserves to flourish.⁸

Now, Push the publicity pay-goda!⁹

The erection of a Publicity Pagoda will result in making presentable the railway entrance to Port Arthur.¹⁰

The day after the contest was announced, the paper ran an editorial called "Let's Have the Pagoda":

The idea of the establishment of a Publicity Pagoda . . . was suggested by Messrs. J. Hewitson and C. E. King.

If placed on the vacant ground on Arthur Street adjacent to the C.P.R. depot it would remove to some extent the eyesore effect that has for so long existed in that locality.

As a means of advertising the city among visitors and strangers passing through, no better method has yet been suggested.

The Publicity Pagoda idea is being carried out with much success by progressive cities in the United States. In Port Arthur a Pagoda situated as proposed on the lake front would have an advantage over similar institutions in cities not so favorably situated in regard to natural scenic environment!

Push the Pagoda scheme.¹¹

J. Hewitson and C. E. King were prominent local businessmen, but not members of city council. Hewitson was a partner in the contracting firm of Stewart & Hewitson. C. E. King was principal of the National Business College and president in 1909 of the Port Arthur Canadian Club. It is likely too that E. B. MacKay, the newspaper editor, was involved behind-the-scenes in the promotion of this American idea. The paper continued to fuel public interest with such headlines as "Much Interest Being Taken in the Publicity Idea—Many Plans"¹² or "Many Interested. Publicity Pagoda Proposition Proving Popular."¹³ Other comments recorded that "the general opinion is that it (the Pagoda) should have a striking, if not an odd, appearance"¹⁴ and "the fact that a prize is offered for the best design is causing widespread interest to be taken in the proposition."¹⁵

Finally, on May 5th, the winning design was announced. Described as "a simple octagonal shape with a canopy roof", it featured "a lookout

capable of accommodating twenty five or thirty people." The cost was estimated at \$2,500 and "It is hoped to have it in shape to receive visitors about the middle of June." Of the five designs submitted, it was H. Russell Halton's that was declared the winner. The report continued, "Each plan had special features to recommend it, and the committee would gladly have accepted an option to combine all the especially desirable features in one plan."¹⁶ The judges were never identified. Three weeks later, the paper published an elevation drawing and floor plan of the Publicity Pagoda.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the city council maintained silence about the Pagoda proposition. In late April, the sum of \$5,000 was set aside for publicity purposes, but no specific expenses or the Pagoda were mentioned.¹⁸ On May 20th, several weeks after the conclusion of the contest, an editorial congratulated the city council on "having decided to adopt the scheme to erect a Publicity Pagoda."¹⁹ "The Notebook" on the same day revealed that the city council was on the site "arranging the details of location."²⁰ (Fig. 2)

Soon, much of the material and labour for building the Pagoda was volunteered and the paper enthusiastically reported "a good portion of the estimate of \$2,500 for the building will be saved for use in other ways, all of which will add to the possibilities of the publicity campaign."²¹ By the end of May, "The Notebook" proclaimed "Work on the Publicity Pagoda commences today. The pagoda will do the rest."²²

Construction had not progressed very far by June 14th when an excursion of 1500 visitors arrived in the city from Houghton, Michigan. Undaunted, the city set up a sign over the foundations of the Pagoda reading "City Publicity Pagoda being erected here to advertise Port Arthur."²³

Late in June, another headline declared "Publicity Pagoda Held Up for Brick."²⁴ The following day, a news item reported "A heavy team belonging to Messrs. Kelly and Close met with disaster this forenoon when they collided with a pile of bricks at the new Publicity Pagoda."²⁵ Although no one, including the horses, was seriously injured in the accident, the location of the Pagoda in the middle of the intersection was to remain an obstacle for traffic until 1977 when the shape of the streets was altered.

Despite the original rush to construct the Pagoda, the walls were not going up until July 20th.²⁶ On the 22nd, it was announced that the beaver carving was to be put in place the next day.²⁷ Towards the end of September, a brief notice indicated "The work of interior finishing of the city pagoda was commenced this morning."²⁸ By this date, the tourist season for 1909 was over. The formal opening of the Pagoda occurred in February, 1910²⁹ and "The Notebook" proclaimed "This is Port Arthur's year."³⁰ (Fig. 3)

THE ARCHITECTURE

Other than the brief architectural description of the Pagoda written at the conclusion of the design competition, the newspaper made no further comment about the architecture. Even though H. Russell Halton was identified as the architect, virtually no mention of Halton was made again in relation to the Pagoda. Halton, whose training and background are unknown, practised architecture in the Lakehead from c1905 to c1930. Although a number of local buildings are known to have been designed by Halton, none is as fanciful or eclectic as the Pagoda.³¹ Halton was evidently familiar with style and pattern books for the Pagoda was composed of elements derived from a variety of civilizations and cultures. Their combination in a single building produced a unique structure.

Already named when the design competition was announced, the Pagoda's name evokes a tower-like structure with a series of upturned roofs. However, the term has other contexts such as "a small ornamental building."³² This developed for the late eighteenth century fashion in England for placing small picturesque structures in gardens and parks. At the same time, Indian architecture contributed the use of verandahs, balconies and bulbous domes to British architecture.³³ Port Arthur's Publicity Pagoda is a small ornamental building surrounded by a verandah.

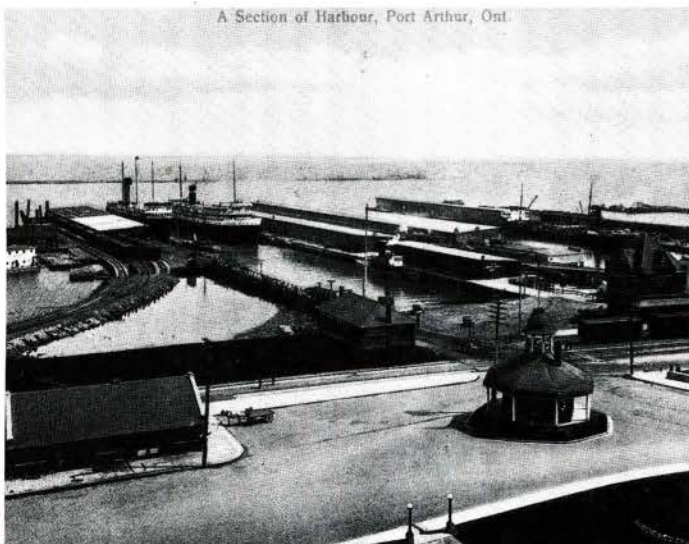


FIG. 2. "A Section of Harbour, Port Arthur, Ontario", from *Souvenir of Port Arthur: Post Card Views*, c. 1912. Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society. The Pagoda is in the middle of the intersection; the C.P.R. Station is to the left and the C.N. Station is to the right.



PRINCE ARTHUR HOTEL, C.P.R. DEPOT, PUBLICITY PAGODA AND BOULEVARD, PORT ARTHUR.

FIG. 3. "First Glimpse on Arriving in the City of Port Arthur, By Boat or Rail" from *Camera Glimpses of the City of Port Arthur, Port Arthur, 1913*. Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.

The most striking feature of the octagonal Pagoda is its distinctive roof resembling a mushroom. In the centre of the main roof is an open belvedere protected by its own bell-shaped dome; originally a decorative iron cresting crowned the peak. The belvedere is six feet in diameter and, thus, is hardly able to hold the twenty-five or thirty people as originally described. The surface of the roof is tiled with small metal shingles which overlap to suggest the texture of fish-scales. To create the unusual curved shape, an elaborate truss-system of two-by-fours were cut and manipulated into place. Wooden pegs rather than nails were used to join the sections. The belvedere is reached by ladder within the canopy; there is no evidence that the public was given access to the lookout.

On the southeast, a gable projects from the main roof to indicate and protect the entrance. The peak of the gable is ornamented with a curving finial enclosing three pointed projections that extend to either side. This gable ornament is of Scandinavian origin and locally is considered a gook luck symbol.

The entrance is framed with fluted Ionic pilasters. Above the lintel is a relief depicting a beaver chewing a log; the remainder of the panel is filled with maple leaves. (Fig. 4) The carving was created by B. Jones of the Stanworth-Martin Company;³⁴ of Indiana limestone, the relief is the only material in the Pagoda that is not of local origin. These design features show Greek and Roman influence with the beaver contributing a distinctive Canadian touch.

Build of "local cement red brick", the walls of the octagon are opened on each face with a large plate-glass window originally intended for display purposes and the doorway which was originally a set of French doors. A verandah with a wooden floor, five and a half feet in diameter, encircles the building; its eight plain wooden columns provide auxiliary support for the canopy roof.

Nothing of the original interior design remains today; its appearance was not preserved in photographs. In the plan that was published in *The Daily News*, heating for the 25' diameter interior space was provided by a fireplace. The floor was a mosaic created with local marble by Antonio Pella.³⁵ Originally, the interior space consisted of one large display room and three small storage areas on the northwest; one of these contains the ladder leading up into the canopy roof.

In photographs from 1912 and 1913, the little Pagoda can be seen with ribbons streaming from the belvedere. (Fig. 5) Its setting was much improved by the paving of the intersection in 1910. In the same year, the CN hotel, the Prince Arthur landscaped its grounds with formal gardens leading down the hill to the Pagoda. The Pagoda was indeed ready to attract the notice of visitors arriving at the docks and stations.

THE POLKA DOTS

The major alteration to the Pagoda, the addition of the multi-coloured polka dots to the roof, occurred in 1961. Intended as a surprise, the dots were painted at night and the perpetrators of the stunt were not immediately identified. It was the Port Arthur Jaycees who admitted to the deed performed "to kick off visitor's week."³⁶ The president of the Chamber of Commerce, James Crooks, called it a "colourful aberration"

and demanded an immediate repainting.³⁷ Norman Wilson, the mayor, decided the dots improved the building, but warned that other city buildings were not to be indiscriminately daubed with paint.³⁸ The dots remained. (Fig. 6)

In 1973, another night-time painting session was foiled by a rainstorm; the newly painted polka dots spread and dripped into one another.³⁹ Undaunted, the Jaycees went ahead and completely repainted the Pagoda. An editorial praised the Jaycees for their efforts with the Pagoda on behalf of "the thousands of tourists who came here every year . . . It deserves to look its best at all times."⁴⁰

After the Pagoda was designed under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1979, the Thunder Bay L.A.C.A.C. made an effort to publicize the building's original appearance, i.e., without the polka dots. The city repainted the Pagoda in 1981 with a solid green roof. Soon enough, as an editorial observed, "No one expected the tourist pagoda would remain un-polka-dotted for long."⁴¹ in the name of "local tradition", the Jaycees enlisted the aid of local politicians, MP Jack Masters and MPP Mickey Hennessey; the latter "wet the bristles of his own brush to paint a dot."⁴² Arthur Black joined in the controversy with a column entitled "The Pagoda: Only in Thunder Bay." In his typical witty fashion, he referred to the dots as "a dose of acrylic acne" and "psychedelic liver spots." Black commented on the various sources of the Pagoda's architectural features and concluded that the polka dots were Thunder Bay's own contribution.⁴³

Most visitors today arrive by automobile and are directed to the Pagoda for tourist information by pagoda-shaped signs placed along the



FIG. 4. Beaver panel carved by B. Jones placed above entrance to the Pagoda. Photograph by Tonia Hearst, Thunder Bay Architectural Inventory, 1977, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.



Sign of Progress

The Industrial Development and Publicity Bureau of the City of Port Arthur.

A special building erected by the city, located on the waterfront, for the purpose of furthering the industrial and general development of the city. This department is under the supervision of the city council, and the yearly expenses are defrayed from the civic funds.

FIG. 5. "Sign of Progress" from *Camera Glimpses of the City of Port Arthur*, Port Arthur, 1913. Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.

major routes. All the signs, except for the one at Cumberland and Camelot Streets, feature the polka-dotted roof. Attracting attention not only by the information provided, but also by their curious shape, these signs enable the Pagoda to continue fulfilling its original purpose.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the Pagoda is the only permanent reminder of Port Arthur's 1909 campaign to attract tourists. The construction provided a means for the community to join together in "boosting" the city; the contributions of materials and labour demonstrates the pride and community spirit that the project created. The idea of using "odd" architecture to attract attention was Port Arthur's answer to the Arch of Triumph and the Statue of Liberty. Locating the Pagoda on the waterfront also contributed to the improvement of the city's entrance. The city's slogans such as "gateway to the West" or "The Place Where East Meets West" are exemplified in the Pagoda with its mixture of architectural elements.

Over the years the Pagoda has become a symbol of the city; its picture is still a feature of local tourist brochures. The Pagoda has become an affectionate landmark which amuses both residents and visitors.

NOTES

1. *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, Ontario, June 29, 1909. August 23, 1909, "The boats arrive in the morning and do not leave for Duluth until the evening . . . So do through western passengers, the C.N.R. express not leaving until five o'clock . . . The C.P.R. boats do not stop long enough here to allow through passengers the privilege of disembarking, so the trade they bring to Port Arthur in the way of tourist patronage does not amount to anything."
2. *Ibid.*, April 13, 1909.
3. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1909.
4. *Ibid.*, April 20, 1909.
5. George B. Macgillivray, *A History of Fort William and Port Arthur Newspaper From 1875*, Fort William, 1968, P. 72.
6. *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, April 21, 1909.
7. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1909.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, April 30, 1909.
10. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1909.
11. *Ibid.*, April 22, 1909.
12. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1909.
13. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1909.
14. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1909.
15. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1909.
16. *Ibid.*, May 5, 1909.
17. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1909.
18. *Ibid.*, April 26, 1909.
19. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1909.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1909.
23. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1909. To welcome the visitors, boats in the harbour were instructed to toot when the steamer approached, an evergreen welcome arch was erected on the dock, the band played, and Port Arthur businesses and homes were decorated with bunting and and flags. June 15, 1909, the city council meeting for last night was canceled because the aldermen were on the dock boosting Port Arthur.
24. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1909.
25. *Ibid.*, June 29, 1909.
26. *Ibid.*, July 20, 1909.
27. *Ibid.*, July 22, 1909.
28. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1909.
29. *Ibid.*, February 28, 1910. A photograph of the Pagoda appears on the front page; only a corner of the accompanying article is legible because the paper was torn before the microfilm was produced.
30. *Ibid.*, March 12, 1910.
31. Architect's File, Thunder Bay Architectural Inventory, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.
32. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1933, Vol. VII, p. 376.
33. John Gloag, *The Architectural Interpretation of History*, London, 1975, pp. 281-283. John B. Nellist, *British Architecture and Its Background*, London, 1967, p. 230. Mildred Archer, *Indian Architecture and the British*, London, 1968.
34. *The Daily News*, Port Arthur, July 22, 1909.
35. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1909.
36. *The Times Journal*, Fort William, June 27, 1961.
37. *The News Chronicle*, Port Arthur, June 26, 1961.
38. *The Times Journal*, Fort William, June 29, 1961 and June 30, 1961.
39. *The Chronicle-Journal*, Thunder Bay, June 18, 1973.
40. *Ibid.*, September 20, 1973.
41. *Ibid.*, July 21, 1981.
42. *Lakehead Living*, July 29, 1981.
43. *Ibid.*



FIG. 6. Pagoda with polka dot roof. Photograph by Tonia Hearst, Thunder Bay Architectural Inventory, 1977, Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society.