

Portage La Prairie

A Profile of a Western Canadian City

by Edward Krahn

Portage la Prairie is located fifty-six miles west of Winnipeg, Manitoba on the Trans Canada Highway. Once the location of wandering indigenous people, it is now a bustling regional Prairie farm city of some 13,086 residents.¹ The first European settlement in the area was Fort la Reine established by Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de La Verendrye in 1738.² Fort la Reine was a fur and provision supply post part of La Verendrye's fur trade network. The Jesuits under Claude Godefroy Coqunt soon set up a mission at the Fort in an attempt to Christianize the native Saulteaux population. The Hudson Bay Company (H.B.C.) established a post in the region in 1796. It was not, however, until 1853 that permanent settlement took place. When population pressures on the river lot farm system in the Red River Settlement reached the crisis stage, Archdeacon William Cockran, of the Church of England, led a group of English Half-Breeds westward.³ Despite opposition from the H.B.C., Cockran purchased a site between the Assiniboine River and the oxbow lake for the establishment of the first prairie agricultural settlement west of Red River. The area consisting of several thousand acres was purchased from the local Saulteaux chief. The purchase price was ten pounds sterling paid in trade goods.⁴

By 1855, a church, a parsonage, and a windmill to grind the harvest of the settlers' labor had been built. Many of the Half-Breed farmers supplemented the farm income by trading provisions to the H.B.C., which had once again established a regular trading post in 1861. During the period from 1860-1870, growth was slow but steady and at the end of the decade the town boasted of having 12 business institutions and a population of 130.⁵ The decade of the 1870's proved to be for Portage what Manitoba historian W. L. Morton called the "Triumph of Ontario Democracy".⁶ This transplanted bedrock of Ontario-British Protestantism was forever to change the demography of Manitoba. The religious and racial homogeneous nature of the St. Mary's la Prairie Church of England Parish changed with the sudden influx of Anglo-Saxon, Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists from Eastern Canada.

The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway late in 1880, guaranteed the destruction of the old way of life. The arrival of the railway brought with it a frenzied period of growth which lasted until mid-1882. Fueled by a new wave of settlers and land speculators, Portage, by the spring of 1882, had its population swollen to 3,500. In all, some 29 banking firms and real estate agencies were involved in the business transactions of the 1881-1882 land boom.⁷ The town acquired the rough and tumbled look of a jerry built "boomtown". Much of the tar paper, building paper and wooden building products used in the rushed construction came from the local Samuel McIlvanie Planing and Paper Mills. Employing about 30 workers, the Paper Company was turning out four tons of paper per day during the boom.⁸ The paper wealth of the real estate boom proved to be a volatile as the paper products produced by the mill. By the end of 1882, the balloon had burst! Bankruptcies became a daily occurrence and many a debtor skipped the line into the United States to avoid their creditors.

The mid-1880's was a period in which the harsh realities of the economic downcycle had to be faced. In an attempt during the boom to attract another railway company to the community, the town council had provided a \$50,000 bonus to the Manitoba and North-Western Railway to establish its offices and shops in Portage. When tax notices remained unpaid during the depression, there was no way in which the bonus debentures could be paid off. Rather than be forced by creditors to levy a special tax, the mayor and council resigned, leaving no official government in place to pass tax bylaws. To oversee the affairs of the town, the mayor and council with the blessings of the community, set themselves up as a non-elected citizen committee.

The overly optimistic expansion of the boom had left the business and residential sections of the community spread out and divided between the Main Street and Saskatchewan Avenue axis. When the economy started to improve, three building moving companies were employed using horse and capstan to consolidate the community—"Never knew of such a place, it was like shifting sand . . ." wrote an official of the Bell Telephone Company. Following several years of steady growth provided by a stable agricultural sector many of the residents became part of the mercantile middle class. These successful entrepreneurs utilized the products of the local Smith Brick Plant to upgrade their homes and business blocks. In the business sector brick fire walls were erected following a rash of fires in the Main Street commercial district. It was later found that many of the fires had been set by a fire bug.⁹ The action of the arsonist helped to speed up the process of establishing Saskatchewan Street as the undisputed business section. The combination of outdated fire fighting equipment, the work of the arsonist, and the flammable properties of the paper building products brought about a reluctance on the part of fire insurance companies to insure town property. The lack of insurance coverage saw the establishment of a mutual insurance company by local residents, and a special fire bylaw passed by town council in 1890. The fire bylaw established a fire protection belt around the business core and restricted the construction of buildings to non-combustible materials. The bylaw meant that more substantial structures were erected and professional architectural designs used.

The transitional period of the 1860-1890's also proved to be a time of social conflict. Not all of the community's residents practiced social morality, Portage had a reputation for being ". . . perhaps one of the hardest for drink in the Dominion."¹⁰ The geographical location of Portage between Lake Manitoba and the American border helped make the community the gateway to the North West. Hotels, boarding houses, and eating places were set up to serve the transient population. The colorful early history of some of these establishments reflected the frontier nature of the North West. One of the more notorious establishments was the Queen's Hotel.

Jim White of the Queen's has purchased Sandy Sinclair's black bear for \$20 and bruin henceforth until further notice, will disport his comical carcass on the shady side of the above named hostelry, along with the other zoological specimens, which the genial Jim keeps for his pleasure and edification of his guests. Bruin is a beauty. No, he's a bear.¹¹

These earlier establishments featured a menagerie that was part; brothel, social club, tavern and inn. The Protestant social reform movement was reflected in Portage by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Salvation Army and local churches. Temperance leaders soon came into conflict with intoxicated bears and inebriated men fueled by "wet" hotels. In 1880, the Reverend William Halstead, a travelling Methodist temperance minister, admonished the hotel owners of Portage la Prairie in an open letter for their lack of morals.

Let us face the matter like honest men. You know, we know, everybody knows, that this terrible evil of strong drink is our great national curse, and the greatest hindrance to our country's welfare. We appeal to the patriotism of every lover of our country, and to the philanthropy of every individual of common sense in this most important matter.¹²

The battle for the minds and the souls of Portage's residents was to continue for many years. The success of the social reform movement was seen in the erection of many fine ecclesiastical structures.



Mainstreet Portage la Prairie, 1882, Provincial Archives of Manitoba.

By 1890, the town once again had regained the population it had during the boom period. This decade proved to be a bright period of growth and the prosperity continued until after World War I. Visible signs of affluence were evident in the construction of imposing public buildings and the blossoming of residential and commercial areas of the town. Substantial buildings solidly built with high quality materials were going up everywhere. Increased civic pride and community confidence was seen in the "booster" campaigns of the local residents. A public Park Act was passed in 1896¹³ The establishment in 1890 of Island Park, as a recreational site, the erection of monuments and tree planting all reflected this civic pride.¹⁴ The local press published editorials on the importance of civic pride and conducted "buy at home" advertising campaigns. Local editors were not above a little friendly rivalry directed at other Manitoba communities.

During the teaching of a 'missionary lesson' a few weeks ago, a class in one of the Portage Sabbath schools was asked the question, "What do we do with the money we collect for missions?" One bright little girl with a keen sense of the needs of the dark minds of the west replied, "We use it to send missionaries in Brandon and China."¹⁵

When the federal government in the late 1890's adopted the open door immigration policy of Clifford Sifton, the non-Anglo-Saxon newcomers were forever to change the milieu of Manitoba generally and

Portage la Prairie specifically. The multicultural traditions of various Eastern European groups added to the growing ethnic basis of Western Canada.

The agricultural growth and development of Western Canada, spurred on by the influx of these new settlers, provided an economic stimulus for Portage. Four major trainlines intersected at Portage and the community rapidly became an important rail distribution centre for points west. Several manufacturing companies were influenced by this ready access to western markets, to the point of establishing warehouses and assembling plants in the community. Companies such as the Lake of the Woods Milling Company and the Waterloo Manufacturing Company shipped their products for Portage establishments to help build the economic superstructure of the rich western hinterland. Portage la Prairie had arrived with both feet firmly planted in the 20th Century, equipped and ready to play its role in the development of Manitoba and Western Canada.

The many different periods of growth during the development of Portage la Prairie have led to a wealth of architectural examples. This heritage resource ranges from "spec" homes built for the working class, to the ornate Queen Anne style of the Victorian middle class, to the Greek Revival and Georgian mansions favored by the local business class, to the Romanesque Revival commercial business blocks.¹⁶

ENDNOTES:

1. 1981 Canadian Census
2. W. L. Morton; **Manitoba: A History**, (University of Toronto Press, Toronto: 1979) p. 31
3. Fritz Pannekoek; "A Probe Into The Demographic Structure of Nineteenth Century Red River", **Essays on Western History**, (University of Alberta Press, 1976) pp.83-95
4. **Portage la Prairie, Manitoba: and Her Industries**, (Steen and Boyce Pulbishers, Winnipeg: March 1882) p. 6
5. **Portage la Prairie, Manitoba: and Her Industries**, p. 9
6. W. L. Morton; **Manitoba: A History**, pp. 199-233
7. **Portage la Prairie, Manitoba: and Her Industries**
8. **Portage la Prairie, Manitoba: and Her Industries**, p. 20
9. **Portage la Prairie Weekly Review**, August 14, 1889
10. Pierre Burton; **The Last Spike**, (McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto: 1971) p. 47
11. **Portage la Prairie Weekly Tribune-Review**, February 8, 1884
12. **Manitoba Weekly Free Press**, September 25, 1880
13. **Portage la Prairie Weekly Review**, December 24, 1896
14. "Large Crowd at Memorial Unveiling", **Weekly Manitoba Liberal** September 11, 1911; and **Portage la Prairie Weekly Review** June 18, 1890 deals with Arbor Days; and the **Portage la Prairie Weekly Tribune-Review**, April 25, 1884 deals with Arbor Days and Parks; the **Manitoba Liberal**, August 3, 1888 deals with the establishment of a Board of Trade for Portage
15. **Portage la Prairie Weekly Review**, December 18, 1897
16. For a closer examination of Portage see—Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation; **Early Architecture of Portage la Prairie**, (Winnipeg: 1983)



Portage la Prairie City Hall.



Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1948. Provincial Archives of Manitoba.