



385 HENDERSON HIGHWAY

ROXY THEATRE

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
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385 HENDERSON HIGHWAY – ROXY THEATRE

East Kildonan is located on the east side of the Red River north of the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. It was originally organized as the Municipality of Kildonan in 1876, taking the name of a Scottish parish from which many of the Selkirk Settlers had originated. It was comprised of river lots, long strips of land laid out along the banks of the Red River (Plate 1). On these lots farmed many members of the original Selkirk Settler families that had first settled on the west side of the Red in the early 1810s. Added to these were retiring fur trade employees and Métis families.

By the early 1900s, the area, similar to Winnipeg and the surrounding communities, experienced a sometimes-frantic growth phase that would last until World War I. This growth included all facets of life – new industries and businesses organized, old residential districts expanded and new districts were created and services, such as streetcars, began pushing further and further from the downtown.

In Kildonan, on the east side of the Red River, this expansion translated into a number of significant changes. The southern part of the Municipality became part of the City of Winnipeg as Ward 7 (Elmwood) in 1906 (Plate 2).¹ In 1914, the Municipality of Kildonan was divided into the municipalities of East and West Kildonan with the Red River as the dividing line.

As with West Kildonan, East Kildonan evolved into two disparate regions- the south saw increased residential and commercial development, taking on a more urban character, while in the north, the large tracts of farmland and market gardens continued, with little new development. As a result, in 1925, the northern portion separated to form the Municipality of North Kildonan (the boundary was Oakland Avenue), after agreeing to pay \$80,000 as its share of the East Kildonan debt (Plate 3). The City of East Kildonan was incorporated in 1957 and was the only suburban government in favour of the Unicity amalgamation when the legislation creating it received Royal assent in July 1971 and became law on January 1st, 1972 (Plate 4).

¹ According to maps and City of Winnipeg documentation, the northern boundary between Elmwood and the Municipality of Kildonan was originally what is now the back lane between Larsen Avenue and Harbison Avenue W, 1 block south of the Roxy Theatre.

The history of live theatre in Winnipeg began in 1866 when an amateur company gave the Red River Settlement its first taste of live theatre on the second floor of Andrew McDermot's Red River Hall.² Thirty-three years later, John A. Schuberg, whose stage name was Johnny Nash, brought an Edison projector to the city and showed the first moving picture film in Manitoba. Schuberg travelled throughout the prairie provinces showing a short, flickering picture that included studio shots and actual footage of the Spanish-American War. The 'theatre' was a 6.1 x 18.3 m. canvas tent on a vacant lot on Main Street north of Logan Avenue that had been given two coats of black paint to darken the surroundings. The tent could hold approximately 200 people and quickly became stuffy and overheated.³ Along with partners Frederick Burrows and W.C. Jones, Schuberg was responsible for several of the city's early movie houses.⁴

As in other North American centres, the first movie theatres were actually vaudeville theatres that utilized moving pictures as another ploy to attract customers. The Elite Theatre (527-529 Main Street) was opened ca.1903 in the Clement's Block and showed both vaudeville acts and movies.⁵ Others that followed included The Bijou (498 Main Street, built 1905-06), The Star (530 Main Street, built ca.1907), and The Royal, which became The Starland (626 Main Street, opened ca.1909).⁶

In 1913, the Rex Theatre, 646 Main Street, opened as the city's first movie-only facility (demolished 2008 – Plate 5). The rise in popularity of the genre led to the growth of theatre chains—in Canada the Allen and Paramount (which became Famous Players-Lasky) chains—that oversaw distribution of movies from the growing list of major studios and the operation of hundreds of theatres across the country.

² The Winnipeg Free Press, June 29, 1971, p. 27.

³ H. Russell, op. cit., pp. 9, 12.

⁴ The Winnipeg Free Press, July 13, 1970, p. 49C.

⁵ Ibid.; and The Winnipeg Tribune, May 7, 1974, p. 49.

⁶ Henderson's Directory (Winnipeg City), 1899-1915.

In the post-World War I, movie houses became “movie palaces” – owners hired architects to design increasingly showy exteriors, using a variety of elements borrowed from a number of historically-based styles, and opulent interior in order to attract and awe customers:

...the construction of movie palaces was an excessive attempt by the industry to sweep its somewhat disreputable origins under the rug. More was needed than rat-free, clean, ventilated buildings to banish the middle-class prejudice against what had been considered lower-class entertainment.⁷

And prestigious North American theatre architect Thomas W. Lamb (1871–1942) stated in a 1928 interview with Motion Picture News:

To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present to their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment ... and a great deal more elaborate. The theater can afford this, and must afford it for our public is large and in the average not wealthy. The theater is the palace of the average man. As long as he is there, it is his, and it helps him to lift himself out of his daily drudgery.

Downtown Winnipeg saw theatres like the Metropolitan and Capitol built with lavish interior ornamentation and furnishings. Going to the movie became an event in and of itself (Plate 6).

Beyond the national chains, Winnipegger Jacob “Jack” Miles established a regional theatre chain. Miles (Plate 7) was born in Russia in 1887 and came to Canada at the age of eighteen in 1905. He settled in Winnipeg, in the midst of its large Jewish community, and worked as a painter. Soon afterwards, however, he opened his first of three bicycle shops and he is credited with introducing Harley Davidson motorcycles to the city. But it was in the local movie industry where he had the most impact. In 1912, he opened the Palace Theatre on Selkirk Avenue, a vaudeville and movie house. Steady growth in the business led to the expansion of the Palace in 1927 as well as the construction of one of Western Canada’s most unique theatres, the Uptown, 394 Academy Road (built 1930-1931 – Plate 8).

⁷ H. Russell, All that Glitters: A Memorial to Ottawa's Capitol Theatre and its Predecessors (Ottawa: Parks Canada, National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1975), p. 32.

Through his companies, Allied Amusements Limited (established as a limited partnership in 1926 with Nathan Rothstein) and in 1936 as the amalgamated Western Theatres Limited, Miles purchased many existing neighbourhood theatres and began a long-time association with the Famous Players Canadian Corporation chain.⁸ At his peak, Miles controlled eighteen Winnipeg theatres, including the Plaza, 104 Marion Street; the Furby, 599 Portage Avenue; the Rose, 801 Sargent Avenue; the Starland, 628 Main Street; and, the Tivoli, 115 Maryland Street. Almost all were designed by fellow Jewish immigrant and Canada's first Jewish registered professional architect, Max Blankstein. Always the innovator, Miles opened the city's first drive-in theatre, the Pembina Drive-In on Pembina Highway, in 1949. The Airport (Ellice Avenue at Madison Street), the Eldorado (Henderson Highway North) and the Starlite (Transcona) were all drive-ins in the Western Theatres Limited family. He also partnered with Nathan Rothstein, who later operated his own Western Canadian theatre chain in the 1920s.⁹

Miles was also influential in the Jewish community; he was an original member and past president of the Hebrew Sick Benefit Association and a founder and past president of the Winnipeg Hebrew Free School. Miles died at his home on Cathedral Avenue on September 18, 1951.

Another facility in the Jacob Miles and Nathan Rosenstein Allied Theatre chain, the Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, was built in 1929 and opened on Christmas Eve (Plate 9).

STYLE

For the main façade of the Roxy Theatre, the architect chose elements of the Mission Revival style, as he did for many of his designs throughout the province and Western Canada. The style has its roots in the California missions built in the 18th and 19th century and it was used extensively, mainly in residential architecture, in the interwar period, 1920-1940.

⁸ "Allied Amusements Limited," Manitoba Business, Manitoba Historical Society website, 2020.

⁹ M. Peterson, Max Blankstein. Architect. (Winnipeg, MB: Winnipeg Architecture Foundation, 2022), pp. 39-42.

Elements of the style included stucco cladding, clay tile roofs, bell towers, and the strongest identifier, the curved parapet wall.¹⁰

The style did not find extensive expression in Winnipeg.

CONSTRUCTION

The theatre building rests on a 35.6-centimetre concrete foundation, the brick superstructure measures 33.0 centimetres thick. It includes a partial basement, under the front of the building with crawl space under the auditorium. The building measures 17.5 x 26.4 x 10.7 metres (see Appendix I for additional construction information).¹¹

DESIGN

The theatre's symmetrical main (west) façade is clad in multi-hued brick, the main floor featured a large entrance and plain brick walls. A full-width marquee was also part of the original design (Plate 9) but was removed in 1969.¹² The upper storey was architecturally treated with a variety of ornamental brickwork including geometric shapes, dark brick window surrounds set in lighter brick recessed panels, and corbelling. A modest stepped brick parapet finishes the elevation (Plates 10-12).

The north façade is windowless, constructed of common clay brick with brick pilasters the only ornamental feature (Plate 13). The south façade is similarly designed, with a second-storey exit near the rear of the building (Plate 14). The rear (east) façade features two upper storey rectilinear window openings, brick pilasters and a modest, concrete capped parapet raised in the centre (Plate 15).

¹⁰ "Mission Revival," Vancouver Heritage Foundation (<https://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/house-styles/mission-revival/>) 2023; and Steven Randel, "Roots of Style: Mission" *houzz Magazine*, online, April 10, 2015 (<https://www.houzz.com/magazine/roots-of-style-mission-stsetivw-vs~20849685>).

¹¹ City of Winnipeg Assessment Record, Roll No. 02000005000, EK, PC 48.

¹² Loc cit.

Beyond the removal of the marquee, two of the upper storey windows on the front façade have been boarded over, the original entrance has been replaced, and the brick on the main floor has been painted.

INTERIOR

When the 1,200-seat theatre opened in 1929, it was Manitoba's first "atmospheric theatre" a method of enhancing the patrons' overall experience by "creating exotic environments to complement the fantasy worlds portrayed in films."¹³ In the case of the Roxy, the ceiling was painted blue; images of white clouds were projected onto it and lights resembling stars dotted it. A Moorish village, like what would be built at the Uptown Theatre on Academy Road, graced the walls of the auditorium.

The conversion of the interior into a two-storey bowling facility meant the removal of all ornamental detailing on the interior (Plates 16-21).

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site and appears to be in good structural condition. As described earlier, significant changes have been made to the main façade and the interior.

STREETSCAPE

The Roxy Theatre sits on a visible site on a busy street (Plate 22).

¹³ Russ Gurluck, *Silver Screens on the Prairie: An Illustrated History of Motion Picture Theaters in Manitoba* (Winnipeg, MB: Great Plains Publications, 2012), p. 126.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

The designer of this theatre was Russian-born and trained Max Z. Blankstein (1877-1931), one of Canada's earliest Jewish architects and its first registered practitioner (Plate 23). Blankstein had a long, distinguished career, including the design of many theatre buildings across Western Canada (see Appendix II for biographical information). Blankstein has received 10 points from the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee.

It is unknown at this time which company build the Roxy Theatre.

PERSON/INSTITUTION

The Roxy in East Kildonan was one of the larger and more ornate suburban theatres in Winnipeg. It operated until 1960 and then reopened as a twenty-lane bowling alley, the same fate as the Uptown Theatre.

The bowling alley closed in 2022.

EVENT

There is no known significant historical event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

The Roxy Theatre was an important suburban entertainment venue, built at the start of the Great Depression. It offered customers a way to escape their daily lives, especially in those trying times. Its conversion into a bowling alley was the result of changes to the motion picture industry.

LANDMARK

The Roxy Theatre building is a well-known structure in the neighbourhood.



APPENDIX I

CITY OF WINNIPEG - Preliminary Report Assessment Record

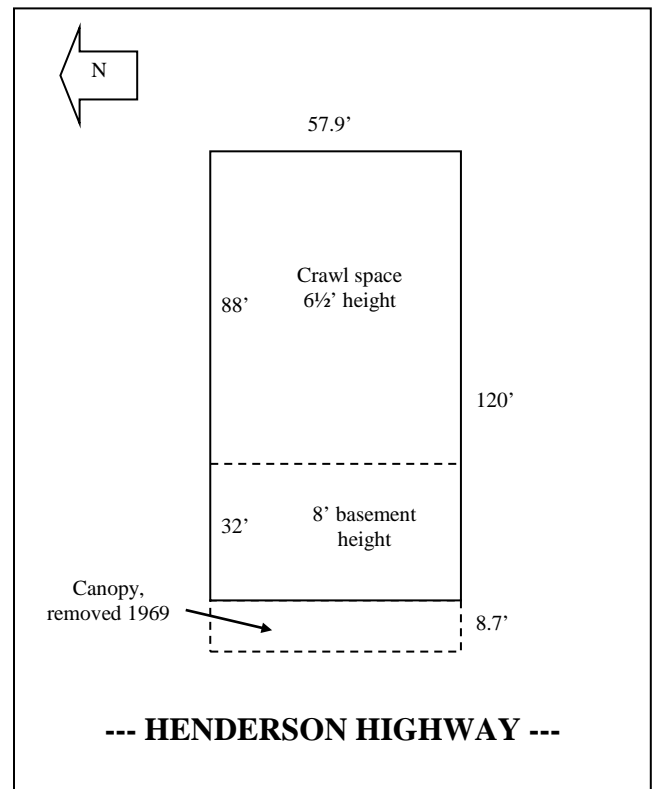
Building Address: 385 Henderson Highway Building Name: Roxy Theatre (Roxy Lanes)
Original Use: theatre Current Use: vacant
Roll No. (Old): 02000005000 (700) R.S.N.: 22862
Municipality: EK Ward: --- Property or Occupancy Code: 48
Legal Description: 97 Kildonan, Plan 1178, Lot 5/8 & 96 Kildonan, Plan 852, Lot 1 Storeys: 2 & B
Location: west side between Larsen and Bowman avenue Date of Construction: 1929
Construction Type: Brick & reinforced concrete **HERITAGE STATUS: COMMEMORATIVE LIST**
Building Permits (Plans available: [CS] City Storage):
- 166213/2018 [CS] \$80,000 (roof repairs)

Information:

- $57\frac{1}{2} \times 88 \times 35 = 247,940$ cu. ft.
- converted to bowling alley in 1968, 2nd floor added (cost of renovation ~\$60,000) with 10 lanes on each floor
- 14" concrete foundation; 13" brick superstructure

ARCHITECT: M.Z. BLANKSTEIN

CONTRACTOR: UNKNOWN



APPENDIX II

Max Zev Blankstein

M. Z. Blankstein was born in Odessa, Russia in 1876 and took his early education and architectural training there, following in the footsteps of his father Mayer “Zisy” Kritchmar (ca.1847-1929), a stonemason and contractor by trade.¹ He practiced professionally in Odessa until the early 1900s. He came to Winnipeg in 1904, part of a large contingent of Jewish immigrants who made the city their home. He took up his profession soon after his arrival, his name appearing on several City of Winnipeg Building Permits. In 1910, he received his certificate from the Manitoba Association of Architects, the 61st certificate granted in the province and became the earliest licensed Jewish architect in Canada.

Blankstein’s practice paralleled a growth in the city’s Jewish community and the majority of his work came from his contacts, professional, personal and family, within this group. He would establish his closest ties with the housing and apartment magnates Rueben Cohen and Abraham Cohen, as well as Jacob “Jake” Miles (later partnered with Nathan Rothstein) of Allied Amusement/Allied Theatres, one of the city’s leading theatre developers. He also designed several theatres in Saskatchewan and elsewhere in Manitoba.

Max Blankstein died at his home at 131 Machray Avenue on December 31, 1931 after an appendicitis operation. He left a wife, two daughters and four sons. Two of the sons, Cecil N. and Morley, and a daughter, Evelyn, would also become architects in the city, Cecil as a founding partner of Green, Blankstein and Russell Associates (known today as GBR Architects Ltd.), Morley in Blankstein Coop Gillmor Hanna (now Number Ten Architectural Group) and Evelyn, who first worked in her brother Cecil’s office and then for Hobbs Glass (later Canadian Pittsburgh Industries).²

¹ Information courtesy of grandson Arthur Blankstein, December 2002.

² A. Blankstein; and D.M. Lyon, “Recent Past Inventory Project,” report produced for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, September 2000, “List of References Re: Architects,” pp. 2-5.

A partial list of major Winnipeg buildings designed by M.Z. Blankstein includes:³

Aikins Court Apartments, 167 Aikins Street (1907)
 Adas Yeshurun Synagogue, 217 McGregor Street (1907) – demolished
 Double Dwelling, 295-297 Atlantic Avenue (1907)
 Diamond Terrace, 174-176-178-180 Aikins Street (1907) – demolished
 First Scandinavian Mission Church, 463 Newton Avenue (1908) – demolished
 Minuk Block, 254-260 Dufferin Avenue (1909) – demolished
 Glesby Stables, 468 Aberdeen Avenue (1910) – demolished
 Chechik, Gold and Kernham Cold Storage Warehouse, 414 Jarvis Avenue (1910)
 Northern Block Apartments, 94 McGregor Street (1910) – demolished
 H. & M. Weidman & Co. Warehouse, 230 Jarvis Avenue (1910) – demolished
 American Soda Water Co. Factory, 358 Flora Avenue (1911)
 M. Calof Warehouse, 121-125 Salter Street (1911)
 Continental Block, 794-796½ Main Street (1911)
 Winnipeg Hebrew Free School (Talmud Torah), 121 Charles Street (1912)
 Palace Theatre, 501 Selkirk Avenue (1912)
 Houses, 397 & 399 Morley Avenue (1912)
 W.J. McMartin House, 283 Kingsway (1912)
 Merchant's Hotel, 541 Selkirk Avenue (1913) – List of Historical Resources
 Brandon Court Apartments, 377 Brandon Avenue (1913)
 Zimmerman Block, 669 Main Street (1913) – Grade III
 Jessie Block Apartments, 626 Jessie Avenue (1914)
 North Panama Apartments, 229 Machray Avenue (1914)
 Alenko Block, 376-380 Selkirk Avenue (1914)
 Kepman Block, 640 Selkirk Avenue (1914)
 Diner Block, 184 Henry Avenue (1914)
 European Block, 588 Manitoba Avenue (1914) – Commemorative List
 Rubin Block/Morley Apartments, 270 Morley Avenue (1914)
 Mennonite Brethren Church (basement only), 531 Burrows Avenue (1917)
 Slobinsky Brothers and Sons Warehouse, 24-28 Derby Street (1918)
 Globe Bedding Co. Warehouse, 274 Jarvis Avenue (1918) – demolished
 Film Exchange Building, 361 Hargrave Street (1922) – Grade III
 Max Blankstein House, 131 Machray Avenue (1922)
 Hebrew Free School (Talmud Torah), 220 Andrews Street (1922) – Commemorative List
 Parkview Theatre, 1823 Portage Avenue (1924) – demolished
 Mindell Block, 607 Main Street (1925) – Commemorative List
 Crosstown Garage, 64 Salter Street (1925)
 Plaza Theatre, 104 Marion Street (1926) – demolished
 Rose Theatre, 801 Sargent Avenue (1926)
 Tory's Academy Auto Service Garage, 155 Fort Street (1928)
 Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway (1929)
 Tivoli Theatre, 115 Maryland Avenue (1927) – converted into grocery store (1959)
 Uptown Theatre, 394 Academy Road (1930) – Grade III

³ Compiled from author's files; City of Winnipeg Building Permits, 1900-1926; and Western Canada Contractor and Builder, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January 1932), p. 9.

Blankstein also designed a number of theatres and buildings in Manitoba and Saskatchewan:

Wadena Hotel, 89 – 1st St. NE, Wadena, Saskatchewan (1913) – demolished

Roxy Theatre, 291 Hamilton Street, Neepawa, MB (1919)

Roxy Theatre, 11 Broadway St. East, Yorkton, Saskatchewan (1928) – demolished

Broadway Theatre, 1773 Broad St., Regina, Saskatchewan (1929) – demolished

Roxy Theatre, 320 20th St. W, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (1929)

Lido Theatre, 220-226 Andrews Ave., The Pas, MB (1929)

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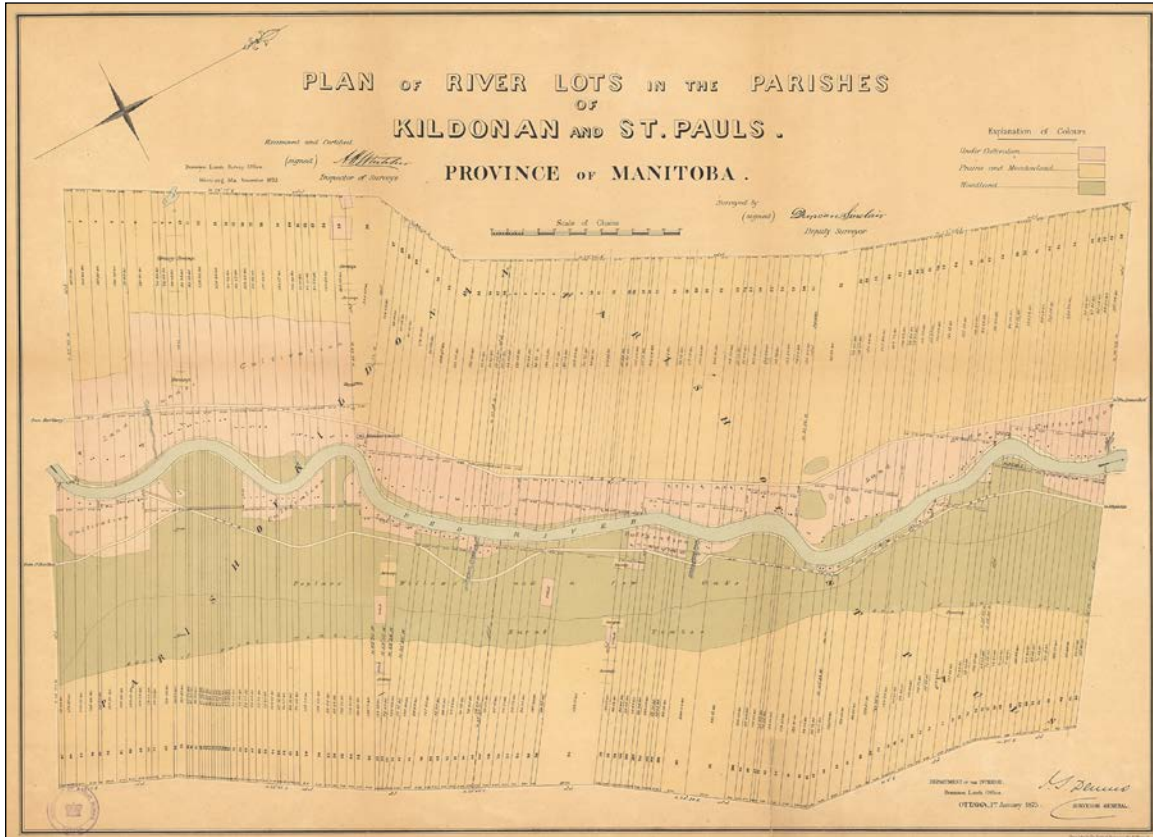


Plate 1 – “Plan of River Lots in the Parishes of Kildonan and St. Paul’s, Province of Manitoba, 1874. The theatre is located on River Lots 96/97 Kildonan, at the far left of the map east of the river. ([Library and Archives of Canada.](#))

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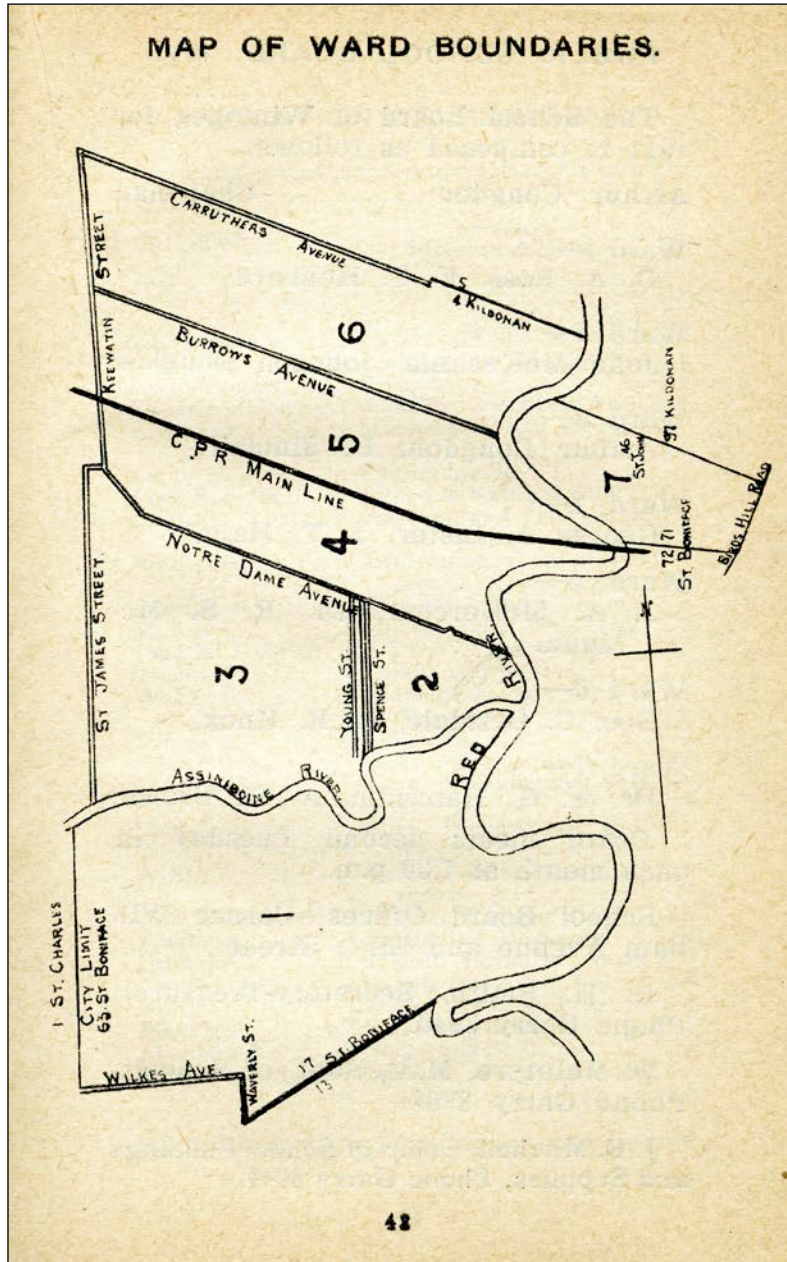


Plate 2 – “Map of Ward Boundaries, no date. Ward 7 is Elmwood. (City of Winnipeg, Municipal Manual, 1911, p. 43, courtesy of Winnipeg Archives.)

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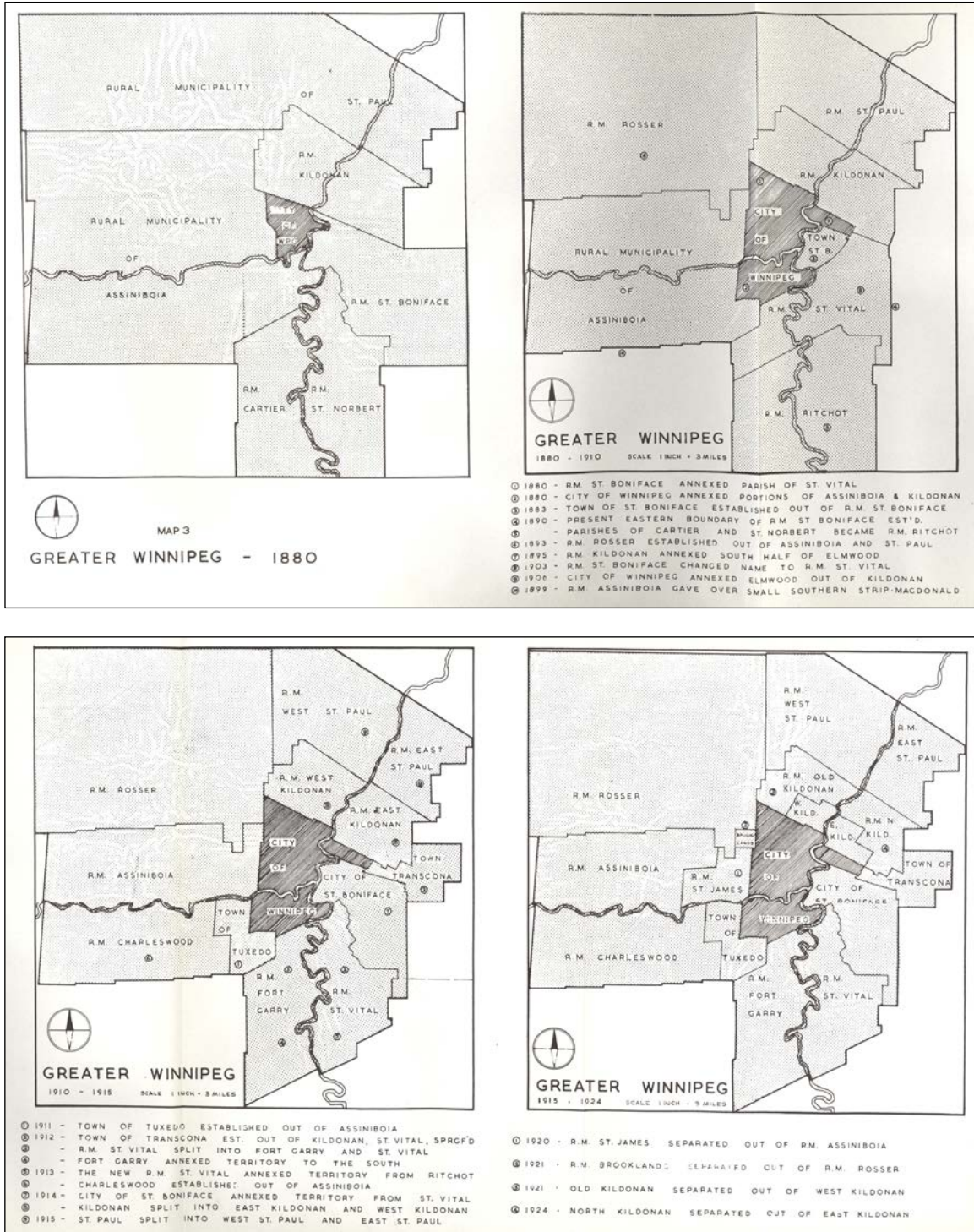


Plate 3 – Map of the boundaries of the City of Winnipeg and surrounding municipalities, towns and cities. (City of Winnipeg.)

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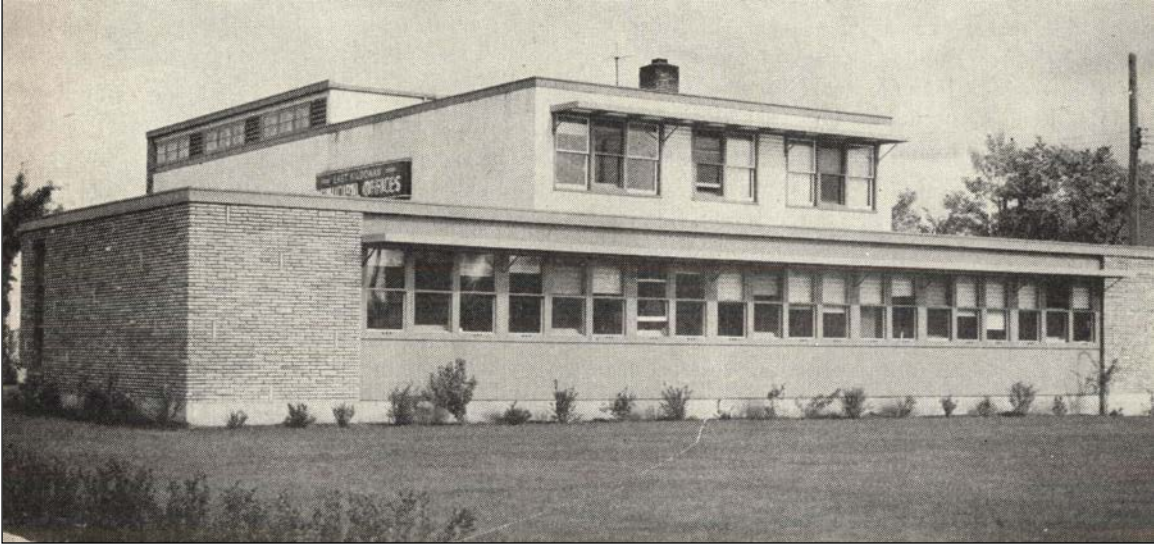


Plate 4 – East Kildonan Civic Offices, Henderson Highway at Kimberly Avenue, opened 1957, demolished 2010. (City of Winnipeg.)

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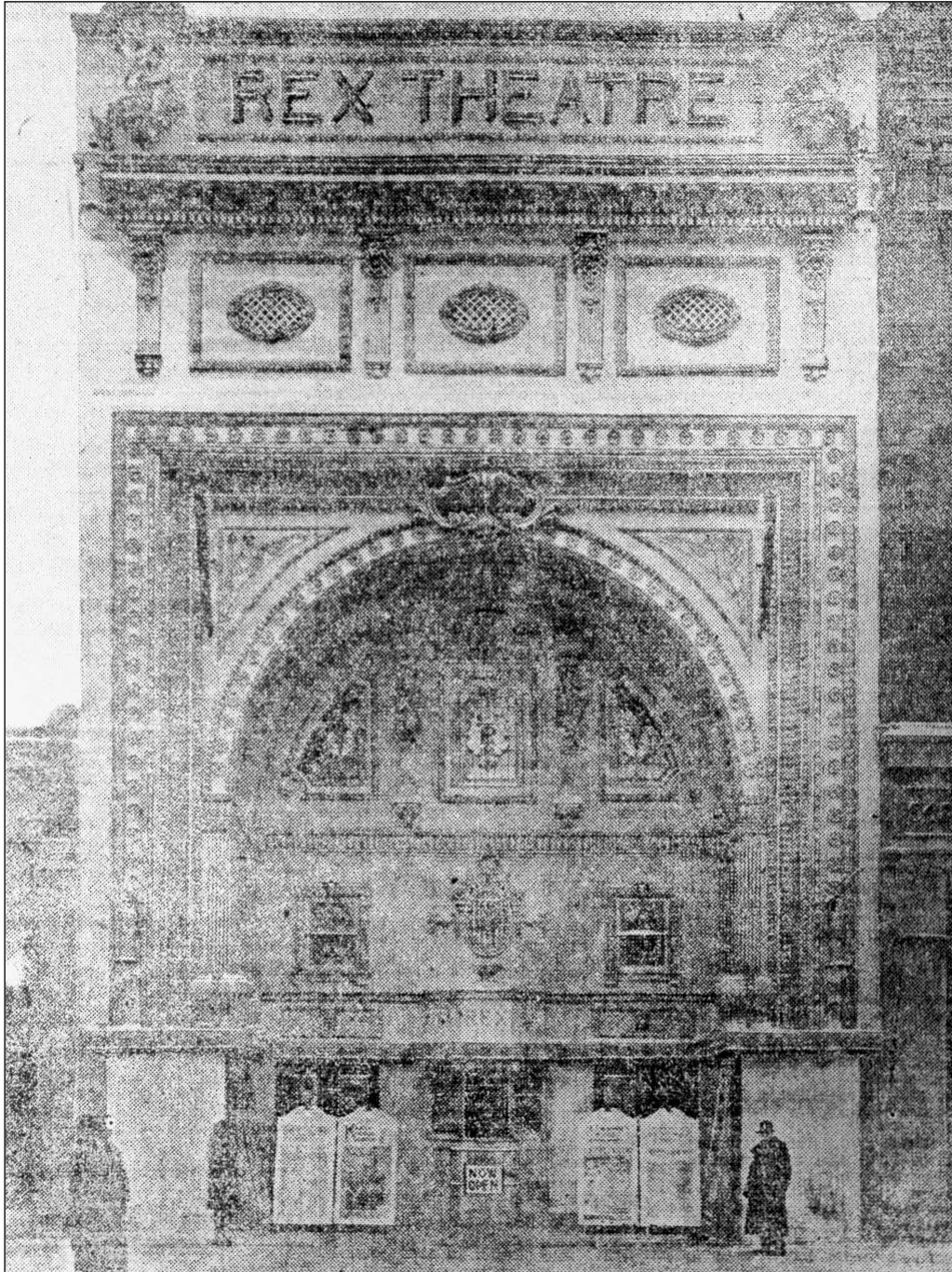


Plate 5 – 646 Main Street, the Epic Theatre (originally The Rex Theatre), 1913; built 1912, A.D. Melville, architect. (Reproduced from Winnipeg Tribune, January 25, 1913, p. 17.)

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Plate 6 – Two 1920 images of the interior of the Metropolitan Theatre, 291 Donald Street. (City of Winnipeg.)

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Plate 7 – Jacob “Jack” Miles, ca.1951. (Winnipeg Free Press, September 19, 1951, p. 32.)

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Plate 8 – Uptown Theatre, 394 Academy Road, 2021. (M. Peterson, 2021.)

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Plate 9 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, ca.1930. (Courtesy of Jim Smith, North East Winnipeg Historical Society.)

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Plate 10 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, front (west) façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 11 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, detail of front (west) façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 12 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, detail of front (west) façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 13 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, north façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 14 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, south façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 15 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, rear (east) façade, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 16 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, basement stairs, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 17 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, examples of concrete and steel columns, basement, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 18 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, basement storage space, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 19 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, exit tower, basement, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 20 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, main floor, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 21 – Roxy Theatre, 385 Henderson Highway, 2nd floor, 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 22 – Henderson Highway looking north from Larsen Avenue (top) and south from Bowman Avenue (bottom), 2022. (M. Peterson, 2022.)

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Plate 23 – Max Zev Blankstein, date unknown. (Blankstein Family Collection.)