

331 SMITH STREET – OLYMPIA (MARLBOROUGH) HOTEL
James Chisholm and Son, 1913; J.H.G. Russell, 1921-23



The early 1900s saw rapid settlement and economic growth in Western Canada. This context provided real opportunities for people to prosper even if they started out with little, if any, wealth or social standing. For four Sicilian immigrants to Winnipeg, development of the Olympia Hotel represented that kind of opportunity.

In c.1890, Leonardo Emma and Giuseppe (Joseph) Panaro opened what became a popular fruit store and restaurant on the east side of Main Street between McDermot and Bannatyne avenues. By the close of the decade, brothers Agostino (Bill) and Giuseppe (Joe) Badali also had started a fruit store, located at northeast Portage Avenue and Smith Street. They were displaced by construction in 1905, but returned to the site to operate a successful café, the Olympia, on the

ground floor of the Kensington Building.

These four men purchased property on Smith Street just north of the café in 1910. Three years later, they began to build the first three floors of a planned nine-storey hotel. To ensure the facility would be first class, they imported marble, stained glass and other finishing materials and they hired an experienced manager from the Château Laurier in Ottawa.

The venture was ill-fated, however. It proceeded during a severe economic downturn and its gala opening in November 1914 occurred just a few months after the start of World War I. Immigration, travel and business activity fell sharply, while unemployment rose. It was too much for the fledgling operation to overcome. By May 1915, the Olympia Hotel had closed.

Emma, Panaro and the Badali brothers fell back on the fruit and restaurant trades, while their former hotel was used by the Dominion government to house troops. It was the 1920s before new investors attempted to return the facility to its original purpose. Beginning in 1921, six upper floors were added to the building, followed in 1923 by a two-storey, north-side addition to provide more office and meeting space.

The Carter-Halls-Aldinger Co. of Winnipeg was the general contractor for all phases of construction. James Chisholm and Son prepared the 1913 design. John H.G. Russell was responsible for the 1921-23 work. Both Chisholm and Russell had become well-established architects after moving to Winnipeg from Ontario.

Chisholm (1840-1920) first practised locally in the late 1870s and 1880s, then spent some time in the United States before resuming work in Manitoba and other prairie provinces. He was joined by his son, Colin Campbell Chisholm (1883-1936), in c.1907. Their clients included the Methodist Church, City Light and Power, and local curling clubs.

Russell (1862-1946) entered Winnipeg in the early 1880s, then studied and worked at various centres in the mid- and western U.S. After opening his local practice in 1895, he too gained regional prominence as a designer of Presbyterian churches, warehouses, office and institutional

buildings, and projects for the Royal Bank of Canada.

Chisholm's plan for the Olympia Hotel employed the Late Gothic Revival style more common to churches than commercial buildings. There was a symbolic connection, however, in that the Olympia celebrated the inspiration and hope, not of an established religion, but of an era.

The building rises from a reinforced concrete foundation to a steel and concrete superstructure. Its finished front (west) and south façades are clothed with polished granite, a soft grey-coloured terracotta and dark red brick. A steel-frame canopy with decorative cast-iron fascia extends across five of the seven bays into which the symmetrical front is divided.

The original terracotta finish on the first three floors wraps around from the front to cover one bay of the south wall. This largely intact finish displays a wealth of Gothic details, including pointed arches, buttresses, angled pilasters, engaged pinnacles along third-storey window corners, an arcaded design in the spandrels, foils, and decorative mouldings. Most striking are the seven arched windows that encompass the ground and mezzanine floors. Each of these three-part openings is embellished with delicate unifoil tracery in the arch, stained and leaded glass, and three quatrefoil tracery panels highlighted by coloured terracotta flowers. The floral motif also is found in the window frames and in one of the horizontal mouldings above the arches. The latter element originally held a series of electric lights.

Each bay from the second storey up contains pairs of windows. The uppermost openings are surrounded by two-storey terracotta arches with keystones and quoin-like tabs. Raised terracotta pilaster caps and quatrefoil pediments mark the roof-line. Additional ornamentation is provided by lug sills, mouldings in a grapevine pattern, a terracotta cornice, and a string course.

By the mid-1920s, the elaborate interior of the renamed Marlborough Hotel included a rotunda with buff-coloured Caen stone walls, Tavernell marble wainscoting, Tennessee marble flooring, and English-style metal light fixtures. The main-floor restaurant featured a two-storey ceiling, orchestra gallery, walnut wainscoting, and French silk tapestries. The mezzanine tea room was equipped with chintz and rattan furniture, Tiffany fixtures and an adjoining musicians' gallery.

On the eighth floor were a ballroom, lounge, convention hall, Blue Room, and kitchen facilities. Another space for dancing was included in the basement grill room which had a heavy beam ceiling, tapestry brick walls, oak accents, and tile floor.

The hotel has undergone several ownership and physical changes over the years, although some original interior features remain. An eight-storey annex was built on the north side in 1956-59. It initially contained 200 rooms, beverage and eating facilities, and the Skyview Ballroom. Later renovations reduced its guest-room capacity. Most of the 1913-21 section was converted to office space and merchandise showrooms in 1976-77. More recently, its ninth floor was turned into two meeting rooms.

The site was acquired in 1991 by the German Canadian Congress for partial conversion to a cultural centre and senior citizens' residence to be operated in conjunction with the hotel. Financial difficulties soon arose, however, and the property was returned to its former owners. The hotel later reopened under the management of the Ramada chain.