



**272 HOME STREET**

**THE THELMA APARTMENTS**

The City Of Winnipeg  
Historical Buildings Committee

July 1992

## 272 HOME STREET - THE THELMA APARTMENTS

The Assiniboine River to the south, Portage Avenue on the north, Maryland Street (east) and Omand's Creek (west) form the boundaries of the Wolseley district in Winnipeg's West End. The area was developed after the turn of the century to meet the demand for new residential alternatives to the commercializing city centre. This outward growth was facilitated by improved roads and a mass transportation system that increased mobility.

Much of the area along the Assiniboine River was surveyed into St. James River Lots which stretched northward from the river bank. Parts of River Lots 42-71 were subdivided in the Wolseley district.<sup>1</sup> These river lots were originally owned by a number of prominent citizens including: Andrew Graham Ballenden Bannatyne (1829-1889), Hudson's Bay Company employee, member of the Council of Assiniboia (1868) and of Louis Riel's Provisional Government (1869), and M.P. for Provencher (1875);<sup>2</sup> Gilbert McMicken (1813-1891), Dominion Land Agent for Manitoba, assistant Receiver General and M.L.A. (1879-83);<sup>3</sup> and Colonel James Mulligan, constable for the District of Assiniboia, last policeman under the Hudson's Bay Company regime and land speculator.<sup>4</sup> Slowly the large river lots and holdings were subdivided and residential streets, lots and buildings began to appear.

While both the north and south sides of Portage Avenue saw extensive construction of housing, the south side witnessed the building of larger, more expensive homes. Because of its relative proximity both to the river and the exclusive neighbourhood of Armstrong's Point, the Wolseley district soon attained an elite reputation of its own.

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<sup>1</sup> Map Room - Land Titles Office; and Old Systems - Abstract Book #244, River Lot 66, Parish of St. James.

<sup>2</sup> Pioneers and Early Citizens of Manitoba, compiled by The Manitoba Library Association (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1971), pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-50.

<sup>4</sup> Manitoba History Scrapbooks, Manitoba Legislative Library, M8, p. 69.

The Thelma Apartments are situated on River Lot 66, Parish of St. James, part of the original holdings of William Drever who was born in the Orkney Islands and arrived in York Factory as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company in August 1821. He remained at the post for 18 years until he retired and moved to the Red River Settlement. Like so many others, Drever obtained a grant of land to farm in the vicinity of Upper Fort Garry, in this case on the Assiniboine River. In 1849 he settled near what is now Winnipeg's main commercial district and opened a general merchant shop. He died in 1887.<sup>5</sup>

In 1914, as the area's most active development stage came to a close, the Thelma Apartments were built on a small parcel of Drever's original land grant overlooking St. James Park (now Vimy Ridge Park).

## **STYLE**

This building contains half-timbering that suggests a Tudor influence in its design. Inspired by late medieval English architecture, Tudor Revival has been a popular style for residential structures, both homes and apartment blocks, from approximately 1890 to present day.

Distinguishing features of the style include a steeply pitched gabled roof with cross gables. Windows are often multipaned and leaded, and highlights and accents of brick and stone are common. The most obvious and widely used ornamental feature is a finish of vertical and diagonal half-timbering with smooth stucco.

## **CONSTRUCTION**

The building sits on the west side of Home Street, between Portage Avenue and Preston Avenue, facing Vimy Ridge Park. The land is legally described as 66 St. James, Plan 14632, Lot 1. The three- storey structure has 33.0 cm. (13") thick walls, composed of both red face and common sand-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

lime brick. The stone foundation is 40.6 cm. (16") thick.<sup>6</sup> Brick interior walls surround all suites, a common fire-retarding element of many blocks in the city.

The building measures approximately 13.1 x 28.9 x 12.2 m. (43 x 94.7 x 40 ft.), totalling 4,242.2 cu. m. (nearly 150,000 cu. ft.) of interior space (see Appendix I).<sup>7</sup> Construction required 107,500 bricks, 4,175 superficial sq. m. (5,000 superficial sq. ft.) of plaster, and 122 cu. m. (160 cu. yd.) of concrete. The project cost an estimated \$50,000.<sup>8</sup>

## DESIGN

All four elevations rest on a smooth-cut stone foundation rising above grade (Plates 1 and 2). The front or east facade is built of red face brick. The rectangular windows are a mixture of newer aluminium and original wooden frames. They are all finished with brick heads and smooth-cut stone lug sills. Enclosed porches grace the second and third floors of this elevation and include the half-timbering that gives this apartment block its Tudor detailing.

The three other facades are built of common, cream-coloured, sand-lime brick. Brick heads and smooth-cut stone lug sills again add contrast to these otherwise plain elevations.

Apartment block construction in North America was an early twentieth century phenomenon. A concern voiced early in the development of this new form of housing was the adverse health affects caused by a lack of proper ventilation and sunlight. In response, several plans were devised by architects across North America to maximize air movement and sunlight into each suite. Plans included a square with an interior greenspace or private park, an "H" shape, an "I" shape, a series of open or screened porches, and mixtures of the above. In each, window space was optimized, thereby

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<sup>6</sup> City of Winnipeg, Assessment Record, Roll No. 826091 (old no. 14802), Ward 1, PC 19 (Condo #50). Below as AR.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> City of Winnipeg, Building Permit, #542/1914.

increasing natural light and improving air circulation. The Thelma Apartments form a simple rectangle with side indentations combined with screened porches on the east facade (see Appendix I).

Another concern voiced by detractors was the lack of privacy the blocks provided and the obvious fire hazards of multi-tenant structures. The former problem was partially solved by locating interior rooms on top of the rooms on the lower floor and by separating suites on the same floor with halls and staircases. The second problem was lessened in a number of ways. As time progressed, architects added fireproof staircases, masonry-enclosed boilers, and other fire stalling devices. Brick interior walls separating each suite also were used - at The Thelma Apartments they were 10.2 cm. (4") thick in the basement and 15.2 cm. (6") on the other three floors.<sup>9</sup> City bylaws worked to keep the existence of large wooden apartment blocks to a minimum, the majority of blocks in Winnipeg thus being three storeys and of brick construction.

## INTERIOR

The original basement of the building held three suites, one with a living room (which doubled as a bedroom), kitchen and bathroom (all off an internal hallway) and two suites with a living room (again used as the bedroom), dining room, kitchen and bathroom. The remainder of space was taken by a boiler room (enclosed in masonry), a locker room and a laundry room.<sup>10</sup>

The three upper floors are all organized similarly, with four suites running off a wide central corridor. Each suite had a bedroom, living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom. All suites on the second and third floors featured balconies.

Interior access could not be gained. However, the interior organization has not been seriously altered, and building permits issued against the block have been for minor upgrading rather than

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<sup>9</sup> Architect's Plans, #542/1914, City of Winnipeg Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

major alterations.<sup>11</sup>

## **INTEGRITY**

The apartment stands on its original site, has suffered little interior or exterior alteration, and is in good structural condition.

## **STREETSCAPE**

The Thelma Apartments sit on the western edge of Vimy Ridge Park, a 2.43 ha. (6.0 ac.) tract of land originally named St. James Park. The site was purchased in 1894 for \$6,002.78 and became one of the City's earliest designated greenspaces (by the end of that year there were eight in total). When first organized, this park was set up as a formal space, with landscaped massing of trees and shrubs, natural curvilinear walks and open lawns (Plate 3). By the time of construction of the Thelma, there were at least 30 urban and suburban parks (Plate 4).<sup>12</sup> Situated close to this park, with an English cottage facade, the Thelma Apartments fit well into the garden setting.

Surrounding this block are rows of medium- and large-sized homes on small lots. The adjacent area also is dotted with churches and other apartment blocks of similar design and size, making the Thelma extremely compatible with its neighbourhood.

## **ARCHITECT**

The architects and builders of the block was its original owners, Arni Eggertson and Thomas Wilson. It is the first structure reviewed by the Historical Buildings Committee credited to the pair. Nothing could be learned about T. Wilson, but Arni Eggertson was well-known locally as a real

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<sup>11</sup> AR.

<sup>12</sup> M.E. Cavett, et. al., "Social Philosophy and the Early Development of Winnipeg's Public Parks," Urban History Review, Vol. XI, No. 1 (June 1982), pp. 31-3.

estate investor and contractor. He was one of many in Winnipeg's Icelandic community who participated in both real estate and apartment block construction ventures. He was born on May 8, 1873 in Iceland and came to Winnipeg at age 14. Like many others in the city, he started out with little money, earning \$20 for his first year of work. By 1904 he had accumulated enough capital to start a real estate business; he also became the director of the Winnipeg Fire Insurance Company.<sup>13</sup>

He was a member of City Council in 1907, 1908 and again in 1917 and was a leader of the campaign for the establishment of City Hydro. During World War I, he represented the government of Iceland in both New York and Washington. He died in Winnipeg on February 12, 1942.<sup>14</sup>

## **PERSON**

In 1899 J.W. Lyon, publisher from Guelph, Ontario, owned \$19,000 worth of land in 66 St. James (864 lots). The land on which the apartment block is located was then bought by James Dunn, cattle buyer and in 1912 Jordan William, investor, is listed as the owner of four lots, 34/37, and a house on Lot 34. In 1913 Arni Eggerston bought these lots and built his fine new three-storey block on Lots 36/37. The next owner of the block was E.G. Eggertson, son of Arni Eggertson and an electrical engineer, who held the property from 1929 to 1954. It then was owned by a number of citizens, both living in the block and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

Tenants of the block have remained relatively constant in that most of them have come from the middle-income sector. The list of original tenants included travelling salesmen, the owner of a pool room, a secretary-treasurer of a lumbermen's association, several managers, and a postman.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> F.H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba (Winnipeg: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913), Vol. II, pp. 363-64.

<sup>14</sup> The Winnipeg Tribune, February 13, 1942, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> City of Winnipeg, Assessment Roll, 66 St. James, Plan 14632, Lot 1.

<sup>16</sup> Henderson's Directory (Winnipeg), 1918.

## EVENT

There is no known event connected with this structure.

## CONTEXT

This block fits into several contexts: the acceptance of large blocks within residential neighbourhoods, the segmentation of income groups in the urban setting aided by these apartments, and the last building boom in Winnipeg.

In contrast to much of the United States and eastern Canada, where apartment buildings were seen as a disruptive force to "the stability of existing single-family neighbourhoods,"<sup>17</sup> Winnipeggers saw them as necessary and, in fact, something "of which we are proud."<sup>18</sup> In Winnipeg, the harsh climate, large numbers of newly arriving single workers, the lack of negativity towards the large blocks, and the economic strength of the city all combined to make Winnipeg the centre of apartment block construction in Canada from 1900 to 1915. As such, the Thelma is one of the last built during the heyday of the apartment blocks in Winnipeg.

Segmentation of the population along income lines was prevalent throughout North America, and in turn apartment blocks were regularly designed to cater to the specific income group of the surrounding area. In many cases, as in the Thelma, blocks were built with some ornamentation and private service entrances to attract a more exclusive class of tenant.

The Wolseley district had seen nearly a decade of fantastic growth that transformed a sparsely populated rural area into block after block of large homes on small lots, dotted with churches and apartments. The Thelma was built at the end of this district's growth period, in fact, at the end of the real growth stage of all of Winnipeg.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Peterson, "828 Preston Avenue - The Rothsay," Report for the City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, February 1991, p. 10; and J. Hancock, "The apartment house in urban America" in A.D. King (ed.), *Building and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Manitoba Free Press*, December 6, 1906, p. 54.

**LANDMARK**

Situated on a popular park and boasting a large, prominent front facade, the Thelma Apartments are conspicuous in their surroundings.

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Plate 1 – The Thelma Apartments, 272 Home Street; built 1914, architects and contractors, A. Eggertson and T. Wilson; front or east facade. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)



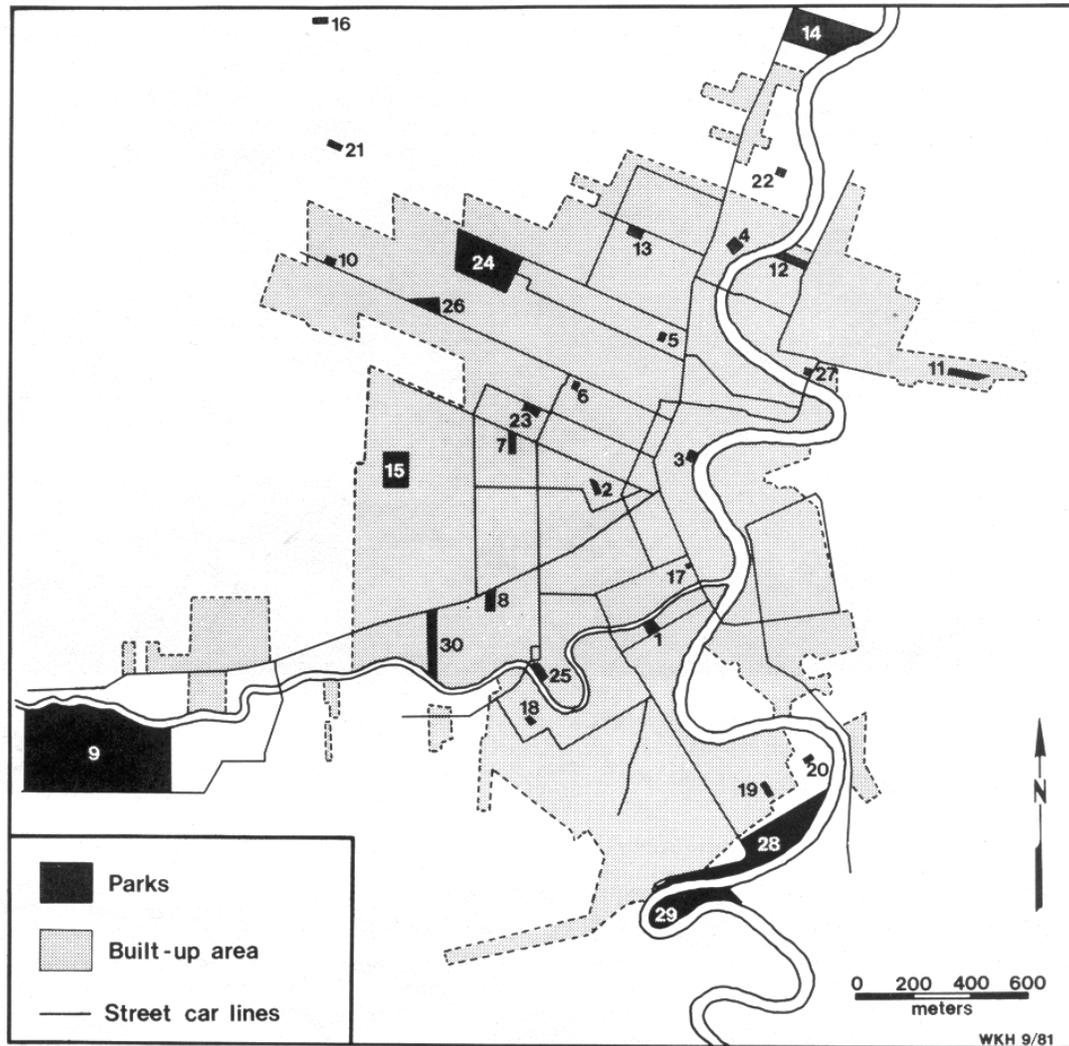
Plate 2 – The Thelma Apartments, 272 Home Street, rear and north side. (Murray Peterson, 1992.)

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Plate 3 – St. James Park, 1910. (Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N11803.)

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**WINNIPEG PARKS SYSTEM (c. 1914)**

**Purchased Parks**

1. Fort Rouge Park
2. Central Park
3. Victoria Park
4. St. John's Park
5. Selkirk Park
6. Dufferin Park
7. Notre Dame Park
8. St. James Park
9. Assiniboine Park
10. Weston Park
11. King Edward Park
12. Elmwood Park
13. Machray Park
14. Kildonan Park
15. Sargent Park
16. Kitchener Park

**Donated Parks**

17. Fort Garry Gateway
18. Crescentwood Park
19. Pembina Park
20. Riverview Park
21. Clark Park
22. Seven Oaks Park

**Transferred Parks**

23. Alexandra Square
24. Exhibition Grounds
25. Cornish Park
26. Logan Park
27. Midwinter Park

**Private Parks**

28. River Park
29. Elm Park
30. Happyland Park