



214 McDERMOT AVENUE

CRITERION HOTEL

HISTORIAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

November 12, 1980

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During a boom period, rapid growth in a city creates a shortage of proper housing, making hotel space high in demand. In Winnipeg, in the early 1880s, there was a land boom, a bubble in effect which generated frantic activity. As the bubble was expected to burst at any time, the smart money got in and out of the market rather quickly. Those who built lodgings and hotels, built them cheaply and packed them full of travellers. Virtually any structure that would stay up could be made into a hotel but the overcrowding, dirt and poor moral atmosphere made many into "cesspools operating under the guise of hotels", to quote Winnipeg's Chief of Police.¹ As the population jumped from 8,000 in 1881 to 16,000 in 1882, 86 hotels opened to accommodate the newcomers.

The boom in the early twentieth century was of a much different nature. Wheat, and the development of the prairie west, created more stable economic growth with far greater substance. While there was also some frantic construction accompanying this boom, many people built their structures to last. In 1903, downtown Winnipeg was quite sophisticated and aspired to be even more so. It had several new hotels, even some grand ones, and had built more that very year.² The Criterion was one of the better quality hotels erected in 1903. Its location in the heart of the warehouse district made it more attractive to the travelling salesmen who based for supplies in Winnipeg before peddling their wares through the north west, than to the immigrants arriving at the railway stations. Hotels were also used by newcomers awaiting possession of permanent homes in the city and by families gathering supplies before heading out to their homestead.

The larger hotels built that year advertised as "all modern" which implied steam heat, electricity and full plumbing, amenities not predictable in all of Winnipeg's diverse hostelryes.³

The Criterion Hotel was owned by John Wilkes who had formerly operated a restaurant on Main Street. That space became too valuable for the small hotel so Wilkes was forced to move. The site on McDermot was generally as it is today: to the east of the Criterion is the Lake of the Woods Milling Company (with the former Dominion Bank on Main Street where a park now exists); to the West are the Leckie Block and the Silvester-Willson Building on the corner of Albert Street. Across

McDermot from the hotel are many of the same buildings there when the Criterion went up in 1903, but with rather different tenants. McDermot, from Main to Princess, was Winnipeg's "newspaper row". The Free Press offices, the Tribune, the Telegram, Town Topics, the Nor'West Farmer, L'Echo, the Northwest Review and several weekly or monthly journals were all located within this area.⁴ A daily news sheet for the grain trade was printed at 171 McDermot and Stovel press published several farm journals from the corner of Arthur Street. The area was alive with newspaper staff and reporters, of which author James Gray has commented

The trade of journalism in that era was overrun with drinkers, if not with drunks, who had an unerring nose for booze as well as news-- frequently one led to the other, and from either direction.⁵

The Criterion was eminently suited to satisfy the thirsty newsmen. On the ground floor was a large bar "handsomely fitted with quartered oak"⁶ with a large and attractive billiard room off to one side. There the staff could get together, not just to relax, but to exchange information for their common profession. The bar of the Criterion was formally closed during the twelve long years from the 'ban the bar' referendum in 1916 until bars finally reopened in Manitoba in 1928.

From 1920 to 1923, there was total prohibition but it proved to be highly unpopular, ending with government control over liquor sales. The main thrust of the whole movement was to eliminate the old western style bars in which "men drank and were encouraged to drink, to intoxication",⁷ rather than for social relaxation. Excessive drinking permeated society causing great hardship for the families of the drinkers, with attending high costs of non-productivity, violence, and social deviation. Re-opening the bars in 1928 was an attempt to control the rampant bootlegging which had arisen to counteract prohibition and only added to some of the problems. Bootlegging, the illegal sale of liquor or beer, has been documented by James Gray in Booze. Gray claims that many bars continued to sell liquor secretly to their regular customers, taking the raps when discovered.⁸

The Criterion also had a substantial hotel to carry it through the dry period, while many hotels which

depended solely on their bars were forced to close. When the bars re-opened legally in 1928, many of the newspapers had left the McDermot Avenue district but the Criterion remained a popular gathering place for members of the press. Vince Leah recalled the Criterion Athletic Club, a group of media people headed by Cactus Jack Wells who met daily in the "dark, buzzing beer parlour" of the hotel. The regulars had arch-rivals in the St. Regis Marching and Chowder Society with whom they played challenge baseball matches. Leah recalls that he was often sent from the Tribune "to haul some newsman back to his typewriter and that happened continually between 1930 and the 50s."⁹

Aside from the bar and billiard room, there were other attractions to the early Criterion. On the second storey was a large, well-lighted dining room supplied by a kitchen with the most modern equipment. Off the dining room were small rooms, nicely decorated, which doubled as private dining rooms or private parlours. The front of the building was a large public parlour furnished in grand style and comfort.¹⁰ The thirty private rooms were in the top two storeys. The long and narrow design of the hotel, which was surrounded by taller buildings, made lighting and ventilation a problem which was solved by using "air and light shafts so satisfactorily that there is not a dark or badly ventilated room in the whole establishment."¹¹ There are presently three skylights over the stairway and the upper floor washrooms. In the practice of the period, there were washrooms on each floor but not in the private rooms.

The building was constructed in the spring and summer of 1903, with the opening delayed six weeks past the October 1st deadline by a scarcity of skilled carpenters and proper building materials, symptoms of the building boom. H.S. Griffith was the architect and the builders were W.J. Hodgins and W.H. Fraser. The dimensions are 22 feet across and 105 feet deep with a height of 58 feet. The building is solid brick with stone facings and terra cotta around the ground floor. The ceiling on the first floor, the bar, were pressed metal but all others were plaster. There was originally a freight elevator. The cost of construction was \$20,000.¹²

The Criterion's architect, H.S. Griffiths, was one of several British architects who came to Canada in

the last two decades of the twentieth century. He was from Oxfordshire, born in 1865 and coming to Winnipeg in the spring of 1887. He didn't actually practice as an architect until 1893 after working as a surveyor and draughtsman for the Northern Pacific Railway and for the government Land Titles office. He designed commercial and residential buildings, including the early Thomas Ryan warehouse, and the residence of G.H. Shaw of the CPR.¹³

Griffith's design for the Criterion creates interest in the windows which vary in size, shape and rhythm in each row. The horizontal lines of the windows, further emphasized by the limestone facing, parapet and a balconet, offset the high and narrow design without looking cramped. The best feature of the façade is the soft-coloured terra cotta detailing around the ground floor which is both beautiful and rare in Winnipeg.¹⁴

The Criterion suffered the degeneration which many of the downtown hotels underwent. In 1976, Al Golden purchased the old "Cri" with the plan to renovate it for law offices and retail space. Some of the furnishings and fittings, dating back to 1903, were sold at a public auction.¹⁵ The hotel has been vacant since that time.

Footnotes--

1. James H. Gray Booze MacMillan of Canada Toronto 1972, p. 6. Chief of Police D.B. Murray reported in 1882 that "many hotels are resorts for thieves and blackguards and are hotbeds for drunkenness...They would be better described as cesspools operating under the guise of hotels."
2. "Accommodation in the Hotels," Telegram 19 December 1903.
3. Loc. cit.
4. Henderson's Directory for Winnipeg, 1904.
5. James H. Gray Booze MacMillan of Canada Toronto 1973, p. 163.
6. "The Criterion," Telegram 19 December 1903 p. 8.
7. W.L. Morton Manitoba: A History University of Toronto Press Toronto 1957, p. 321. See also Lionel Orlikow A Survey of the Reform Movement in Manitoba 1910 to 1920 University of Manitoba M.A. Thesis 1955, p. 29-38.
8. Gray, op. cit., p. 212-19.
9. Vince Leah "Closing of the Criterion Hotel will sadden some sports fans" Tribune 6 November 1976.
10. Telegram, 1903, op. cit.
11. Loc. cit.
12. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 108 26 March 1903.
13. "A Group of Winnipeg Architects" Canadian Architect and Builder January 1897 p. 5.
14. William P. Thompson et al Winnipeg's Historic Warehouse Area Heritage Canada and the Manitoba Historical Society Winnipeg 1976 p. 19.
15. Free Press 18 October 1976.

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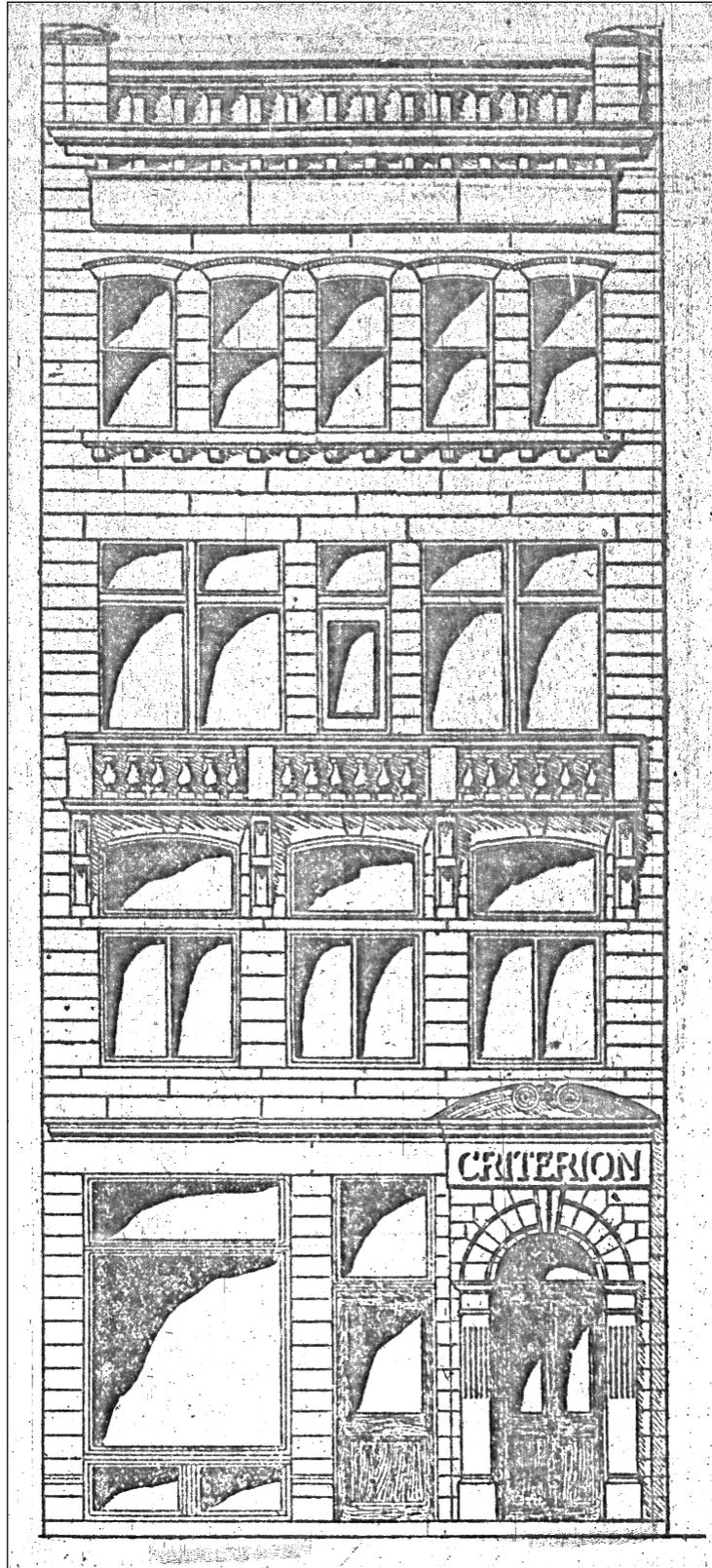


Plate 1 – Criterion Hotel as pictured in 1903. (Reproduced from the Telegram, December 19, 1903.)

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Plate 2 – The Criterion Hotel as it was actually built, 1969. There is a difference in the fenestration, both in shape and execution from the original design but the greatest change is in the treatment of the ground floor façade. Griffith's design calls for an Italianate treatment of the main door which is placed on the right. The actual design features coloured terra cotta ornamentation as a border, in the architrave and on the capitals of the columns. The two doors on either side of the façade may not both be part of the original construction. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 3 – McDermot Avenue immediately before the Criterion was built, ca.1902. In the foreground on the left is the Dominion Bank and behind it is the Lake of the Woods Milling Co. Building. Next is the small building which the Criterion replaced. The Telegram Building can be seen here while the Tribune and Free Press buildings were on the right (north) side of the street. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Detail of architrave. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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Plate 5 – Detail of terra cotta. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 6 – Capital of columns on the main façade. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

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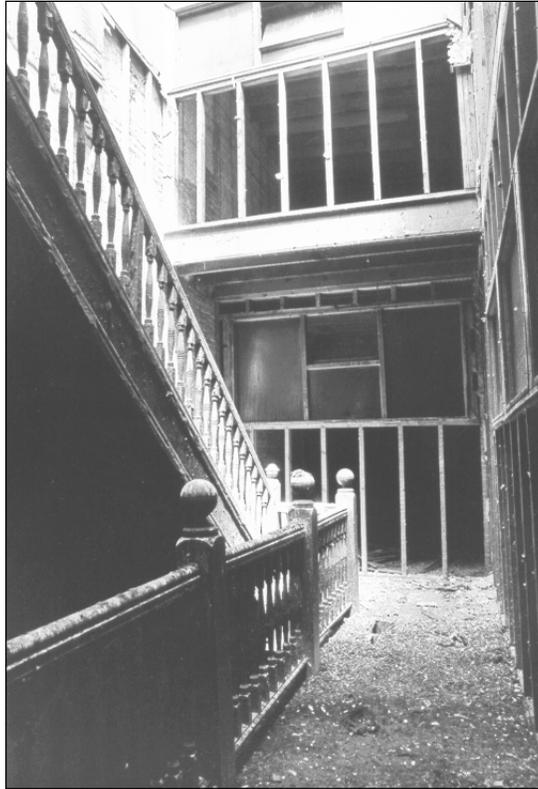


Plate 7 – Interior staircase. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)



Plate 8 – Detail of the columns in the interior. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)