



**213 NOTRE DAME AVENUE**  
**ELECTRIC RAILWAY CHAMBERS**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

April 20, 1981

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Although Winnipeg was a modest community in the 1880s, it had aspirations and ambitions far in excess of its size. This was due in part to the kinds of people who had come to the city — young, vigorous folk infected with daring and even audacity, who experimented in diverse development schemes. Accordingly, several gas and light companies were formed on shoe-string budgets and based on a limited technology. Enough light and electricity were generated to interest some bigger investors, three of whom were the powerful Canadian Northern Railway team of Mackenzie, Mann and Ross.<sup>1</sup> In 1892, they jointly formed the Winnipeg Electric Street Railway Co., with Sir William Mackenzie in the presidency.<sup>2</sup> Because a street railway needed an abundant and reliable source of power, such companies usually generated their own, as was the case here, thereby forging an intimate connection among the city's supply of gas, electricity, and public transportation that was to vex politicians for the next 20 years.

Initially in direct competition with a horse-drawn street railway company, the WESRC laid track and purchased streetcars, gradually building a clientele as the city's outer areas grew up. As it expanded, the WESRC methodically acquired various competing power utilities such as the Winnipeg General Power Company (1904), the Suburban Rapid Transit Company (1905) and the Winnipeg, Selkirk and Lake Winnipeg Railway Company (1906).<sup>3</sup> In 1895, the company erected a steam generating plant at the foot of Assiniboine Avenue at Main, which supplied the street railway and sold the surplus power to private homes. As the demand for electricity increased, the power utility went farther afield to the Pinawa rapids on the Winnipeg River. In 1902-06, the WESRC developed a large hydro-electric generating system there and sold the power at stiff rates to Winnipeg consumers. Now a monopoly, the company was reaping large profits and paying substantial dividends to its shareholders.

While the utility was certainly providing the essential services of power, street-lighting and public transit,<sup>4</sup> Winnipeg citizens chafed under the steep rates and businessmen reviled the private monopoly. For several years, many people had favoured a municipally-owned power utility, models

of which were to be found operating successfully across the country. As the lobby grew, and the Winnipeg Electric Railway Company (renamed in 1904) continued to charge extortionate rates, city council finally resolved to hold a referendum in June, 1906. In a last-ditch effort to save their position, the WERC dropped their power rates by 50%,<sup>5</sup> but the electorate still voted for municipal hydro-electric development.

After this vote, and before the new public utility actually delivered power in 1911, Winnipeg's citizens rankled at the WERC. Gone was the novelty of a streetcar ride — suddenly the cars were too drafty, too cold, overcrowded. Passengers had to wait too long between runs, freezing in the winter and half-baked in the summer, only to have to wade through the famous Red River gumbo to get to the tracks which ran down the centre of the street.<sup>6</sup> The rates for electricity were seen to keep the city underdeveloped because cheap power was essential to industry.<sup>7</sup> At the height of the conflict in 1910, city council attempted to acquire Winnipeg Electric Railway by direct purchase and then by legal takeover through the courts on the charge of breaking their charter: both attempts failed.

Even with the government's competition, the WERC was hardly dealt a mortal blow. They kept the street railway (although council insisted on tighter regulations), continued to supply gas to industry and home heating, and still sold electricity to all Winnipeg's independent suburbs. In 1913, for example, their profits were over two million dollars<sup>8</sup> while securing exclusive franchises to supply power and street lighting to every municipality adjacent to the city.<sup>9</sup> A permanent staff of 1,500 employees with a monthly payroll of \$100,000, serviced 110 miles of track, 250 cars and nearly 400,000 street lights.<sup>10</sup> It was in these years of pre-war prosperity that the WERC built the Electric Railway Chambers.

In 1912, architects Pratt and Ross were commissioned to design the 11-storey steel skeleton office tower. The senior partner, Ralph Pratt, was born and trained in England before coming to Winnipeg in 1892. He worked as a railway architect first for the CPR and then for the Canadian Northern, designing dozens of railway structures such as the CNR's Prince Edward Hotel in Brandon, the Vancouver railway station, as well as several private works. It was through the WERC's president,

Sir William Mackenzie, simultaneously head of Canadian Northern, that Pratt and Ross were chosen for the Electric Railway Chambers.

The general contractors for the Chambers were Carter-Halls-Aldinger, who had also got their start in railways and public works. The senior partner, W.H. Carter, was an American who apprenticed with the major firm of William Grace Co. of Chicago. After coming to Winnipeg in 1903, he teamed with Frank Halls, a draughtsman who had considerable experience in fire-proof construction, and A.H. Aldinger, a civil engineer.<sup>12</sup> The company built many prominent structures in Manitoba over the years.

The new Railway Chambers was "the last word in office building construction."<sup>13</sup> Its steel skeleton, fire-proofed with hollow tile, rose from a cassion foundation that rested on solid rock. Polished granite on the main floor of the two façades gave way to an elegant wrap of terra cotta. The interior had floors and wainscotting of marble, as well as the washrooms. The doors and trim were made of hollow metal but finished in a veneer of mahogany. The three cage elevators were finished in ornamental iron and bronze. In case the message was not obvious enough, 6,000 electric lights ran the length of the columns which lit the building in a magnificent dazzle. Clearly, electrical power was power indeed.

Original estimates of construction costs were \$500,000,<sup>14</sup> but the Chambers ended up at nearly a million dollars. In the true fashion of Louis Sullivan, the Chambers are a blend of ultra-modern building technology with a façade motif of Italian Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> The massive piers form arches elaborately worked in terra cotta and regularly punctuated with lion gargoyles, hunched over and glaring fiercely onto Notre Dame and Albert Streets. The cornice is heavily ornamented and particularly deep, in fact, it contains the 11th storey which only has windows on the two brick sides. Its site is visually important as a boundary of the downtown commercial district.

With their prestigious new building complete in 1913, the WERC explained their success with a

swagger:

The progress of the company has been marked by performance rather than promises, and whether measured by physical improvements, by financial achievements, by ingenuity in organization, by impregnability in defense, or by generosity in largesse, the Winnipeg Electric Railway Company stands as the greatest single agency for the advancement of Winnipeg!<sup>16</sup>

Originally, the company only occupied the first two floors of the Chambers, with some offices and a lounge for the motormen and conductors in the basement. Pratt and Ross kept an office on the 10th floor and mortgage and investment companies, lawyers, accountants and supply firms filled the rest of the space. The building superintendent had a suite of rooms on the top floor.

In the 1920s, a mixture of businesses occupied space there, including the British Trade Commission, and the National War Savings Commission. As the WERC continued to grow, it required more space and by 1944, it used half of the Chambers. Two prominent firms held large offices there for many years — Monarch Life Company and the international accounting firm of Touche Ross. Gradually, accountants have become the principal tenants of the Chambers, although there has always been an interesting mixture of business and professional firms.

The Winnipeg Electric Company, as it came to be called in 1924, continued to provide street car service, changing to trolley cars in 1938. Beginning in 1918, they also began running gasoline motor busses within the city limits, to fend off the competition from independent jitney (mini-bus) drivers. Some of the early acquisitions gave the WEC feeder railway lines to Selkirk, Gimli and Headingley. By 1925, the streetcars alone were carrying 55 million passengers annually which makes 200,000 people daily.<sup>17</sup> The demand for gas and electricity continued to grow with the city,<sup>18</sup> although Winnipeg Hydro serviced the actual City of Winnipeg. Yet by 1953, it was obvious that a unified system of power distribution, and a public transit system were needed. The Greater Winnipeg Transit Company took over the WEC in the operation of trolley and gas busses. By a power agreement in 1955, all electricity was generated and distributed by a cost-sharing agreement

between Manitoba and Winnipeg Hydro. That was also the last year for trolley busses, the finale of the electric street railway.

For several years after, Greater Winnipeg Transit operated from the Electric Railway Chambers, until the 1960s. Montreal Trust expanded and occupied the first two floors until quite recently, and the name of the building was changed to Notre Dame Chambers. Lawyers, accountants and a large firm of consulting engineers now occupy most of the space. Many of the offices have been modernized but a fair amount of the original grand interior remains. There has been some alteration to the ground floor, but the upper floors remain the same as 1912.

## FOOTNOTES--

1. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg a social history of urban growth 1874-1914 McGill-Queen's University Press Montreal 1975 p. 94.
2. Walter E. Bradley "A History of Transportation in Winnipeg" Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba Papers Series III No. 15 Winnipeg 1960 p. 12.
3. "Dates Show Progress" Winnipeg Tribune 17 September 1955.
4. In 1905-06, the Winnipeg Electric Railway Company supplied 127,000,000 cubic feet of gas to industry, carried 13,000,000 passengers on its streetcars, and generated 12,000,000 kilowatt hours of electricity. "Put Power Behind Your Savings" Winnipeg Electric Company pamphlet, Winnipeg c. 1927.
5. Bill Burdney "Far-sighted citizens built city's electric-power empires" Winnipeg Tribune 7 May 1974.
6. "Poor Service of Suburban Line" Winnipeg Free Press 21 October 1909. The years 1906-11 were filled with complaints in the papers about the WERC, probably stemming from the impatient waiting of a municipal authority.
7. Artibise, op. cit., p. 89 & 94.
8. "Street Railway Earnings" Free Press 17 February 1914.
9. "Electric Company Secures Franchises" Free Press 3 October 1913.
10. "Winnipeg Electric Railway Making Great Strides" The Dominion January 1912, p. 16.
11. Frank Schofield The Story of Manitoba Vol. III The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company Winnipeg 1913 p. 538.
12. "Carter-Halls-Aldinger" Winnipeg Saturday Post 8 June 1912.
13. "Winnipeg Electric Railway Company" Winnipeg Saturday Post 25 October 1913 p. 8.
14. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 2606 11 July 1912.
15. William P. Thompson et al. Winnipeg's Historic Warehouse Area Heritage Canada and the Manitoba Historical Society Winnipeg 1976 p. 20.
16. Saturday Post, op. cit. 25 October 1913.
17. The population of the city in 1925 was 179,000.
18. "Put Power Behind Your Savings", op. cit.

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Plate 1 – Electric Railway Chambers shortly after its construction, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N10882.)

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Plate 2 – Electric Railway Chambers, 213 Notre Dame Avenue, 1921. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Foote Collection 1387 [N2359].)

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Plate 3 – A view down Notre Dame from the corner of Portage Avenue. The Electric Railway Chambers is on the right and the Lindsay Building on the left. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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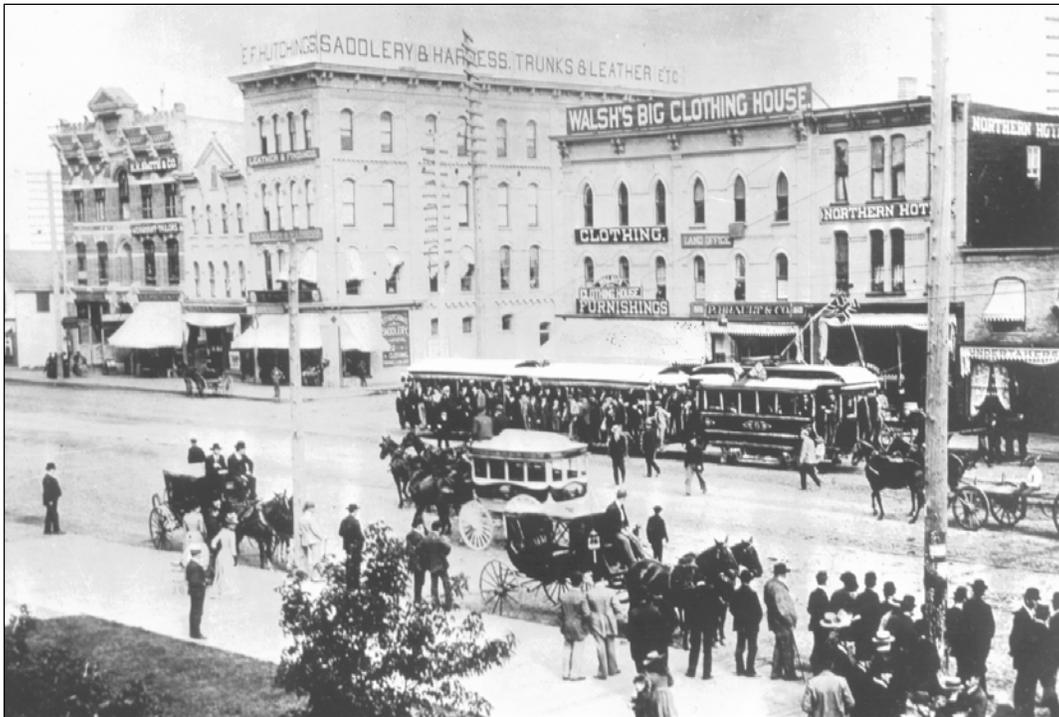


Plate 4 – The official opening of the Electric Street Railway system on 5 September 1892. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 5 – A streetcar in winter, 1927. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 6 – Detail of the cornice, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 7 – The Electric Railway Chambers at night, ca.1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N10883.)

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Plate 8 – As the Montreal Trust Building, 1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)