



364 SMITH STREET

WALKER THEATRE

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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Then, the Walker Theatre...what memories that recalls! On February 18, 1907, thirty seven years after the Ontario Rifles Theatre Royal opened with such splendour, once more a Lieut. Governor did the honours. This time it was Sir Daniel McMillan. The occasion was the grand opening of the splendid Walker Theatre. Winnipeg now had a population of 70,000 instead of 215.

It was a memorable event. Puccini's new opera, "Madame Butterfly" presented by the Henry W. Savage English Grand Opera Company enthralled the brilliant audience. Several columns in the daily paper described the ladies' grandeur. Mrs. Walker's beautiful black sequin gown was noted particularly. Her long pale blue kid gloves added to the striking effect.

In the splendid programme prepared especially for the occasion appeared the story of "The Early Playhouses of Winnipeg" which earlier have been referred to. This interesting record is signed "By an Old Timer". Mr. Fred M. Gee thought the nom de plume was one often used by Mr. Walker.

February appears to be a fateful theatre month. On another February day twenty-nine years later, in 1936, the sad news was published that the Walker Theatre had been sold for taxes. For years it was dark except for special occasions. Happily the old familiar building is with us still. But different.

On November 3, 1945, a moving picture "Blood on the Sun" welcomed us to this reconverted theatre, which is now the up-to-date Odeon. Another sign of the times.

WALKER THEATRE

The Walker theatre, Winnipeg, still stands at the very head of all the theatres of the Dominion as to construction, beauty, comfort and the very high class of attractions it houses. It is the only theatre in Winnipeg which plays the high class musical and dramatic stars and companies and is one of the big sights of the city to visitors, as well as the most select place of amusement to Winnipeg and the Canadian West.

Although many excellent attractions have already been offered by its enterprising manager, C. P. Walker, this season, there are many more brilliant stars and companies booked for the winter months. And now that the nights are beginning to draw out and outdoor amusements are neither plentiful nor desirable, men, women and children, naturally turn to their favourite amusement, the theatre, and watch with interest the news of the metropolitan companies which are to appear at the Walker.

Next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, also Wednesday afternoon, "Officer 666" one of the biggest comedy hits of New York during last season, and which was recently produced in London, and there duplicated its American success, will be offered for the first time in this city. It is a play full of visible tricks and melodramatic moments that start a wave of shivery thrills chasing each other up and down the spine only to end in an uncontrollable burst of laughter at the funny antics of this particular sleuth, who, in all unguarded moments is induced to part with his uniform for a brief period while the borrower of it is endeavoring to rescue a lady fair from a web of complications woven around her through the machinations of an internationally famous picture thief. "Officer 666" is easily the best farce of the year. It has all the elements that go to make a successful play least of which is a charming love story wherein Cupid matches his wits against the stern arm of the law and wins a complete victory.

"Bought and Paid For" will be the offering for the second half of next week, commencing with the Thursday evening performance, and concluding with the two presentations on Saturday.

The Joseph Sheehan English Opera company will return on Nov. 25 for a week of standard opera.

The eminent American tenor, who is such a favorite here, will be heard this time in "Martha", "The Bohemian GUT" and "The Love Tales of Hoffman". This company has made a very great success during its recent trip through western Canada and has a large following in Winnipeg. All three operas in which it will be heard here are full of true romance and beautiful melody - a genuine treat to lovers of music.

"The Blue Bird" Maurice Macterlinck's wonderful fairy fantasy is down for early presentation with all the original wealth of scenery, beautiful electrical effects, handsome and quaint costumes. In fact the same splendid staging which made its production notable at the New theatre in New York. A very large and fine company will interpret Macterlinck's characters. This is quite an exceptional attraction for it appeals to old and young alike as do the big Christmas pantomimes in good old England.

Roselle Knott the distinguished Canadian actress who has been off the stage for several years is this season again delighting her hundreds of admirers. She comes to Winnipeg shortly in the name part of "The Awakening of Helena Richie. Miss Knott is one of the handsomest and most magnetic women on the stage and she is an emotional actress of rare power. She is surrounded by a capable company of New York players.

Holbrook Blinn supported by beautiful Catherine and a company of fifty in "A Romance of the Underworld" by Paul Armstrong author of "The Heir to the Hoorah" and other successes. Mr. Blinn has unlimited opportunities in this play for the display of his marked ability in a certain type of part.

"Naughty Marietta" Victor's latest and best comic opera will be presented here by a large organization headed by Florence Webber, and under the direction of Oscar Hammerstein.

"The Rose of Panama" another musical hit, is also down for early production here. This is under the direction of John Cort, who may always be called upon to send an excellent company backed by superb staging.

These are only a few of the good things which are on the Walker theatre list for the early part of the winter months and do not cover the special attractions such as Mme. Clara Butt, the world famous English contralto and other musical stars who will give recitals here.

Source: Winnipeg Tribune, 16 November, 1912, p.32.

MRS. C. P. WALKER

After 1900 the number of theatres in Winnipeg increased as the rapid growth of the city's population made it profitable for promoters to provide more and better amusements. Women were an increasingly important part of the audience for these amusements. Household help and the ability to purchase many items that used to be made in the home had given women more leisure. In addition an increase in the number of women in the labour force meant more of them had money to buy theatre tickets. These women had a wide choice of entertainment to select from. Before the end of the first decade of the twentieth century had elapsed, a woman in Winnipeg could choose between sensational melodrama at the Grand, "high class" vaudeville at the Orpheum, standard dramas and comedies presented by the resident stock company at the Winnipeg Theatre, and the best touring companies at the Walker Theatre. All of these theatres had matinees for women and children, and ticket prices that were probably within reach of most people. The least expensive seats at the Orpheum were 10 cents and at the Walker 25 cents.

Harriet Anderson, the wife of C.P. Walker, was the most interesting woman involved in the theatre in Winnipeg in the years shortly before the Great War. The Walkers arrived in Winnipeg in 1897 when Mr. Walker, who was the manager of the Fargo Opera House, leased the Bijou Opera House on Notre Dame and Adelaide with the intention of adding it to the circuit of theatres for which he booked touring American companies. He renovated the Bijou and renamed it the Winnipeg Theatre. The Walkers were determined to bring Winnipeggers the best touring companies obtainable. Their success made it possible for C.P. Walker to build a fine new theatre. This was the Walker Theatre, now the Odeon, which was formally opened on February 18, 1907. Mr. and Mrs. Walker seem to have worked as a team in operating their theatre. Mr. Walker took care of the business end, while Mrs. Walker, as press agent for the theatre, sold the product to Winnipeggers. This meant she wrote all the material given to Winnipeg's three daily newspapers and several weekly papers.

Harriet Walker was probably the best saleslady the theatre could have had, for she knew the theatre and loved it. She had spent her childhood in New York as the daughter of a talented amateur entertainer, and this gave her a chance to see a great deal of theatre. At the age of thirteen, Mrs.

Walker joined A.M. Paslmer's Union Square Company. During the two years she played children's parts for this company, she had an opportunity to observe and meet some of the leading actors on the American stage. In 1882 she joined the Bride-Goreham Company which was a comic opera troupe that toured in the eastern United States and Canada. She also toured at the head of her own company in such works as Hoyt's "Bunch of Keys". This background enabled Harriet Walker to acquire the knowledge and experience of good theatre she needed not only to be able to advise her husband in his booking and to do her work as a publicist for the theatre, but also to be an excellent music and drama critic. If she was not the best commentator on the theatre writing in the Winnipeg press at that time, she was certainly the liveliest and the most fun to read.

Mrs. Walker's drama criticism was written as a letter to the editor of Town Topics, the city's weekly society paper. It was written under the pen name, "Rosa Sub, the Matinee Girl." She began writing this column in 1898 and continued it for almost the entire life of the paper which was published until 1913. In this column she adopted the personality of a giddy young girl whose letter to the editor combined shrewd comment on the theatre she was seeing with references to the beaux who were taking her there. Neither the editor of Town Topics, Charles Handscomb, nor her own husband knew she was "Rosa Sub". Shortly after she began writing, there was speculation upon the identify of the "Matinee Girl." Some correspondents to the paper suspected she did not wear skirts because she knew too much for a matinee girl. By 1906 it was an open secret that Mrs. Walker was the "Matinee Girl." Over the years the "Matinee Girl" matured as Mrs. Walker gradually abandoned the character of the flirtatious young girl and began to provide more serious comment on drama, music, and current events. According to her daughter, Mrs. Walker began the column because she needed a creative outlet that her press work for the theatre was not providing.

Being the wife of the most prominent theatre manager in the city and a drama critic does not appear to have put Mrs. Walker in a position of conflict of interest. She does not seem to have abused her position. A description she gave her colleagues in the Canadian Women's Press Club of the qualifications of the good theatre publicist suggests she knew the value of integrity in selling. Mrs. Walker's ideal press agent was to possess imagination and the ability to stick close to the truth in his writing. This would enable him to write a notice which would attract the public and at the same time

preserve their faith in the word of the management of the theatre.

Eventually Mrs. Walker purchased a quarter interest in Town Topics. Whatever her reasons were for becoming involved in Town Topics, Mrs. Walker must have been aware that her writing for the paper was an excellent way for the Walker Theatre's press agent to reach the women who were an important segment of the audience for theatre. For potential advertisers Town Topics described its estimated readership of 10,000 as largely female - women of culture and means who had the money to purchase what they desired. In her column, writing as a woman for other women, Mrs. Walker was able to depict theatregoing as an important part of a fashionable woman's social life.

Mrs. Walker is also interesting because she was typical of the Winnipeg women who supported the campaign for votes for women. She was an energetic woman who needed to develop interests outside the home and who worked with other women for the causes she believed in. She was a member of the Women's Musical Club, and she had served on the board of the Winnipeg Children's Hospital Board and had been president of the Women's Branch of the Humane Society. As a member of the Canadian Women's Musical Club, in which she held a number of executive posts, she demonstrated that she knew the value of networking. Membership in the Canadian Women's Press Club must have been professionally useful to her, judging from the number of times the minutes of the Winnipeg Branch record meetings devoted to entertaining performers appearing at the Walker and grateful acknowledgements for the gift of theatre tickets to the membership. It was also as a member of this club that she had the chance to work with women like the Beynon sisters, Nellie McClung, Cora Hind, and Kenneth Haig, all of whom were active in the Political Equality League. By the end of 1913 Mrs. Walker was also participating in the work of the League. She and her young daughter appeared in the successful performance of the "Women's Parliament at the Walker Theatre on January 28, 1914.

Source: Carol Budnick, "The Performing Arts as a Field of Endeavor for Winnipeg women, 1870-1930", Manitoba History No. 11 (Spring 1986), pp. 17-19.

THEATRE IN PIONEER TIMES

The West was growing up. The railways brought an influx of new settlers, and the population increased rapidly. C.P. Walker became the most influential person in the next phase of the development of theatre in Western Canada. The theatre he built in Winnipeg, the Walker Theatre, became the model for similar first-class structures in other centres. Then he organized a touring circuit to ensure regular high-quality bookings for these theatres.

Corliss Power Walker was born in the United States in 1853. His clergyman father moved his family from Vermont to Minnesota, where he served pioneer communities as a teacher and preacher. His son was brought up for the practical life and apprenticed as a printer. However, the distance between printer and theatre manager was not as far as C.P. Walker's father might have imagined. Walker occasionally had to handle advertising and programs for people producing shows. One client asked him to book a hall and that was it - the printer found himself a theatre manager.

Excited by descriptions of the new land opening up in the north, Walker left his job as manager of a theatre in Fargo and moved to Winnipeg. He quickly realized how unsuitable the Winnipeg Theatre was for the burgeoning municipality. Although it took him several years to raise sufficient capital to build a replacement, he began to make plans for a theatre of his own. Walker made sure that his dream theatre was going to be one of the most modern in the world.

Although he was fundamentally a businessman, he had excellent taste, a love of theatre, and a sincere wish to improve people by exposing them to culture. He would occasionally bring in unprofitable attractions, such as a whole symphony orchestra for one performance, if he felt his audience needed it. His new theatre had a large gallery where seats only cost twenty-five cents. Walker wanted everyone, especially children and students, to be able to afford to see fine theatre.

In *Curtain Time* Walker's daughter Ruth Walker Harvey described life in Winnipeg in the first thirty years of the twentieth century, when the Walker Theatre was the city's cultural centre. What the book lacks in specifics, it makes up for in vivid impressions of the theatre and the actors and the

audiences who attended it.

The Walker Theatre's motto boasted that it was "Canada's finest theatre," and in 1907 that was probably true. The special souvenir program for the opening described it as "ultra-modern, ultra-luxurious, (and) ultra-safe." The program repeatedly stressed safety and thorough fireproofing. The theatre had a steel cage construction with two internal firewalls, a heavy asbestos fire curtain, and a ventilation system similar to the one in the Library of Congress.

The Walker emphasized comfort as well as safety. Sightlines were excellent because there were no posts in the auditorium. The sides of the building supported the two balconies. The boxes were close to the wall in order not to intrude. Ruth Harvey described the auditorium as functional and the decor as Edwardian, creating "an air of festivity and warmth." The auditorium was simple for the period. "the curve of the proscenium was outlined with rosetted lights and a triple frieze of maple leaves....The ornamental plaster work on the proscenium and the fronts of the balconies and boxes (was) restrained and graceful....The upper walls were ivory. The seats were covered in crimson plush." A quotation from *As You Like It* adorned the act curtain.

The large stage was even more functional than the auditorium. The Walker was one of the few theatres in Canada capable of handling lavish productions of the most spectacular plays, such as an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with ice floes, dogs, and clouds ascending to heaven. *Ben Hur* could actually be staged with the full number of chariots. The stage had a seventy-foot high gridiron with a full fly gallery. There was also an elaborate lighting system. Huge doors allowed scenery to be brought easily from the outside dock to the stage. There were workshops for electricians, carpenters, and property people. A special animal room downstairs could house exotica, such as real lions, tigers, and camels. The performers had ample dressing-room space; the musicians had their own lounge. The front of the house contained a comfortable box office, business offices, and cloakrooms as well as the foyer and convenience rooms. The Walker Theatre satisfied audiences, performers, and technicians and was well worth its price of \$330,000.

The first attraction in this theatre was the Li Pollard Lilliputian Opera Compañh, one of several

children's opera companies then in vogue. However, the grand official opening on February 18, 1907, featured the Henry W. Savage New English Grand Opera Company in *Madam Butterfly*, starring Canadian soprano Florence Easton. The box office was inundated with ticket requests. The advance mail-order sale alone took in the unprecedented total of more than \$4,000.

Formal announcements for this gala event included instructions for "your coachman" on how to approach the entrance at the end of the performance to avoid "confusion and delay." The announcement also warned: "The formal dedication ceremonies start at 8:15, so that it is imperative that the entire audience be seated in order that the gentlemen who are to speak may not be subject to interruptions and annoyance." The Lieutenant-Governor, the premier of Manitoba, and Winnipeg's mayor all joined Walker in proclaiming the building open. The Lieutenant-Governor aptly observed: "I can say of this theatre what cannot be said of any enterprise in this city: that it is the only institution that in advance of the growth and development of the city. A theatre of which we may be proud and which would credit to any city in the world." The inaugural performance thrilled the influential Winnipeggers who attended.

Many other equally exciting productions followed through the years because the Walker Theatre played host to most of the great tours that came from the United States and England. It became the epicentre of theatrical touring in Canada. Walker brought plays in to Winnipeg and then sent them south or west through his own network of theatres, later to have the same companies return going in the opposite direction. He managed to maintain a reasonably full schedule of touring productions until the 1920s, only occasionally having to resort to films or vaudeville.

The success of the Walker Theatre encouraged the construction of similar playhouses across the prairies in every major centre. When these theatres were ready, large-scale touring in Western Canada became really profitable.

The Walker managed to survive the end of the touring period - the death of the road - longer than any of the other theatres on the prairie circuit. In fact, Walker really sustained his theatre in the last few years as a public service. However, he died Dec. 23, 1942 at the age of 89. The once-proud

building eventually closed and was sold in 1936 for \$35,000 to pay back taxes. After a long period of lying vacant, it was remodelled and opened as a movie theatre, the Odeon, sharing the fate of most prairie theatres. With the closing of the Walker Theatre as a live theatre, an era ended.

Source: E. Ross Sturat, The History of Prairie Theatre: The Development of Theatre in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan 1833-1982, Simon & Pierre (Toronto, 1984), pp31-33.

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Plate 1 – The interior of the Walker Theatre, 364 Smith Street, 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

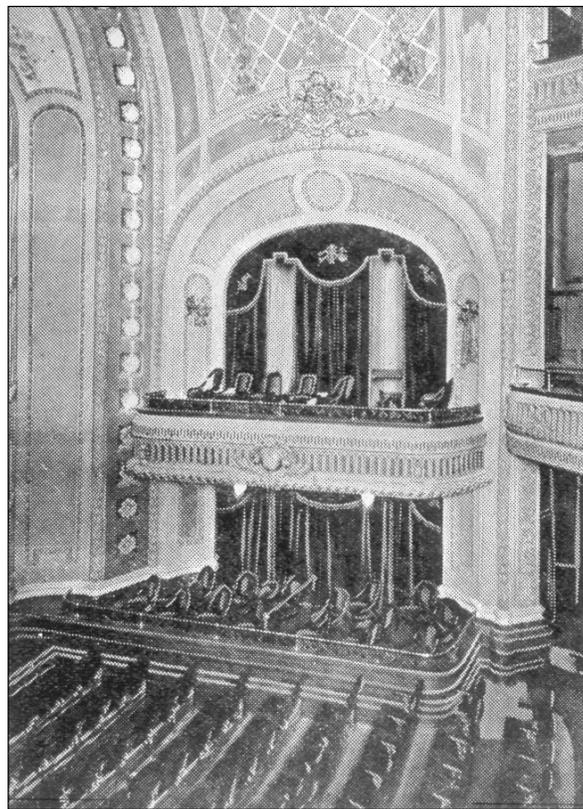


Plate 2 – A view of the loges, 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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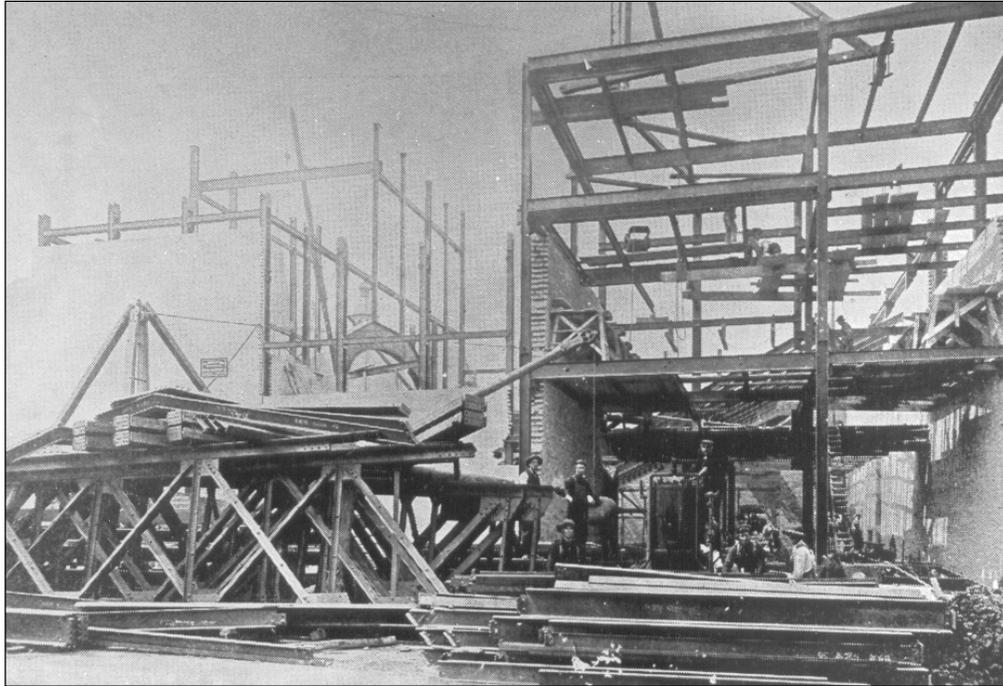


Plate 3 – The steel frame construction of the Walker Theatre, July 19, 1906. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

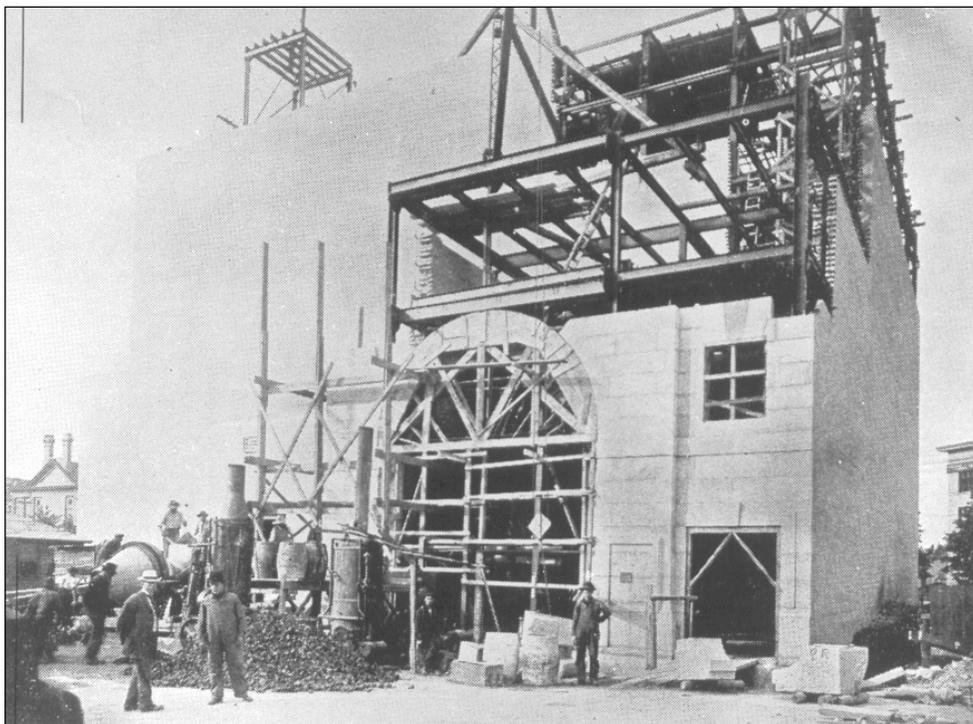


Plate 4 – Walker Theatre under construction, September 1906. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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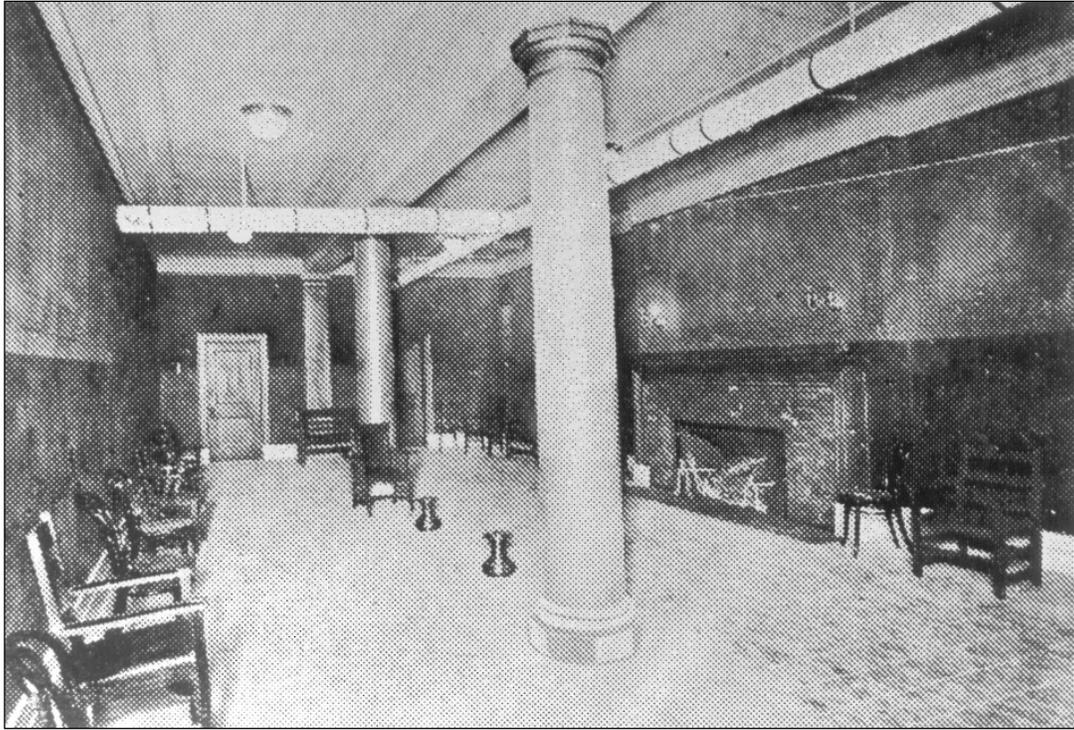


Plate 5 – Lounge area in the Walker (note the spittoons), 1907. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 6 – Odeon Theatre, 1965. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 7 – C.P. and Harriet Walker, 1925. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)