



325 TALBOT AVENUE
FORMER FIRE HALL NO. 8

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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Located on Talbot Avenue in Elmwood, No. 8 Fire Hall was constructed in 1906. Elmwood was a small suburban projection of a north end ward at this time. It was defined by the CPR line which crossed the Red River from Point Douglas to Elmwood, thereby dividing this north-eastern community from St. Boniface to the south. St. Boniface boundaries followed faithfully along the tract of land deeded by Lord Selkirk to the Catholic Church. During the negotiations in 1879-80 for the crossing of the Red River by the CPR, Archbishop Tache had control over the St. Boniface lands which made him pivotal in the selection of a bridge site.¹ Political factors resolved the issue in 1879: the new bridge would pass through Point Douglas to span the high banks of the Red north of St. Boniface. The Louise Bridge fed the rail line east into Elmwood.

Completed in 1880, the Louise Bridge was both a highway and a railway bridge, meaning that vehicular and foot traffic could also pass. By 1904, this bridge was too light for heavier railway stock so a new rail bridge was built while a second Louise Highway Bridge replaced the original one in 1909.² This second Louise Bridge was planned in 1906, part of a package deal to bring the community of Elmwood within Winnipeg's boundaries.

Elmwood was a natural outgrowth of the 1880 bridge access. Originally part of the rural municipality of East Kildonan, this district clustered by the rail line grew up in random fashion as industries and manufacturers located near the only productive transport system. As industry built up in the 1880s and 1890s on the Winnipeg side, so did it later on the Elmwood side, but without any zoning or controls. Tax advantage and cheaper transportation costs attracted a variety of heavier industries such as abattoirs (the forerunner of Swifts), coal yards, breweries, machine works, and lumber yards.

Hand in hand with this were the beginnings of residential development. Houses for the workmen, on thirty foot lots, joined the rail line industrial cluster. By 1900, Elmwood consisted of a beautiful new cemetery and a community of small houses interspersed with industry. Languishing for proper

municipal services within the farming community of Kildonan, Elmwood joined the City of Winnipeg in 1906, while the rest of East Kildonan developed at a slower rate, incorporating as a separate city in 1957.³ It was not until the formation of Unicity in 1974 that Elmwood was re-united with the neighbours north and south.

Among the advantages of joining with Winnipeg came the construction of Elmwood's own fire hall in 1906. This was Fire Hall No. 8 in the city's fire protection system, erected on Talbot in the heart of the residential district. Further residential growth was anticipated from the construction of the new Redwood Bridge in 1910, which also gave Elmwood its first streetcar line.⁴

No. 8 Fire Hall was a part of Fire District No. 3, with headquarters at No. 3 Fire Hall on Maple Street in Point Douglas. In the event of a large fire, halls from the district would automatically work together, with other districts called in if necessary. The boundaries of this district — the city limits to the north, east and west and CPR line to the south — show how little development there actually was at this time north of the city centre.⁵ Equipment in the Elmwood Fire Hall in 1921 consisted of the following: two captains with eight firemen, one horse-drawn hose wagon, one horse-drawn hook and ladder truck, one horse-drawn chemical fire engine of 100 gallon capacity, and one steam fire engine of 750 gallon capacity.⁶ As three of these vehicles were horse-drawn, there were three horses kept in the rear of the fire hall at all times.

Motorization of the force was undertaken in the 1920s, but in the suburbs, horses were retained much longer. In snow or mud conditions (which were more common away from the city centre), horse-drawn vehicles had the clear advantage. With the stables on the ground floor, hay was stored in a loft on the second floor at the rear while a wooden storage shed at the rear of the property stored the sleighs out of season as well as coal and wood to heat the building.⁷

The fire hall itself was a variation on a standard plan by the city's fire hall architects, A. and W. Melville. Using the Maple Street Fire Hall No. 3 as a prototype, the Melvilles simply made cosmetic adjustments to the plan, in this case four carriage doors and a triple window arrangement in

the gable on the third floor. It is three storeys high, 75 by 55 feet, designed to have space for a maximum of eleven horses and sixteen men.⁸ Like the other Melville fire halls, it featured brick construction on a foundation of stone. The main floor was concrete, sanitation of the horses' wastes being the critical factor but the floor proved the best for motor vehicles in later years. Equipment and animals shared the ground floor while the second floor contained the dormitories washroom and an office with the men's lockers and general storage were in the attic.

Steam heat, full plumbing and electricity seem like staple systems to us but in 1906, they were noteworthy features to be appreciated.⁹ Life was becoming more pleasant all the time for Winnipeg's firefighters. Although the entry qualifications and annual medical examinations were still stringent, firemen no longer had to live at the fire hall. Until 1919, shifts were three full days on and one day off but after that time, a two-platoon system was introduced. This system meant a ten hour day shift of one week alternated with a fourteen hour night shift.¹⁰ In the 1940s, a three-platoon system was introduced. It was held that this time off would give the men a better home life and make for a well-rounded individual. Fire-fighting has always required courage, judgement and good health.

Fire Hall No. 8 was constructed by John Saul at a cost of \$17,000.00. As a partner in Saul and Brown, John Saul had also built No. 3 Fire Hall on Maple (1904), fire halls on Sargent and Burnell, Burrows and Aikins, Gertrude, Pearl, Sherbrook, Pritchard and Sinclair as well as a City Lighting Plant on McDonald and May.¹¹ Clearly he was the favourite for the fire hall construction in the city.

Because of the specific mixture of building types in Elmwood, the work of this fire hall was different from most other suburban halls. Naturally, most of the fires originated in the wood frame houses on the narrow lots. In fact, two thirds of all fires in Canada were in the home.¹² As well, with many open areas, grass fires were also routine. But the Talbot Avenue firemen had to contend with industrial fires where businesses were side by side with vulnerable frame houses.

A striking example of this special problem was the Smart Company factory fire in September 1923. As manufacturers of mechanical loaders, the Smart Factory included a machine shop or blacksmith

shop, a carpentry shop and a tinsmith. When an explosion caused a fire there that was fanned by strong winds, five houses nearby burned to the ground and six others were badly damaged. Three people were injured and 23 left homeless. Firefighters were called in from across the city, including the municipality of East Kildonan and the City of St. Boniface. The 70 firemen were just barely able to contain the flames to this level of devastation.¹² The possibility for a really huge conflagration was ever present.

Elmwood continued a steady pattern of growth but its essentially mixed nature has remained. Nairn Avenue, for many years the main street of the suburb, has become a highway for traffic from Transcona and Elmwood to downtown. Talbot has also evolved into a secondary main street with several commercial outlets and apartments. Many of the primary processing plants such as the breweries, coal yards and meat-packing houses have relocated or closed down but a number of smaller industries (and a few large ones such as Alsip Brick and Tile) remain scattered within the district.

Fire Hall No. 8 became redundant with the creation of Unicity in 1974. It was used for several years after as an ambulance depot but now contains a boxing ring and training facilities for boxers. There are plans for commercial re-use of the building that will involve both exterior and interior alterations.

Like all Winnipeg fire halls, the original rounded glass doors of the carriage entrances have been replaced with flat ones and the arches filled in with wood. The two doors on the west side of the fire hall have been boarded up since c.1975. The crenellated parapet at the top of the tower has been altered but aside from these changes, there have been no major alterations to the facade. The adaptability of the Melville design, as well as the durability of the materials, has been proved once again and the integrity survives by and large. As a fixture within what remains essentially a small community, the fire hall has significance to Elmwood.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Randolph R. Rostecki The Growth of Winnipeg 1870-1886 University of Manitoba Thesis 1980 p.43.
2. "Winnipeg's First Bridge Crossed the Red Seventy-Five Years Ago" Winnipeg Free Press 14 September 1955.
3. "After Four Decades of Growth East Kildonan Becomes a City" Winnipeg Free Press 1957. Local history life, Legislative Library.
4. "Elmwood's Scene of Home Building" The Winnipeg Advance February 1910 p.1.
5. City of Winnipeg Fire Department. The Winnipeg Firemen's Benefit Association 1921 p.13.
6. Ibid., p.19.
7. City of Winnipeg Fire Atlas. Western Canadian Fire Underwriters Association 1919 p.3710.
8. "The Elmwood Fire Hall" 6 December 1906.
9. David Spector "The Architecture of Functionality: Winnipeg Fire Halls, Hydro Terminals and Sub-stations, Pumping Stations and Police Station to 1925" report prepared for the Historical Buildings Committee, City of Winnipeg, September 1981 p. 13-14.
10. City Fire Department 1921, op.cit., p. 16
11. Spector, op.cit., p. 53-54.
12. "Loss in Spectacular Fire Total \$287,000" Manitoba Free Press 15 September 1923.

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Plate 1 – Former Fire Hall No. 8, 325 Talbot Avenue, as an ambulance depot, 1981. (Courtesy of the [Western Canada Pictorial Index, A538-17140.](#))



Plate 2 - Firefighters and horse-drawn equipment in front of Fire Hall No. 8, ca.1921. (Courtesy of the [Western Canada Pictorial Index, A531-16944.](#))

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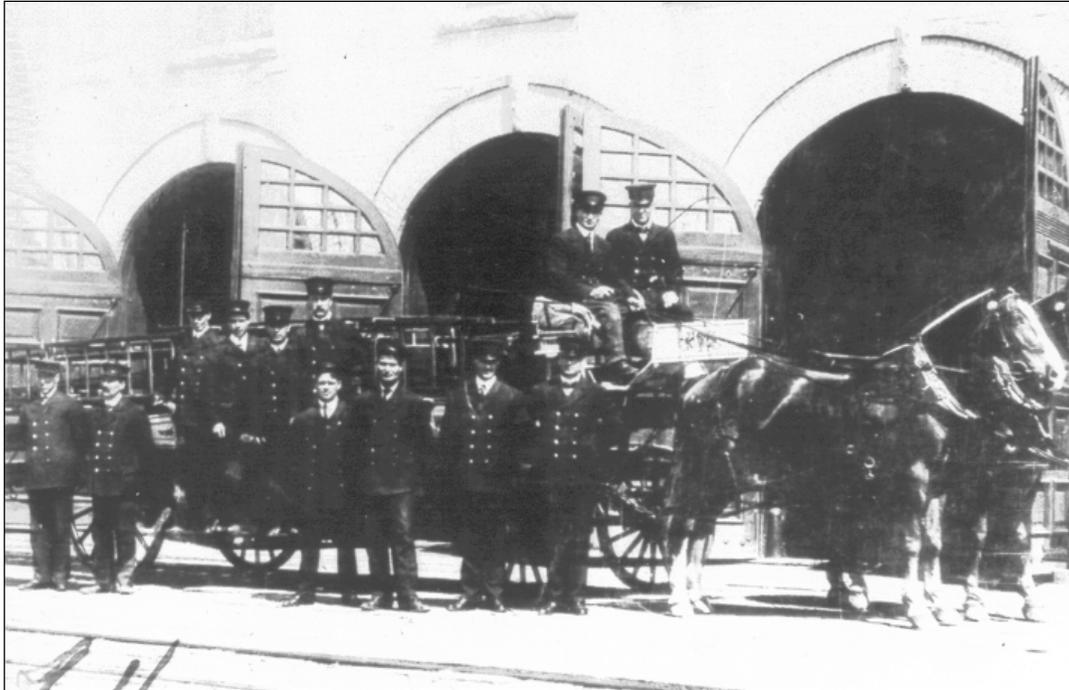


Plate 3 - Firefighters and horse-drawn equipment in front of Fire Hall No. 8, ca.1921. (Courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, A531-16945.)



Plate 4 - Smart Factory fire in Elmwood (470 Martin Avenue), 1923. Besides the large factory complex, five houses burned to the ground and six were damaged. This fire engine was one of many brought in from across the city, in this case from No. 4 Fire Hall on Gertrude Avenue. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)