

301 VAUGHAN STREET

**CENTRAL YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN
ASSOCIATION BUILDING**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

28 March 1985

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In a response to the plight of young men in the city of London, England, the first Young Men's Christian Association was formed in 1844. The negative social toll of rapid industrialization placed thousands of young people in dismal circumstances, considered to be the antithesis of a Christian life. Growing quickly, the early YMCAs were dedicated to spiritual means, including Bible classes and prayer groups.¹ The movement expanded to Canada in 1851 with the creation of a Montreal Y.M.C.A. Firmly under the auspices and spiritual support of the Protestant Churches, these early organizations were entirely Anglo-Saxon in their outlook and appeal. As well, by the very nature of their aims and proceedings, the YMCAs were entirely urban.

Pioneer conditions in Winnipeg in 1879 paralleled some of the problems of London thirty-five years previous. There was a disproportionately large number of young men, away from the more restrained influence of their homes, and exposed to the baser manifestations of frontier life; drinking, gambling and the all-encompassing term "vice". Two young men with 'Y' experience in Toronto, J.A.M. Aikins (later the Lieutenant-Governor) and R.D. Richardson, opened a Y.M.C.A. reading and meeting room over a store on Main Street in 1879.²

For the first several years, the Winnipeg "Y" group functioned in the established pattern of Bible study, prayer meetings, inspirational lectures and the provision of a reading room stocked with Christian Literature and newspapers. Yet obvious social needs became so pressing that members began to reach out in the community. Providing Sunday services in the immigration sheds, visiting the jails, and assisting newly arrived young men to find decent accommodations and employment became a corollary focus of the group's activities. By the 1890s, the Winnipeg Young Men's Christian Association had over 300 members. Lodged in various rented locations a building fund was started and three islands for summer camps near Kenora were purchased.

Finally in 1900, through the co-operative efforts of Winnipeg businessmen and clergy, the first Y.M.C.A. building was opened at the corner of Portage Avenue and Smith Street. This building,

which remains in an altered condition as the Birks Building, marked a further dimension in the Y.M.C.A. organization. Their thinking had grown to advocate the all-round individual who manifests a healthy union of spirit, mind and body.³ To that end, the new Y.M.C.A. building featured sport facilities that were among the best in the country at the time. The first indoor swimming pool and the first full gymnasium were part of the new structure. As well, hobby rooms, meeting areas, games rooms and dormitories were located in the four-storey structure.⁴ Naturally, membership in the new facilities blossomed, giving impetus in turn to the spiritual and social aspects of the association. Besides being an alternative to the bar or the poolroom, the “Y” continued with its inspirational lectures, its Sunday night prayer services and its work with immigrants and prisoners. A special appeal to younger boys, aged 12 to 16 years, attracted a younger segment to the activities. The beginnings of the leadership movement, providing a good example for young boys, can be traced to this period.

So successful was the new approach at the “Y”, that these facilities were outgrown within a very brief period. The Y.M.C.A. Board quickly decided that a new building was essential. In keeping with their self-imposed popular ideals, the planned structure was to be “substantial, plain but generously furnished, its membership fees low enough to permit any respectable wage earner to enjoy its privileges”.⁵ With customary common sense, it was also noted that the new building should be on a corner lot one block off Portage Avenue to lessen the cost of administration. In July 1909, the Vaughan Street site, 175 feet by 120 feet, was purchased at a cost of \$37,500.⁶

Such a large amount of capital had to be raised that an aggressive and daring plan was conceived. Under the direction of such notables as James H. Ashdown of the hardware empire, R.J. Whitla of the large dry goods trade and E.D. Martin of the drug store supply, a civic campaign to raise \$350,000 was launched. In seven high-energy days, campaign canvassers, 250 in all, collected \$354,000 from 4,380 local citizens.⁷ The money was to build and equip the “Y” on Vaughan, a second North End “Y” on Selkirk Avenue, to provide proper facilities for the summer campers and to purchase an athletic field.⁸

The Selkirk Avenue “Y” was opened in June 1911. The central “Y” was delayed when test borings high quicksand, necessitating piling, setting back construction and adding an unforeseen \$10,000 to the cost. J.H. Ashdown laid the corner stone in August 1911 with the formal opening of the new building on 4 May 1913.⁹ Membership at this time involved approximately 1,200 young men and boys.

Both new “Y” buildings were designed by Jackson and Rosencrans of New York, a company with wide experience in planning Association buildings, assisted by architect J.H.G. Russell of Winnipeg. Both names appear on the plans, making it difficult to assess the impact of each on the process. Russell’s business ledgers treat the structure in the same fashion as all his other projects.

We are fortunate in having Russell’s detailed photographic record of the construction of the Y.M.C.A. building. A commercial photographer took regular pictures of the work in progress showing the building at all construction stages and noting the time elapsed.

This building measures 155 feet by 120 feet, and is essentially two connecting blocks. The larger block is the main part of the building, six storeys high with brick bearing walls and hollow tile partitions. The smaller block, attached to the rear, is three storeys of buff brick containing the pool and the gymnasium.

Because sports and hobby interests change over time, this building has been adapted and altered. The original layout of the interior has been carefully recorded. The main entrance leads to a short flight of stairs to the ground floor. Here was a large reception room with a fireplace and inglenook, wood beam detailing and tiled floors. Some of the original woodwork can still be seen but the size of this space has been eroded. Several offices, a board room and a music room adjoined this space, mainly on the north side. On the south side was an assembly room 38 by 50 feet with a stage that was connected by accordion doors to a second meeting room 18 by 46 feet. The boys’ entrance ran into the south side of the building, giving the younger members direct access to the second floor. In the rear section of the main floor was the pool (always referred to as ‘the plunge’),¹⁰ lockers and a dining room.

Six bowling alleys, a billiard room, game room, kitchen, barber shop and possibly a handball court were found in the basement as well as the boilers, pumps, storage and lavatories.

The second floor was taken up with club rooms, meeting rooms, the boys' department, a library and reading room, boxing and wrestling areas (again, to keep dubious but popular activities off the street), boys' lockers and the gymnasium in the rear section above the pool. The gym measured 50 by 120 feet, originally lit by upper windows and featured a banked running track elevated around its perimeter. The gym was equipped with the nets, hoops, rings, mats and weights that provided for a variety of athletic activities, and was large enough to accommodate several games simultaneously.

The third floor contained club rooms, classrooms, a ladies' room and a visitors' gallery over the gymnasium. As well, there were nineteen bedrooms. The upper three floors were taken up with bedrooms, 160 in all, and washrooms.

The building featured a complete ventilation system, steam heat, drinking fountains on every floor and two elevators.¹¹ Each bedroom has a bed, a dresser and a walk-in closet. Each private room also had a window, made possible by a small interior court that extended to the second floor. This court was covered with skylights.¹²

In total, the new Central Y.M.C.A. building cost \$529,640 to construct and furnish. It was built by general contractors Hazelton and Walin. Partner Herbert T. Hazelton was also an engineer who continued to live and work in Winnipeg until the 1930s while his partner, Claus Walin, seemed to be based permanently in Chicago. Winnipeg business men on the Y.M.C.A. Building Committee made certain that local suppliers benefited from the construction.

The foundation of the Central Y.M.C.A. is concrete supported on piles. The ground floor of the building's three finished sides is faced with Tyndall Limestone. Quoins, window details, bands and the entablature are expressed in a creamy terra cotta that incorporates some classical Greek

motifs. Menominee brick was used on the pool wing. The pronounced cornice is further accentuated with a low ornamented metal parapet that has oxidized to a green colour.

The façade is rigidly symmetrical with the exception of the boys' entrance on the south end. Many of the details around the main entrance and in the terra cotta are neo-classical, giving the building the appearance of something stable and enduring but welcoming its members at the street level. The appearance is formal and certainly institutional, but reminiscent of an apartment block, an acknowledgement that the building was home to hundreds of young men.

Once again, membership and activities were stimulated with the openings of the new "Y" in 1913. The educational division, which had been suspended for several months, redoubled its program, offering courses in such fields as architectural drawing, show card writing and gas engines. The Camera Club, Glee Club and Debating Society were thriving and the future of the Y.M.C.A. looked very bright.

When war was declared in 1914, large numbers of prairie youths signed up, decimating the ranks of membership. Meanwhile, all the "Y's" across the country poured money into overseas projects such as the provision of Y.M.C.A. canteens near the front while "Y" buildings at home were given over totally for the recreational use of service men.¹³

With their mandate of service stretched to the limit, the Winnipeg Y.M.C.A.s entered the 1920s with crippling mortgages from war effort debts. When foreclosure threatened the entire operation, the Selkirk Avenue "Y" was sold on 20 July 1925, said to be "the blackest day in the history of the Winnipeg Y.M.C.A."¹⁴ Still staggering under its debt load, the Central "Y" on Vaughan Street carried on while the Board of Directors fought to stay afloat. A heart-felt fund-raising campaign combined with two large estate endowments permitted the association to carry on. During the depths of their financial woes, architect John Russell was president of the Y.M.C.A. from 1925 to 1929.

Having survived this grim decade, the financial circumstances of the 1930s were relatively easy for the "Y" to cope with. Their recreational facilities were in constant use by the large numbers of unemployed men.

While the Bible study group, religious meetings, and interaction with the Protestant clergy were maintained during this period, the Y.M.C.A. became a much more secular organization. The underlying Christian principles continued to season “Y” activities, but came more and more to be expressed in terms of “community responsibility” and “leadership.”

The Second World War again depleted its membership, but this time the Y.M.C.A. was in more stable financial shape. “Y’s” around the world provided recreational facilities and equipment for allied soldiers overseas.

Always very responsive to changing conditions, the association launched a program of suburban expansion in the 1950s. Y.M.C.A. branches were opened in St. James, St. Vital, at McGregor Street and Mountain Avenue, and in Elmwood-Kildonan. By the end of all this expansion in the late 1960s, the Vaughan Street Y.M.C.A. finally received some repairs and renovations that had long been postponed. Beginning with a facelift to the bedrooms of the residence in the late 1960s, the early seventies saw an upgrading of the plumbing, the installation of smoke and fire detectors, aluminum windows installed, renovations to the lobby, extensive repairs made to the pool and track, renovations in several portions of the building and a better boiler added. Then in 1977, a \$550,000 addition of five racquetball courts was made over the old pool and gymnasium wing, bring this rear section to the six-storey height of the main building.¹⁵

The Y.M.C.A. had changed in other ways as well. Since the 1950s, women had taken part in the many social and educational functions of the Central “Y”, but it was not until the 1970s that women were fully integrated and given access to the athletic facilities. All the “Y’s” had become oriented and completely nondenominational.

Contemporary “Y” programs also reflect social changes. Adult education programs, special youth programs, outreach work with native children are all part of the new Y.M.C.A. As well, their recreational programs involve handicap work, physical education programs for infants all the way to senior citizens, swimming classes for children on reserves and the continuation of summer camp programs for underprivileged children.

When the Winnipeg Y.M.C.A. celebrated its centennial in 1979, membership stood at 12,000 with over 75,000 more people involved in its programs.¹⁶ Over the years, many thousands of Winnipeggers have participated in “Y” activities. Assessing the impact of such a far-reaching and pervasive institution as the Y.M.C.A. can only reinforce the remarkable contribution of the Young Men’s Christian Association to the Winnipeg community.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Murray G. Ross, The Y.M.C.A. in Canada, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1951, p. 4.
- ² Op. cit., p. 150.
- ³ This three-fold emphasis can be traced from the 1880s onward in the “Y” movement. It was slightly late to blossom in this city because of the financial constraints of rented rooms and non-existent facilities.
- ⁴ Y-One Hundred a Winnipeg Y.M.C.A. Commemorative Publication, Winnipeg, c. 1979, p. 9.
- ⁵ Annual Report, Y.M.C.A. Winnipeg, 1909.
- ⁶ “The New Y.M.C.A., A Metropolitan Institution,” Manitoba Free Press, 8 March 1913.
- ⁷ Y-One Hundred, op. cit., p. 16.
- ⁸ “Meeting the Needs of the “Gateway City””, Y.M.C.A. Civic campaign brochure, Winnipeg, November 1910. Unpaginated.
- ⁹ “Corner Stone Laid by J.H. Ashdown”, Manitoba Free Press, 23 August 1911 and “Dedicate New Y.M.C.A. Building”, Manitoba Free Press, 5 May 1913.
- ¹⁰ The pool measures 75 by 30 feet. Its filtered water was supplied by a well sunk through the basement of the building and pumped up. These were the days before the Shoal Lake aqueduct. Experience in the old building had shown water consumption to exceed all expectations so the “Y” decided not to count on the variable pressure and supply of the city’s artesian well system.
- ¹¹ This description was synthesized from those found in “Meeting the Needs”, op. cit., and “A Metropolitan Institution”, op. cit.
- ¹² 1919 Fire Atlas of Winnipeg, folio 101.
- ¹³ Y-One Hundred, op. cit., p. 17.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 29-31.
- ¹⁶ “‘79 YM’s 100th year of serving Winnipeg”, Winnipeg Tribune, 23 March 1979.

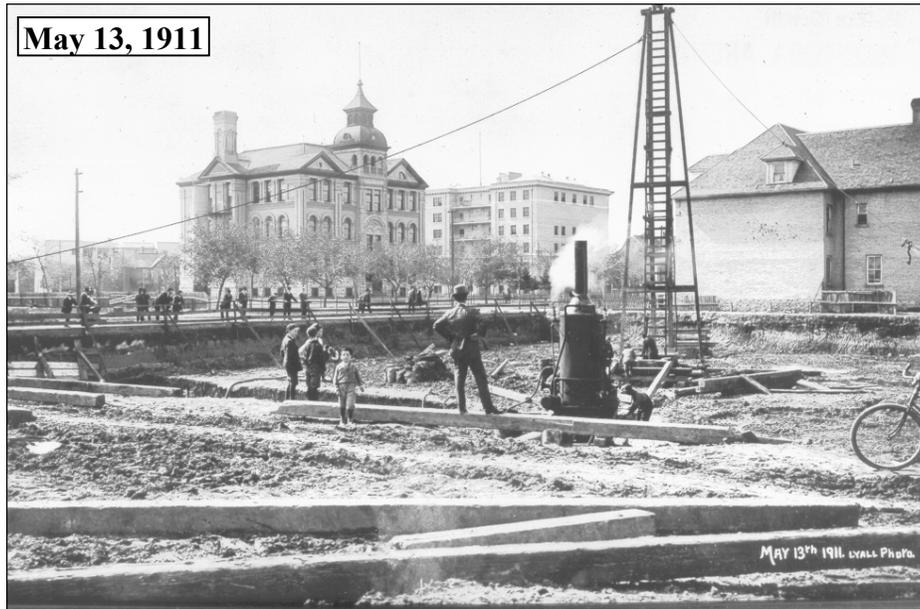
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Plate 1 – The architects drawing of the Y.M.C.A., ca.1910. The pilasters, front entrance and rustication at the base were altered from this drawing. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7358.)

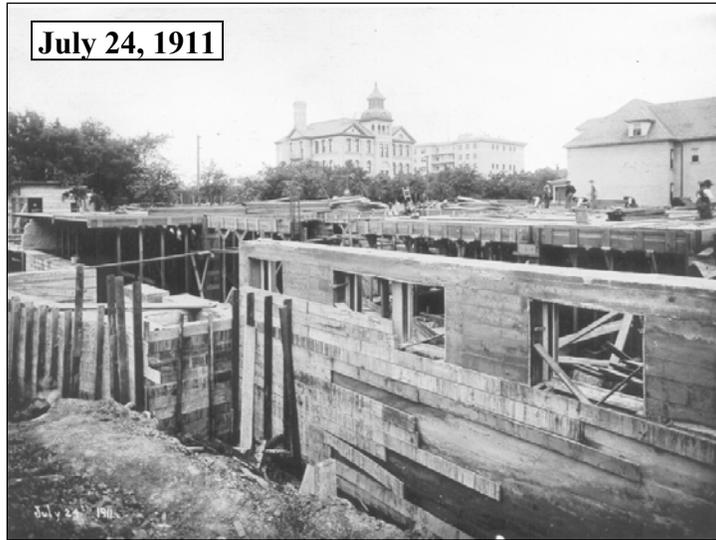
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Plates 2-8 – A sequence of photographs showing the construction of the building (each photograph is dated). (All courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, J.H.G. Russell Collection.)



**301 VAUGHAN STREET – CENTRAL YOUNG MEN'S
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July 24, 1911



Sept. 18, 1911



Oct. 16, 1911



**301 VAUGHAN STREET – CENTRAL YOUNG MEN'S
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Plate 9 – The pool nearing completion, 1911. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, J.H.G. Russell Collection #48.)



Plate 10 – Looking west on Portage Avenue, 1915. The rear of the Y.M.C.A. is in the centre of the photograph. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N7355.)

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Plate 11 – Portage Avenue and Kennedy Street, 1928, showing the east and south elevations of the Y.M.C.A. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, T. Burns Collection #580.)