

407 BOULEVARD PROVENCHER – LE CLUB BELGE (THE BELGIAN CLUB)
Contractors: Wynant and DeLeeuw, 1908; Theodore Bockstael, 1911; Progress Construction Co., 1914



Incorporated in October 1905 as one of Manitoba's early cultural associations, Le Club Belge has continued to this day to be a hub of the relatively small, but active Belgian community.

The group's roots first took hold in the province in 1888 when a handful of immigrant homesteaders were recruited through the efforts of Bishop Alexandre-Antonin Taché of St. Boniface who wanted to bolster the French-speaking Roman Catholic population in his charge. The bishop's agent, Father Clouthier, brought in another 200 Belgian settlers the following year. Over the next two decades, their number grew to about 2,453.

Some engaged in farming south of the Assiniboine River near Holland, Bruxelles, St. Alphonse, Mariapolis, Ninette, and Deloraine. Others located to the north and east at Ste. Rose-du-Lac, Ste. Amélie, Pine Falls, and Ile des Chènes. The majority, however, stayed in the St. Boniface-Winnipeg region where they became prominent in the dairy industry, market gardening and construction.

Shared language, religion and history enabled the settlers to associate with the French and Dutch communities. But the Belgians also wanted to have their own institutions where they could provide mutual support and celebrate their distinctive nationality and Flemish and Walloon traditions.

Le Club Belge became one such focal point, serving as a cultural and recreational centre, helping to establish the Sacred Heart Church (1914-17) at 501 Plinguet Street, and encouraging related organizations such as the Belgian Veterans' Association No. 107, Belgian Benefit Society of Manitoba, Belgian Ladies Sick Visiting Society, Winnipeg Racing Pigeon Association, and Robin Hood Pole Archery Club.

Members of Le Club Belge first met in a downtown Winnipeg boarding house under the leadership of founding president Louis de Noble. By early 1906, they had moved to a more convenient site, the Montagne Block, in St. Boniface. Two years later, they bought some property on the north side of Boulevard Provencher near the Seine River and awarded a contract to Belgian builders Wynant and DeLeeuw for their own one-storey brick clubhouse. The project, which cost about \$4,877, was assisted by a loan from the local McDonagh and Shea brewing enterprise.

The original structure was in a vernacular commercial style. It rose from a cut-stone base to a red brick façade laid in a running band pattern and a flat roof with a modest cornice and parapet. The club's name was displayed in bold letters on a pediment. The end entrance and three large rectangular front windows were topped by radiating brick voussoirs and contrasting light keystones.

A second storey was added for \$3,590 by St. Boniface contractor Theodore Bockstael in 1911. Three years later, the Progress Construction Co. owned by DeLeeuw and Bockstael erected a two-storey, 6.1-metre (20-foot) extension on the east side of the clubhouse at a cost of \$5,800.

The resulting facility retained its initial styling, supplemented by another end entrance, a band of

seven second-storey windows with lug sills, string courses, a boxed cornice with a semi-circular pediment, and the club's name and date of establishment featured below the cornice. Exterior changes over the years included the addition of a vertical neon sign and installation of glass blocks in the windows.

Inside are found a two-lane, sand-based bowling alley, lounge, bar, and office space in the basement, another lounge and bar on the main floor, and an upper-level banquet hall. Although much renovated, the interior retains some of its original pressed tin ceiling.

Adding to Le Club Belge's visual presence just east of the Rue Des Meurons intersection is a 1938 stone memorial to Belgian war veterans which stands on the Provencher median in front of the clubhouse.