290 VAUGHAN STREET

ROBINSON BUILDING

(FORMERLY THE PUBLIC PRESS BUILDING)
The Public Press Building, at 290 Vaughan Street across from the Central Y.M.C.A. was constructed in 1917. It originally had two storeys on a raised basement instead of three.

The Public Press Limited was a printing plant formed in 1909 as a subsidiary company of the Grain Growers’ Grain Company. This larger company produced its own magazine, *The Grain Growers’ Guide*, as an official mouthpiece for the organization. Circulation of *The Guide* increased so rapidly from its founding in 1908 that it was decided to print the journal internally. The printing presses could then attend to the company’s general requirements as well as carry on a general printing business as the Public Press. When the original plant on Sherbrook Street became too cramped, the operation moved to this new building in 1917.

As an organ for the Grain Growers’ Grain Company, *The Grain Growers’ Guide* had a good deal to say. Now known as the United Grain Growers, the organization began as a protest in response to the perceived injustices of the prairie farmer. This agrarian protest had its roots in the years prior to the First World War,¹ eventually developing the cooperation learned by its members into a political and social force in the ‘progressive movement’ of the 1920s.

Farmers operating in isolated farms along the prairie frontier found themselves powerless and at the mercy of the railways, the grain elevator companies, the tariffs on their machinery. Above all else, they were prey to eastern political domination. In the short term, farmer’s cooperatives gave this segment of western society economic leverage which gathered momentum and sophistication to become a political force. One of the most significant of the early steps was the formation of the Grain Growers’ Grain Company in 1905-06, the brainchild of E.A. Partridge of Sintaluta, Saskatchewan. By 1910, this farmer-controlled cooperative, assisted by the provincial governments, operated a competitive line of country and terminal elevators.²

After flexing their collective muscle on several issues, many farmers came to believe that they should enter politics as a class in order to fully cover their interests as well as bring solid
agrarian values into public policy.³ The Grain Growers’ Guide became a strong advocate, having been fiercely critical of the federal government. Its editor since 1911 had been George F. Chipman, an articulate and idealistic man with strong progressive tendencies.

By 1920, The Guide had a circulation of 80,000 subscribers,⁴ reaching a remarkable number of farming people across the country. Chipman represented the dominant perspective, led by T.A. Crear, president of the United Grain Growers’, and John Dafoe of the Free Press. They believed that a progressive slate could effect needed changes within the existing political system. Spurred on by the editorials in The Guide and the Free Press, these men believed in a “western mission to the nation.”⁵

Under the banner “Equal Rights to All and Special Privileges to None”, The Grain Growers’ Guide proclaimed that it was owned and controlled by farmers, entirely independent, and that “not one dollar of political, capitalistic, or special interest money is invested in it”.⁶ This was the frontier ideology of a well-organized and determined sector of Canadian society. Progressive governments were elected in Ontario in 1919 and Alberta in 1921. As well, in the 1921 federal election, sixty-five Progressive M.P.s were elected across the country and managed to hold the balance of power as the third party. In Manitoba, Chipman and The Guide had supported the farm candidates in all these elections. Chipman was intimately involved in the success of the United Farmers of Manitoba in their election victory in 1922. Because they tried to be totally non-partisan, the United Farmers of Manitoba candidates had fought the election without a leader. Once taking power, three men were considered as leaders, including George Chipman. In fact, John Bracken was voted by caucus to become the premier of Manitoba for the next eleven years.⁷

Chipman retired from politics but continued to build The Guide into a strong national journal. In 1926, The Guide was changed from a weekly to a semi-monthly paper and in 1928, the name was changed to The Country Guide. With a circulation of 120,000 it was much more than a magazine of western grain growers.⁸ The Country Guide still hammered away at the farmers’ viewpoint in Canadian politics, but it covered a huge range of articles including crop reports,
advances in farming methods and technology, information on stock breeding, the latest in plant
 genetics, news of social events, household hints, a children’s page, etc.

When George Chipman died accidentally in 1935, the Guide carried on and the following year
brought out The Nor’West Farmer as an additional magazine. Although the Public Press and
The Country Guide moved from the Vaughan Street structure in 1958, they have continued to
publish in Winnipeg right up to the present and were recently described as “one of the most
important newspapers” in Western Canada, especially in the period before World War Two”.

The parent organization, the United Grain Growers, remains, of course, a major component of
the Canadian grain trade. It is recognized as an integral part of the farm cooperative movement
that has played such a large part in Western Canada’s economic development.

The Public Press Building was constructed in 1917 according to the design of Winnipeg
architects John Woodman and A.E. Cubbidge. Very much the senior partner, Woodman had
come to Winnipeg as a youth to work for the C.P.R. He continued on with the railway as its
Chief Engineer of the Western Division for the next twenty years, opening his architectural
practice here in 1901. Alone or in partnership, he has designed such notable Winnipeg structures
as the Somerset Building, the Lindsay Building, the Paris Building, the Free Press Building, the
Eaton track warehouse on Alexander Avenue and the Hudson’s Bay Company wholesale
headquarters on Main Street. A.E. Cubbidge specialized in residential architecture.

Originally, the Public Press Building was two storeys high, 100 feet by 120 feet, brick and
reinforced concrete on a foundation of concrete and stone. Contractor J. McDiarmid and
Company built it for a final cost of $110,750. Ten years later a third floor was added, also
designed by A.E. Cubbidge, for a cost of $38,000. This time the general contractors were
Borrowman and Jamieson. In 1947 the rear loading docks were changed, the doors altered into
the elevator shaft and a penthouse added.

In order to give the printing plant maximum natural light, the basement was given large windows
at grade, elevating the first floor. This presented the opportunity to create two rather imposing
entranceways, giving a segmented arch over a large lit transom and surrounded in limestone and brick. Limestone is used in contrast to the rich brown brick in the trim above and below the windows as well as in band across the façade between the first and second floors.

The building employs the brown brick on three sides, while each elevation displays a different degree of finishing. The south elevation has a set-back in the middle with skylights over the ground floor section. The rear is finished in rough white brick.

Careful observation of the façade reveals subtle ornamentation which makes this building far more than just a factory. There is skillful brickwork on the upper floor walls, carved stone detailing, the interplay of light and dark materials and the ironwork screening the basement windows.

The heavy presses were located in the basement, while the typesetting and linotype printing was done on the ground floor. The offices of the Public Press and The Country Guide were located on the second floor and after 1927, on the third floor. The cutting and folding process also took place on these upper floors.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the 1930s, another subsidiary of the Public Press operated on the new third floor. Rapid Grip and Batten were commercial artists, photographers and photo-engravers, handling the Art Department for The Country Guide and other Public Press publications and products.

In 1959, when the Public Press relocated, this building became the home of Sidney I. Robinson Sporting Goods and S.I. Robinson Furs. The name was changed to the Robinson Building. Other tenants in the intervening years include Kahn Optical, Listowel Trophies, Ash Temple Ltd., Western Handicraft Supplies and L.M. Architectural Group.

In The Country Guide and George F. Chipman, we have two important contributors to the prairie agricultural and political scene. As a movement, the farmer’s Progressive Party had withered by the late 1920s, but not until it had ushered in a new era of reformist politics and, equally important, paved the way for a three-party system in Canadian provincial and federal politics.
As well as its political role, The Guide has been a steady source of information and contact with the prairie farm community for three generations. Chipman, whose association with The Guide lasted from 1909 till his death twenty-four years later, spent his working career in this building.

**FOOTNOTES**


2. Ibid., p. 334.


12. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 82, 22 March 1917.

13. Ibid., No. 3739, 27 September 1927. Also *Western Canada Contractor and Builder*, September 1927, p. 38.


The Public Press Building, 290-292 Vaughan Street, ca.1943. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Uncatalogued.)
2 The Public Press Building, 290-292 Vaughan Street, before 1927. (Courtesy of R. Van Vleet.)
3 George F. Chipman of The Grain Growers’ Guide, 1914. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Collective Personalities, #6/18.)
Military Parade, Portage Avenue, ca.1928, with The Public Press and Y.M.C.A. buildings in the background. (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Events #318/3.)