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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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WINNIPEG, 1874-1914

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Winnipeg's establishment as the major urban center of Western Canada in the period prior to 1914 was a result of neither geographical location nor initial advantage. The city prospered because it had dynamic leaders and businessmen who directed their efforts toward achieving for their community rapid and sustained growth at the expense of any and all other considerations. And the most serious question they faced in the early years of the city was the location of the C.P.R. main line. For as far as Winnipeg's leaders were concerned railways were the key to growth; the one essential without which all their plans would fail. Although Winnipeg was incorporated as a city in 1873, that strictly legal action did not by itself guarantee the city's future. Indeed, at least until the coming of the C.P.R. in 1881, the eventual development of the community was in doubt.

Winnipeg's geographical location, at the conjunction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, was in fact a hinderance. While this riverside location might have mattered in the days of fur trading and river transport, it was considered a liability in the days of rail transport since the land on which the settlement of Winnipeg stood was very susceptible to flooding. The community of Selkirk, twenty miles north of Winnipeg and on much higher ground, was, from a strict geographical viewpoint, a far superior location. It was only by the determined activities of Winnipeg's leaders that the C.P.R. Syndicate was persuaded that the city should receive not only the main line of the railroad, but its major shops and yards as well.

This is not to say that Winnipeg did not have any initial advantages over Selkirk or other communities for the location of C.P.R. main line. It was, for example, the largest and most developed community in the North West at the time and given the needs of the C.P.R. Syndicate in building the railway, this factor was of some importance. Yet it was certainly balanced by the record of the C.P.R. in bypassing other existing communities, and at the time it was by no means evident that the Syndicate would have located in Winnipeg were it not

for the generous concession - including a cash bonus, free land, a railway bridge, and exemption from taxation - given it by the City of Winnipeg.

Economic Growth and Metropolitan Development

The decision that the main line of the C.P.R. would pass through Winnipeg ensured the city's future. During the next three decades the city became the hub of commercial activity in the North West and the most populous and prosperous community in Western Canada. Compared to the struggling, prerailway settlement of 1881, Winnipeg by 1914 was an established and prosperous metropolis. Strategically located on the railway at a point where it entered the western plains, Winnipeg became the entrepot of the wheat economy that emerged on the prairies. From 1881 on its development reflected the pace and character of economy activity in Western Canada and the degree of domination it was able to exercise over this hinterland in the face of the challenge and claims of rival cities.

Winnipeg's economic growth was quite remarkable. By 1911 it stood in fourth place in Canada in terms of industrial output, surpassed only by Montreal, Toronto, and Hamilton. Winnipeg accounted for one-half of the prairie provinces' manufacturing output in 1911, and was firmly established as that region's banking, jobbing, and shipping headquarters. In short, Winnipeg had combined all the ingredients necessary to make it the undisputed metropolis of Western Canada. The city had access to a rich hinterland and had developed within its boundaries the services necessary for control over a region. These included such resources as financial institutions, manufacturing establishments, large, diversified wholesale houses, transportation facilities, administrative agencies, and even specialized services such as firms of architects and consulting engineers. But the most spectacular, and to the city's businessmen the most satisfying, element in the economic growth of the period was the surpassing of Minneapolis, Chicago, and other cities as the greatest grain center on the North American continent. This occurred in 1909 when Winnipeg handled 88 million bushels compared to 81 million for Minneapolis and less than 60 million for any other city.

What is particularly noteworthy about this economic success story is the role played by Winnipeg's commercial elite in bringing it about. For among the many factors involved in Winnipeg's rise to metropolitan status was the unshakeable confidence of the commercial elite that their city was destined to become one of the great cities of North America - the "Bull's Eye of the Dominion" and the "Chicago of the North." The businessmen who directed Winnipeg's growth in this period constantly and confidently used every tool at hand to ensure the city's dominance. The powerful Winnipeg Board of Trade constantly sought and received assistance from the federal and provincial governments while the municipal government, itself dominated by the city's businessmen, used public funds to promote the growth they desired.

This high degree of boosterism among the city's businessmen was primarily a result of the fact that the commercial elite considered Winnipeg a permanent home. The city's advancement thus implied enlargement of their own businesses and profits. In the postwar period this condition was no longer so clearly evident as branch offices became more and more dominant in Winnipeg's economy. The aggressive individuals employed in these firms had no permanent roots in Winnipeg since they were almost certain to be transferred in due course to eastern Canada. In contrast to the prewar city which had a large number of commanding businessmen who individually had built up major business organizations and collectively had made the Winnipeg Board of Trade a power to be reckoned with in western and national affairs, postwar Winnipeg had few outstanding entrepreneurial figures. As a result, the years after 1914 saw a dimunition of Winnipeg's commanding position. The city's days of rapid growth and ever increasing importance were over.

Population

Like their counterparts in most North American cities, Winnipeggers, were fascinated with the growth of their community. And the one index of growth that was most important was the increase in population. The number of residents the city had at any particular time was considered to be of paramount importance, especially in

comparing Winnipeg's advancement with that of other cities. Almost as important in a community whose ruling elite were exclusively Anglo-Saxon and Protestant was the ethnic and religious composition of the city. For although Winnipeggers were firm believers in the virtues of immigration, most did not easily reconcile themselves to the resultant polygot population.

Of the three main channels of population growth - the arrival of immigrants, natural increase, and annexation of new sections - the most significant in Winnipeg was immigration. In the period 1890-1914, for example, natural increase accounted for only 16% of Winnipeg's growth while immigration accounted for about 84%. The major sources of the native born immigrants were Ontario and Manitoba, with Ontarians the dominant group until 1891. Among foreign-born immigrants, the British group far outweighed any other. By 1914, however, other foreign-born immigrants were present in significant numbers in Winnipeg. These included Slavs, Germans, Americans, and Scandinavians. But of primary importance was the fact that the overwhelming majority of the city's residents were of British-Ontario stock. Since Americans and Quebecers were relatively unimportant, it meant that the traditions and culture of the British-Ontarian group was predominant.

Among the many changes in Winnipeg's occupational structure during this period, three stand out. The basic and perhaps most significant change occurred in agriculture. The sharp decline in the percentage of the work force engaged in agricultural pursuits - from 22% in 1881 to 1% in 1911 - is not surprising when it is realized that Winnipeg had grown into a major urban area. By 1911 land was simply too valuable to be used for agricultural pursuits. The picture that emerges from this change is that the old Red River settlement, with its river lot farms, had been almost totally engulfed by a thriving commercial center. Furthermore, if one uses a widely accepted definition of an urban area - the residence of non-agrarian specialists - this change indicates that Winnipeg was clearly a city by 1911.

The other key changes in the work structure were in the areas of transportation and trade and commerce. The sharp rise in

transportation employees, from 2% of the work force in 1881 to 14% in 1911 points to Winnipeg's growth as the distribution center for Western Canada. Winnipeg's metropolitan growth is also shown in a 10% increase (from 15% to 25%) in the number of trade and commerce employees. Most of this growth was in the wholesale and retail sector.

These changes, combined with an increased tendency for employees to work in groups of fifteen or more (80% of the manufacturing workforce by 1915), were the fundamental changes that occurred between 1881 and 1914. The frontier egalitarianism of the 1870's was replaced by a hierarchy of owners, managers, foremen, tradesmen, and laborers. And, of course, the same changes made labour organizations and strikes part of the Winnipeg work scene.

Political and Social Organization

As a result of the early recognition that so much was at stake in public decisions, Winnipeg's merchants and businessmen, real estate agents and financiers, contractors and manufacturers - in short, Winnipeg's commercial class - took an active part in municipal government. Both to protect and to further their interests, the city's commercial elite dominated every elective office prior to 1914. Furthermore, in an attempt to achieve business efficiency in municipal government, these men instituted a Board of Control in 1906 designed to "restrain any financial rashness on the part of City Council in guiding the growth of the booming city."

The control exercised by the commercial elite over municipal affairs in Winnipeg was not achieved by displacement of an older aristocracy. Unlike many other North American cities, where businessmen gained control of the local government only by pushing aside an old and established social elite, Winnipeg was from the outset dominated by businessmen. The city was actually established by businessmen for business purposes and its commercial class was its first and natural leader. Between 1874 and 1914, Winnipeg's commercial and social elites were indistinguishable; membership in one group was almost always accompanied by membership in the other.

An examination of the individual men who held civic office in Winnipeg reveals that they not only belonged to the same business

organizations (such as the Board of Trade), but that they also belonged to the same social, cultural, and athletic organizations. They met in the lounges of the Manitoba Club and the Carleton Club, at the discussions of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, and at the activities of the Winnipeg Operatic and Dramatic Society, the Winnipeg Rowing Club, the St. Charles Country Club, and numerous curling clubs. The social life of Winnipeg's well-to-do was not limited to these activities, however. The life-style portrayed in the pages of Town Topics, Winnipeg's magazine of "Society, Music, and Drama," included attendance at amateur and professional theatre and concerts, quiet euchre parties, formal balls, teas, weddings, and luncheons. It also included frequent trips to California, Florida, Europe, and Eastern Canada. Many of the businessmen spent holidays at pleasure resorts such as Grand and Victoria Beaches on the southern shores of Lake Winnipeg. Significantly, these resorts remained preserves of the well-to-do throughout the period since the families of working people, free to travel only on Sunday, were held in the city by a clause in the Lord's Day Act which prohibited the operation of special trains on the Sabbath. In short, Winnipeg's commercial class had little interaction with the city's working class.

The social and cultural activities of the city's middle and lower classes were quite different. At least part of their time was spent engaged in the activities offered by Winnipeg's many bars, poolrooms, Free Admission Parlours, and houses of prostitution. But these groups were also involved in the activities of a host of ethnic and voluntary organizations. These included the Sons of England, the St. Andrews Society, the Irish Association, the German Society, the Icelandic Society, the Zionist Society, the Ruthernian National Society, and numerous others. Coupled with the churches and ethnic newspapers, membership in these organizations alleviated some of the meaness of the lives of the working class.

The Physical Environment

While the commercial elite concerned itself with Winnipeg's rise to big city status, the city was developing distinctive

neighbourhoods and work areas. The clustering of economic activities, the segregation of economic and ethnic groups, the unequal distribution of municipal services, and the markedly different types of residential construction created a considerable variety of specialized and unique districts. Indeed, the presence of neighbourhoods of distinctive character - the business district, the "foreign quarter", the "sylvan suburbs", and so on - distinguished the large city of Winnipeg from its more jumbled predecessor, the small, almost rural, pre-railway city of 1874-1884.

The pace of growth in Winnipeg in the years after 1885 matched the urbanization trend that dominated the rest of Canada around the turn of the century. In only forty years, Winnipeg grew from a small furtrading post with less than 2,000 inhabitants to a sprawling metropolis almost one hundred times that size. The physical expansion that accompanied this growth in population was equally great. When incorporated in 1873, only 3.1 square miles were included within the boundaries of the city. By 1914 this had grown to 23.6 square miles.

This rapid growth brought numerous changes. Winnipeg was transformed from a city of pedestrians and horses to one of bicycles, streetcars, and even a few automobiles. The old residential area of 1874 had become by 1914 the principal zone of work - the industrial, commercial, financial, and communications centre of the Canadian West. At the same time the older dwellings of the central area that were not torn down for industrial expansion were on their way to becoming the homes of the lower-income half of the population. Beyond the central core three distinct areas of new houses had sprung up. To the south the more affluent and chiefly Anglo-Saxon elements of the population resided; to the west was a large middle-class area of somewhat more mixed ethnic composition; and to the north was the working-class and foreign ghetto.

Winnipeg in 1914 was very much a city divided; divided into areas of work and residence, rich and poor, Anglo-Saxon and foreigner. By this time, too, many of the familiar modern problems or urban life were beginning to emerge; the sudden withdrawal of whole segments of an old neighbourhood's population; the rapid decay of entire sections of the city; the spread of the metropolis beyond its political

boundaries; and, above all, the discipline of the lives of Winnipeg's residents into specialized transportation paths, specialized occupations, specialized home environments and specialized community relationships.

The establishment of such patterns of growth had serious consequences for Winnipeg. In the short run, of course, residential segregation had a pacifying effect. Income and ethnic segregation held conflicting groups apart. The upper class of the South End and central core were separated from the lower class and foreigners of the North End. Each district had a neighbourhood homogeneity that gave a sense of place and community. But the social consequences of such patterns in the long run were equally obvious. Many Winnipeggers never lived in mixed neighbourhoods and thus failed to develop the tolerance which must exist in such areas. In seeking the freedom of living informally among equals in certain districts of the city, many residents escaped the demands of respect for different goals and values. And, if any one characteristic stands out in such events as the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, it is this lack of any willingness to understand the point of view of others. From this one example it is apparent that decisions made by city officials, businessmen, and home builders in one era had a profound effect on future events. Indeed, many of the ideas, values, and residential patterns that emerged in Winnipeg between 1874 and 1914 have never disappeared.