

CHAPTER TWO

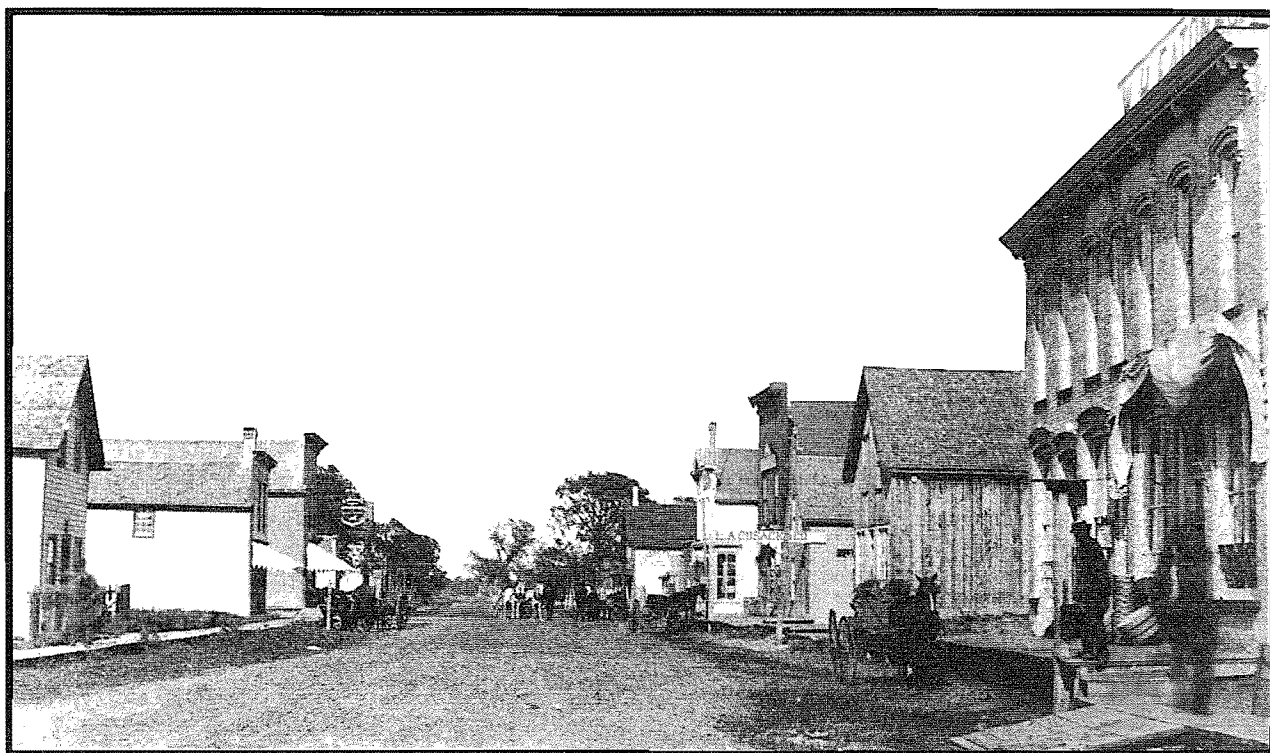
Head of Inland Navigation, 1883-1910

THE TOWN BUSTLED with prosperity. Each day the train brought yet another gang of young men looking for work as carpenters, plasterers, bricklayers and boatmen, and several times a week the steamers docked with cargoes of green lumber and shingles from the islands of Lake Winnipeg and the ferries crossed from East Selkirk with piles of building lime heaped high upon their decks. From this labour and these materials, a solid new community took its shape. Already the dusty corner of Eveline and Manitoba was the heart of the business district, a false-fronted cluster of five general stores, two butcher shops, a bakery, a drug-store, a blacksmith shop, two flour and feed stores, two hotels, a livery stable, two stationery and book stores, and a printing office where Gemmel and Groff ran off the *Selkirk Herald* every Friday morning. Behind these buildings, to the north, the south and the west, frame houses freckled the landscape. The southern reaches of Eveline were lined with fashionable residences, while more modest structures arose on empty lots farther back from the waterfront. This was the progress and the stability that the town boosters had sought, and, like it or not, they owed it all to the C.P.R.

It was a time when the absence of a railway

could kill a fledgling town before it had a chance to do anything more than crow about itself, and the branch line from Winnipeg immediately became Selkirk's lifeline to the rest of the commercial world. No longer did local merchants and manufacturers have to rely on cramped wagons and creaking Red River carts that took all of one day to bring supplies from the city and all of the next to return with orders and merchandise for sale. Nor did they have to place their trust in the small steamers, like Colcleugh's *Lady Ellen*, which might take hours to negotiate the rapids of St. Andrew's. The train could carry much more freight and many more passengers and, best of all, could easily make the one-way trip in under an hour. But there was a price to be paid for such luxury of transport. Shortly after the town was incorporated in the summer of 1882 the first council, headed by Mayor James Colcleugh, passed a bylaw granting the Canadian Pacific a bonus of \$35,000 to construct the branch line into Selkirk.¹ This was an enormous sum for the community with a taxable assessment of only \$879,519, and in later years it would become an unmanageable burden. But in 1882 it was understood simply as the price of progress.

Signs of progress were everywhere in Sel-



Eveline Street, 1885

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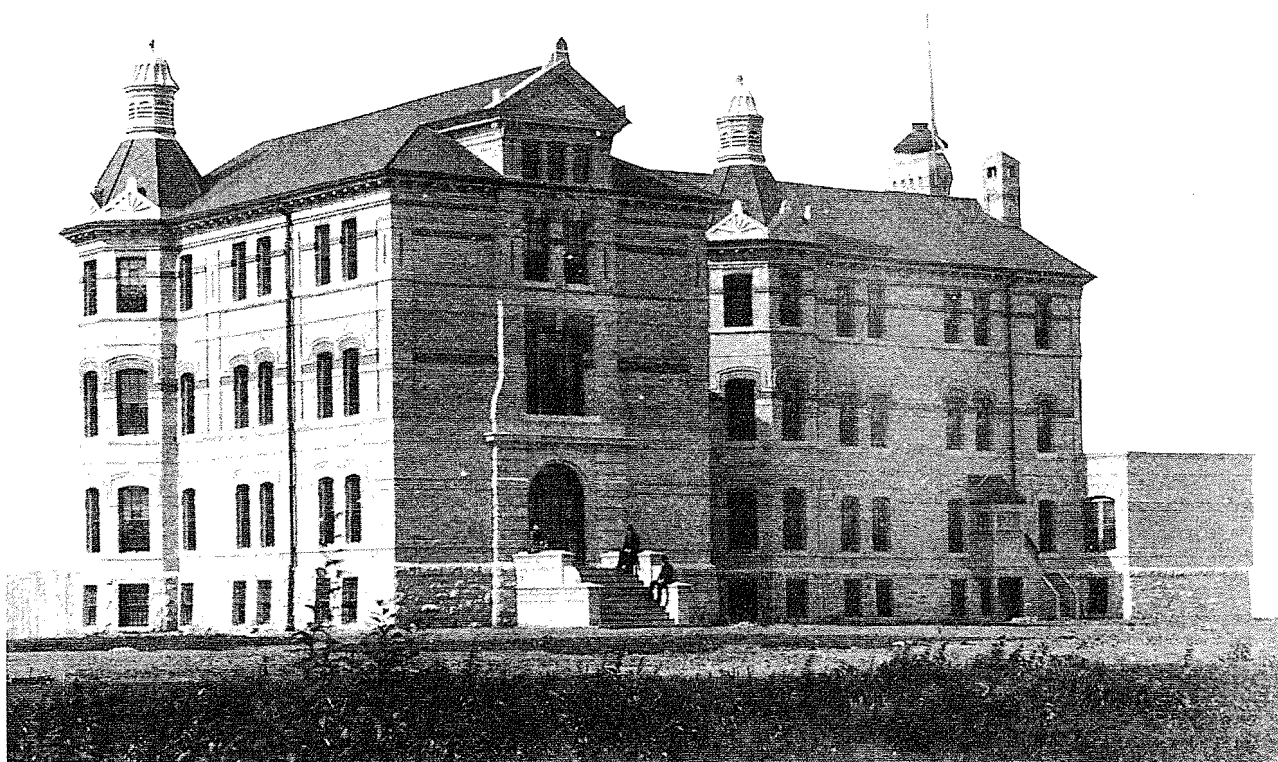
kirk, and in few places were they more evident than far to the west along Manitoba Avenue. There, on an empty plot of land, the new provincial asylum for the insane began to take shape in the late summer of 1884. There was a real need for such an institution in Manitoba. Until the 1870s deranged people were sent out of the province for treatment, and those unfortunates who remained were locked in jails where they were treated like animals.² When space became available at Lower Fort Garry in 1871, provincial authorities fenced off the northern part of the compound for use as a prison and transferred the insane there. The prison warden, S. L. Bedson, protested against the confinement of demented people in his bailiwick because they disturbed the prisoners, but even after Stony Mountain Penitentiary was erected in 1877 the lunatics were still with him, although he did manage to confine them to the basement. Soon the penitentiary was filled to capacity and the provincial government, lacking the funds to build a proper asylum, once again moved the insane into Lower Fort Garry where they remained for another two years.

The first medical superintendent of the insane in Manitoba was Dr. David Young, a physician of some repute in Selkirk and throughout the Red River Settlement. Various descriptions of him as an "esteemed citizen"³ and as a "drunken incompetent,"⁴ Young was born at Sarnia in 1847 and received his medical training at Queen's University in Kingston. Like many young professionals of his generation, he moved west after graduation and became the medical officer of the penitentiary at the Stone Fort. He soon made a name for himself by treating the many victims of scurvy in Red River following the disastrous grasshopper infestation of 1875-6, and again during the next year when an epidemic of smallpox swept through the Icelandic settlements on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. When the new asylum opened at Selkirk in 1886, Young seemed a logical choice for the

position of superintendent, and for the next 36 years his handsome carriage was a familiar sight along the King's Road as he travelled daily between the hospital and his colonial home at Lockport.

The asylum he governed was an impressive sight, rising three stories above the flat prairie. It was constructed of white brick manufactured at Selkirk, with a few bands of red brick "to mark the lines of the stories and to give by variety of color a cheerful and effective appearance."⁵ It was no accident the architect wished his building to present a cheerful aspect. It was modelled on plans drawn up by a Pennsylvania commission inquiring into the condition of the insane, and reflected the humanitarian attitude towards the demented that was coming into vogue. Several features of the building show this concern with pleasant surroundings for the patients. The wards, for example, were arranged so that every room was lighted with sunshine. And while it was necessary to place bars on the windows to prevent escapes, the architect was careful to obtain "cast iron guards rather ornamental in form, so as to obtain the same end without the depressing jail like appearance the straight wrought bar always gives."⁶ In the yard, trees were planted for shade and beauty, an artesian well dug to provide ample water for drinking and therapeutic baths, and a great drain installed under the centre of Dufferin Avenue all the way to the river to "carry away the large amount of [water] soakage which is found to exist, especially in the spring, and so to keep the building healthy for the inmates."⁷ Stables were built for cows and horses, and large plots of land were left open to be farmed by the patients. Still, there could be no doubt that this was an institution of confinement, for all around the site ran a picket fence, eight feet high and 3000 feet long.

The asylum quickly became a Selkirk landmark and a mainstay of the local economy. It provided steady work for 12 permanent staff



The newly-completed Selkirk Mental Hospital, 1887

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as well as another job for James Colcleugh, who became its first bursar. Others benefitted more indirectly, as the institution required enormous quantities of food, linen and other supplies for the patients. These needs grew annually as the patient population increased from 59 in 1886 to 122 by 1892.⁸ By that time the asylum was admitting patients from the North West Territories as well as from Manitoba, and this may explain the rapid rise in the hospital population.

While the provincial asylum hinted at the importance government funding would always have in Selkirk, there was another public building that stood for a kind of economic growth in which the town was never to have much success. This was the registry office, built in 1883 by local contractor Richard Dickson at a cost of \$2080.⁹ Like all small towns of the era, Selkirk wanted to become a trading centre for all the farmers of the area, a place to which they would come to sell their cream, butter and grain, to buy cotton cloth, harness and machinery, and to socialize around the cast iron stove in Bullock's store. Possession of a registry office, in which all land transactions were recorded, seemed an intelligent way to tempt farmers into town. The problem was there were very few farmers to attract.

Nature did not favour Selkirk in this respect. The river that bordered the town on the east may have been a highway to Indians and fur traders, but it was nothing more than an obstacle to those farmers who had settled the wooded lands of Springfield and Birds Hill. Until 1884 there were only makeshift ferries on the river at Selkirk, and after that the ferryman charged a toll for both passengers and teams. And, if the active merchants of Beausejour hadn't already captured the business of farmers on this side of the Red, those of East Selkirk certainly would. By the mid-1880s East Selkirk was a sizeable community with all the general stores and blacksmithing shops a farmer could want, and the construc-

tion of the C.P.R. roundhouse there in 1883 provided an excellent hall for church services, hospital facilities, and lively dances.¹⁰ If a farmer needed work during a lean crop year, he could probably find it in the quarries, or in Arthur Doidge's brick and pottery factory, or down at Colville Landing where the steamers docked and transferred their cargoes to the trains. Over time an allegiance to this community developed among farmers on the east side, and it would be many years before they would find it necessary to cross the river regularly.

West of the town lay swamps. Visitors to Selkirk in the 1880s were absolutely convinced that the town was the sole high spot in Lisgar County and that it was surrounded by stagnant creeks and bogs that never drained.¹¹ To a degree, this was true. Not far west of Selkirk was the thin end of a 24 mile long swamp called the St. Andrew's Marsh, but more popularly known as the Big Bog. This waterlogged leviathan, ranging in width from two to five miles, served as the drainage basin for the creeks of five townships to the west and of Netley Creek to the north.¹² A more formidable obstacle to farm settlement could scarcely be imagined. In 1882 Colcleugh and other concerned citizens obtained the backing of the townspeople and attempted to find a practical route for the construction of a road across the bog to the settlements of Greenwood and Victoria on the far side. Under the guiding hand of surveyor A. H. Vaughan, the little party spent two months wading through the mud and water looking for a suitable roadway. They claimed to have found two routes, both through the thriving community of Clandeboye, but it seems they were unable to get additional funding from the people of Rockwood and their plan fell through. Undaunted, they tried to persuade the provincial government to drain the bog by dredging Netley Creek, its natural outlet into the Red, but the government found that this would cost \$75,000 and

refused to consider the suggestion. Not until 1899 was this work done.

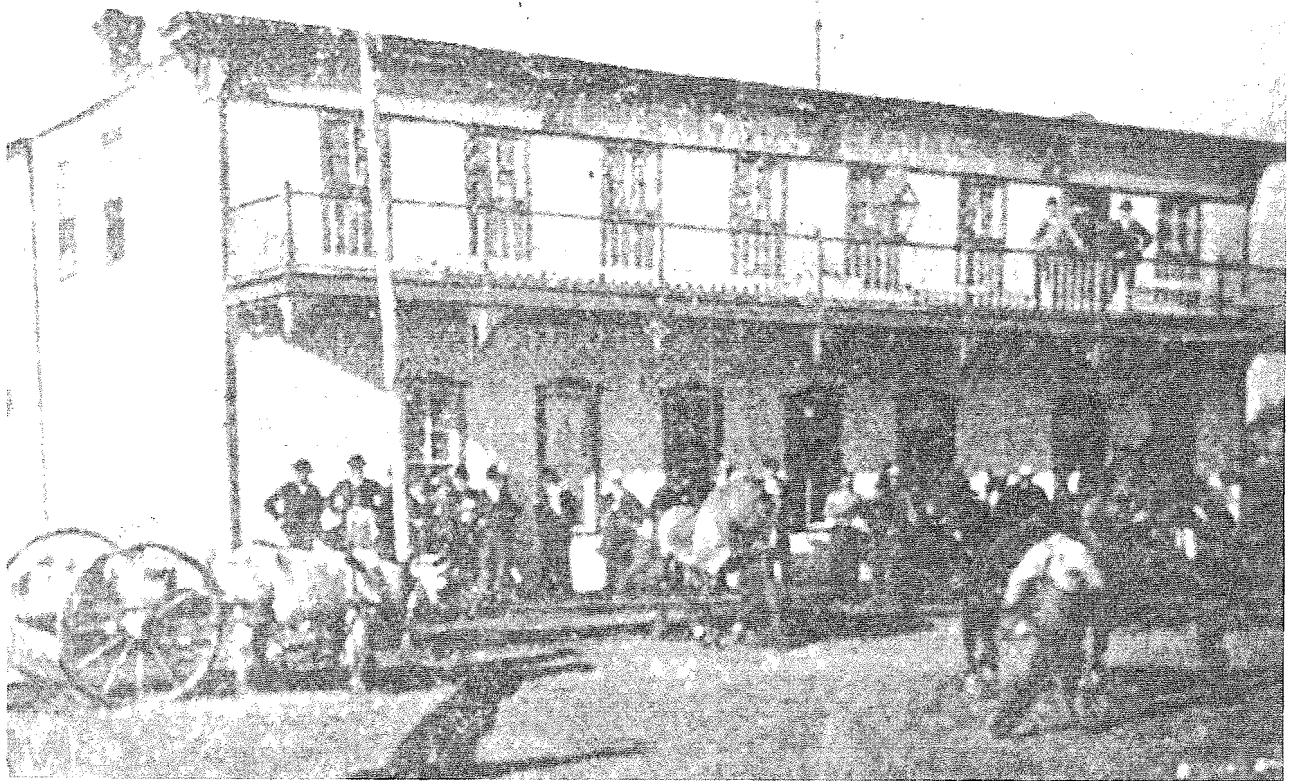
As if the Big Bog and the Red River were not sufficient barriers to the development of Selkirk as a farmers' trade centre, the town council had to contend with St. Peter's reservation directly north of town. Some of the finest farm land in the district was locked up inside the reserve, and the leaders of the town spared no effort trying to open it to settlement. Early in 1883 Colcleugh advised the Lisgar M.P., A. W. Ross, to "devise some means of busting [the reservation] and your name will be immortalized!"¹³ He had just circulated a petition among the townspeople asking the Dominion government to relocate the Indians elsewhere and to put the reserve land up for sale to farmers in 100-acre blocks. As he told Ross, "the shape it is in now is always going to be a drawback to our growth and prosperity."¹⁴

It was not simply that the reserve prevented settlement; the town was constantly having trouble with the Indians, too. They were, according to the *Selkirk Herald*, "noted for their thriftlessness, immorality, and indolence."¹⁵ The free flow of liquor in Selkirk's hotels did nothing to help matters, of course, and noisy brawls involving 25 or 30 Indians down at the Lisgar Hotel were common. It was said that the "braying" of drunks on the streets at night was a regular occurrence, and women did not venture out after dark for fear of assault. In 1888 a quarrel between an Indian from the reserve and an Italian who lived in a shack down by the river ended when the Italian drew his revolver and shot the Indian in the chest. Somehow the victim managed to stagger down the street to Mackenzie and Smith's store, and a doctor was called, but the man did not survive. About the same time a great disturbance took place on the reservation itself when close to 1000 Indians, upset at the way in which the government allocated food supplies, surrounded the Indian Agent, held him captive

while drowning out his cries for help with war whoops, and stole the entire ration of bacon he had brought with him. Incidents like these, which received tremendous coverage in the local newspaper, did nothing to encourage farmers and their wives to shop in Selkirk.

There was, however, a side to life on the reservation to which none of Selkirk's merchants objected. This was the annual treaty day, when Indian Agent McColl came to distribute \$15 to every family of five at St. Peter's. On the night before, the merchants moved wagonloads of goods out to the reserve and set up tents in which to sell them to the enriched natives. At first only a few eager merchants participated, but by 1886 there was an hourly stagecoach running between town and the reservation, and steamboats carrying hundreds of passengers chugged down the river day and night.¹⁶ Trading in cheap goods and liquor continued around the clock, and the place grew more riotous with each passing hour. By the turn of the century treaty day at St. Peter's attracted 2000-3000 visitors from Selkirk and Winnipeg, and dancehalls, dining halls and church bazaars were set up to accommodate them. The affair became an annual gala carnival, and with over \$12,000 in treaty annuities at stake each year Selkirk residents began to count it as an important feature of their economy.¹⁷ It continued to attract their attention until the Indian band was gradually relocated to a reservation between the lakes after the turn of the century.

Selkirk boosters had long envisioned the day when their town might become a popular summer resort for Winnipeegers, and in 1883 construction of the C.P.R. branch line made this possible. Soon thousands of visitors converged on the town every summer to relax and picnic amid the natural beauty of the fern grove at the river's edge or to rent one of the small sailboats always available from the fishing companies down at the docks. Holidays,



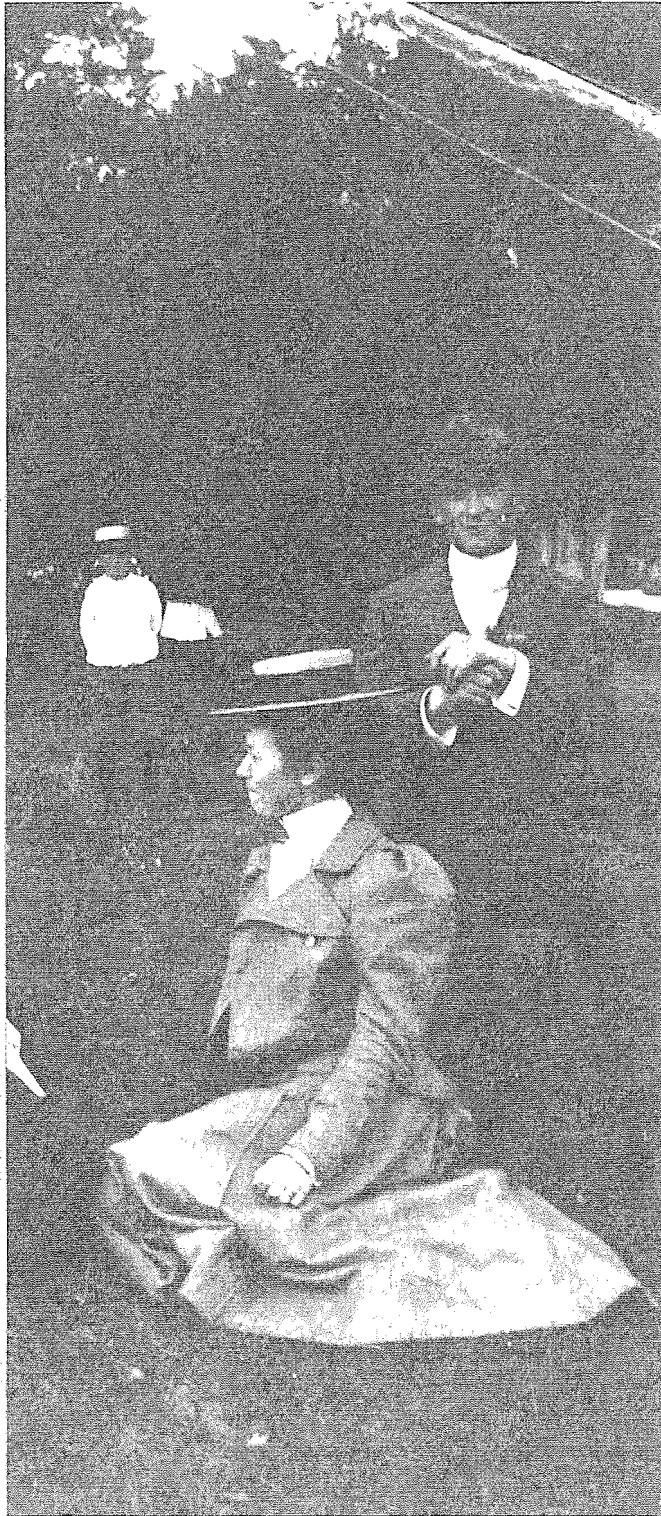
Lisgar House Hotel, Selkirk, 1894

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especially Victoria Day, saw the greatest influx of people. On that particular occasion in 1884, Winnipeggers arrived by train and aboard the steamer *Marquette*, a shallow draught vessel quite capable of lurching over the treacherous St. Andrew's Rapids. The town council ensured that the "Thistle Inspector" had made his rounds in town and at the fairgrounds, and that Constable White had managed to swear in six 'specials' (at \$12 for all six) to keep order on the holiday. All day long the visitors enjoyed an endless variety of sporting competitions, aquatic exhibitions, horse-races, and long-jumping contests, while the hastily-recruited Selkirk Brass Band tooted its tinny repertoire amid the general din of the afternoon. Still more impressive were the company picnics, notably those of the C.P.R. and of Ashdown's Hardware, that took place in the mid-summer months. To the usual sporting events and races, these added dancing platforms for the adults (with Italian string bands providing the entertainment), wheels of fortune for the adventurous and the reckless, and pleasure boats for cruising down the Red. To the visitors, this was great fun; to the businessmen of Selkirk, it meant great profits. As the new century began, the merchants succeeded in getting the Board of Trade to endorse the idea of a distinctive park for the town, one that would bring together all of the picnicking parties that spread themselves along the river bank. This was the beginning of River Park, "located in the north end of the town so that visitors from southern parts will require to come through the centre of the town,"¹⁸ and thereby enrich the merchants as they passed by. From a Mr. Polson, the town purchased its park land on the flats between the West Slough and the river for \$250 an acre. It was to be developed in conjunction with the newly-built Winnipeg, Selkirk and Lake Winnipeg electric railway, and to this day it is possible to discern the line's right-of-way loop by the circular arrangement of trees planted



Picnic at Selkirk, 1898



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near the centre of the park.¹⁹ By 1905 the town had completely cleared the site of brush and stones, built a pontoon bridge across the slough at the foot of Taylor Avenue, and erected a large dancing platform with concession stands in the middle of the park. Although River Park was to face stiff competition from the C.P.R.'s resort at Winnipeg Beach, it would always remain a favourite rendezvous for the youth of Selkirk and Winnipeg.

Of all the entertainments that contributed to Selkirk's coffers, none were grander than the steamboat excursions which became popular on the Red River and Lake Winnipeg in the early 1890s. Some excursions, particularly the earlier ones, were of short duration and consisted of nothing more than a one-day trip to Netley Creek, where a picnic lunch was enjoyed before the return to Selkirk. But for the princely sum of \$15 (equivalent to as much as half of a labourer's monthly wage), there were available week-long cruises that carried wealthy Winnipeggers, Selkirk notables and visiting dignitaries as far up the lake as Grand Rapids. For these tours big ships like the *City of Selkirk*, *Premier*, and much later the *Keenora*, were employed. Tourists would come to town on the C.P.R. line, disembark from the Bradbury station aboard a special carriage owned by Millidge's livery, and present themselves to the officers of the boat at the docks. Once the boat had taken on water for the boilers and cordwood for the engines, the crew would cast off to the loud cheers and wild waving of the local children who never missed the excitement of another departure. With passengers ringing the decks and the Union Jack and an assortment of other pennants fluttering in the breeze, the boat would slowly make its way downstream between the tree-lined banks, past the beaches, Hecla Island and Whiteway Point, and thence into the open lake. This was one part of the voyage that most passengers enjoyed immensely, and

those who had remembered to bring along their box Kodaks snapped furiously in every direction. As one Winnipeg socialite remembered.

It was a very pleasant sail through this part of the lake, past many pretty islands and small bays. Gull harbour is one of the prettiest spots, and being immediately in the course of the steamer, will no doubt soon become a favourite summer resort.²⁰

On board the passengers dined well, and their every care was attended to by a bevy of stewardesses who sailed on every cruise. The only unpleasant aspect of the tour was the constant shower of cinders and sparks that floated down from the main stack and sometimes set fire to an elaborate hat or singed a few hairs of a lady's exposed coiffure. At frequent intervals the boat put in to be 'wooded up' again, and this gave the passengers an opportunity to go ashore and explore the tiny settlements and fishing stations, or to arrange a hasty visit to a lighthouse, such as the one perched upon the rocks of Black Bear Island. Before half the week was gone the excursion party would arrive at Grand Rapids, to be transported upon the tramway to Cedar Lake where the mouth of the great Saskatchewan was a sight never missed. The passengers always delighted in snapping pictures of the wreck of the old *Colville* that lay disintegrating on the shore, and then they made preparations for the return voyage. The steamer excursion was a tour unique in the west, and although the names of the boats would change over the years, its popularity would endure for decades.

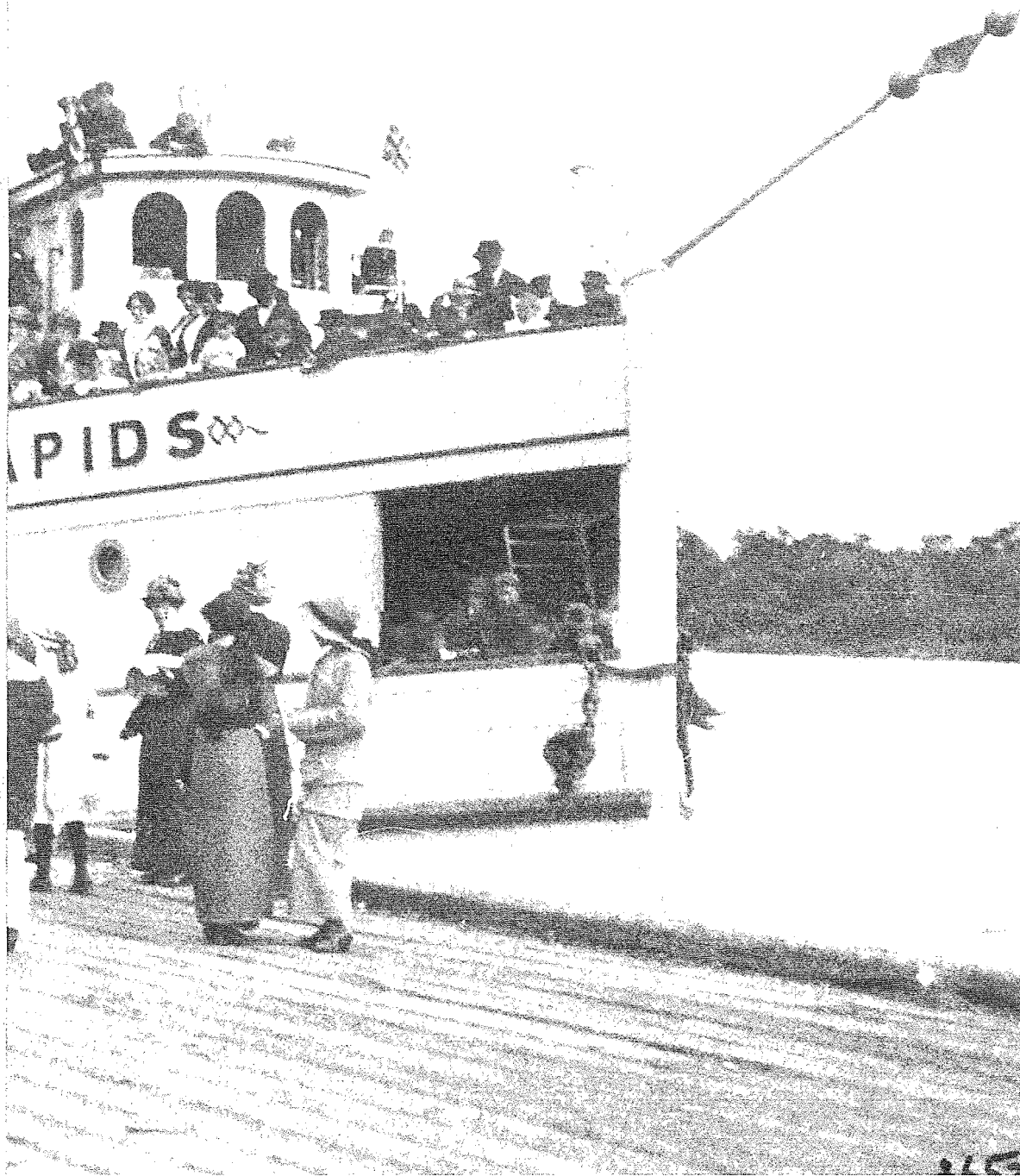


J. H. Ashdown's employee picnic at Selkirk Park, 1914

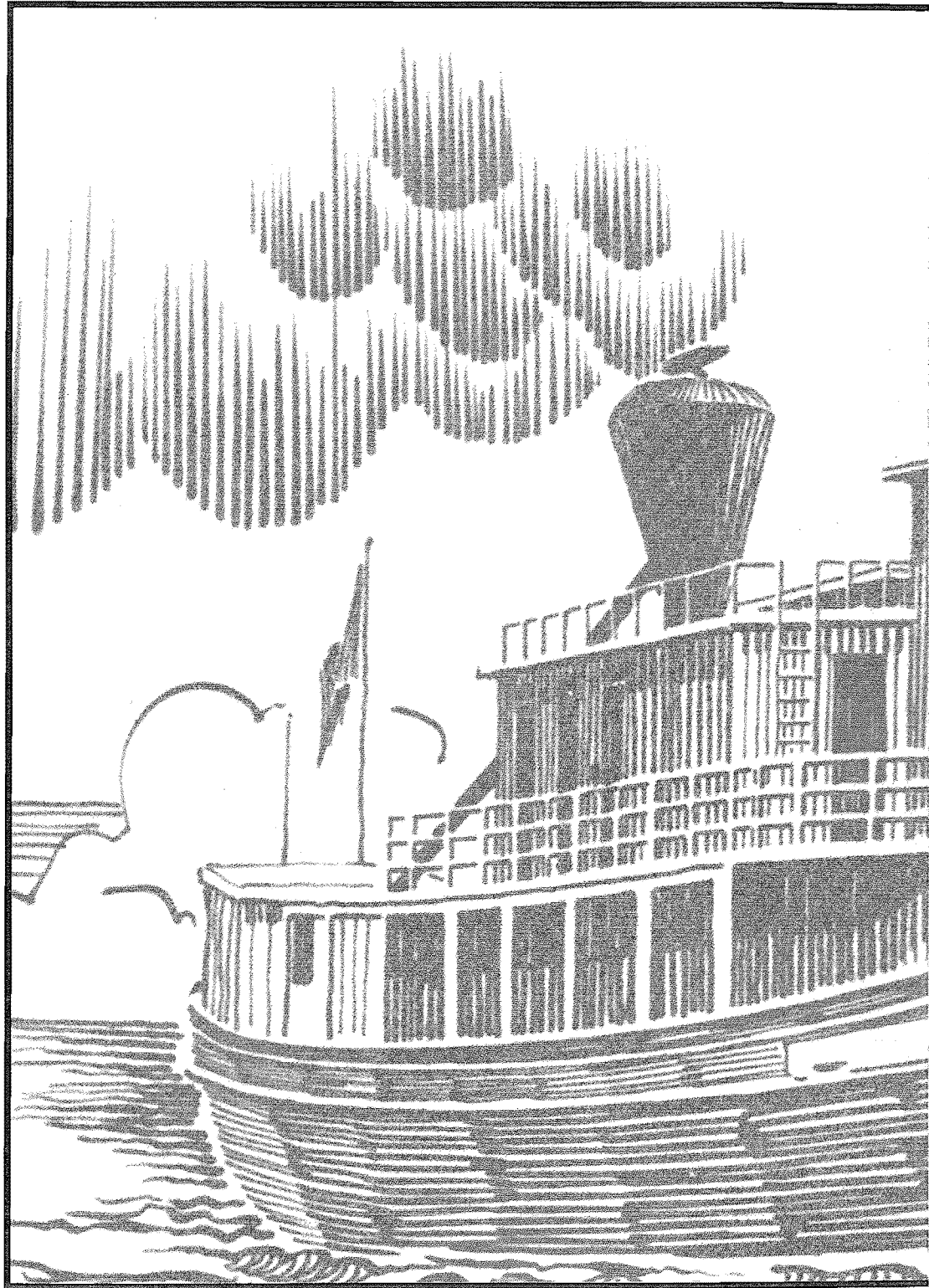




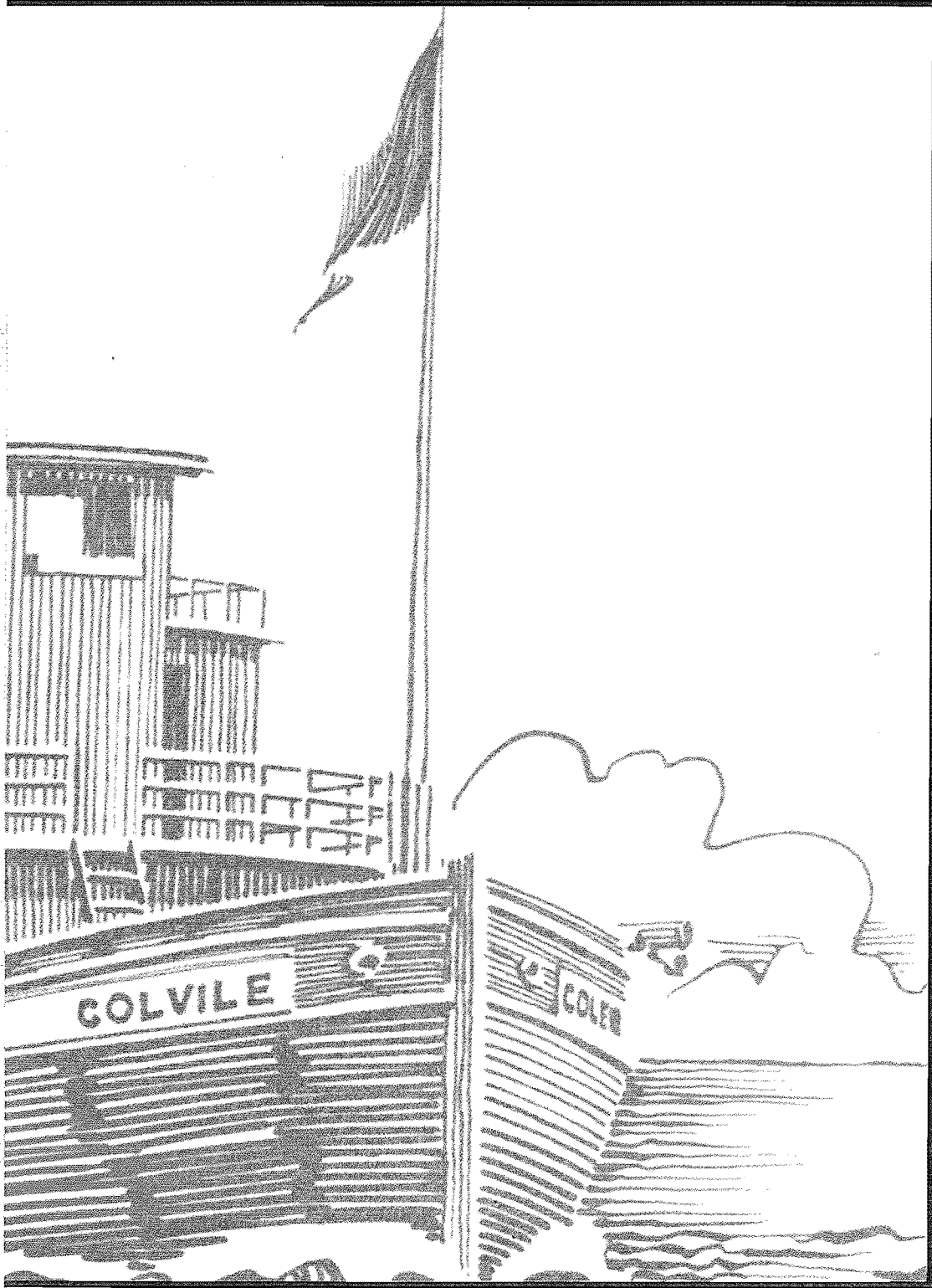
Excursion at Selkirk, Manitoba, c.1910



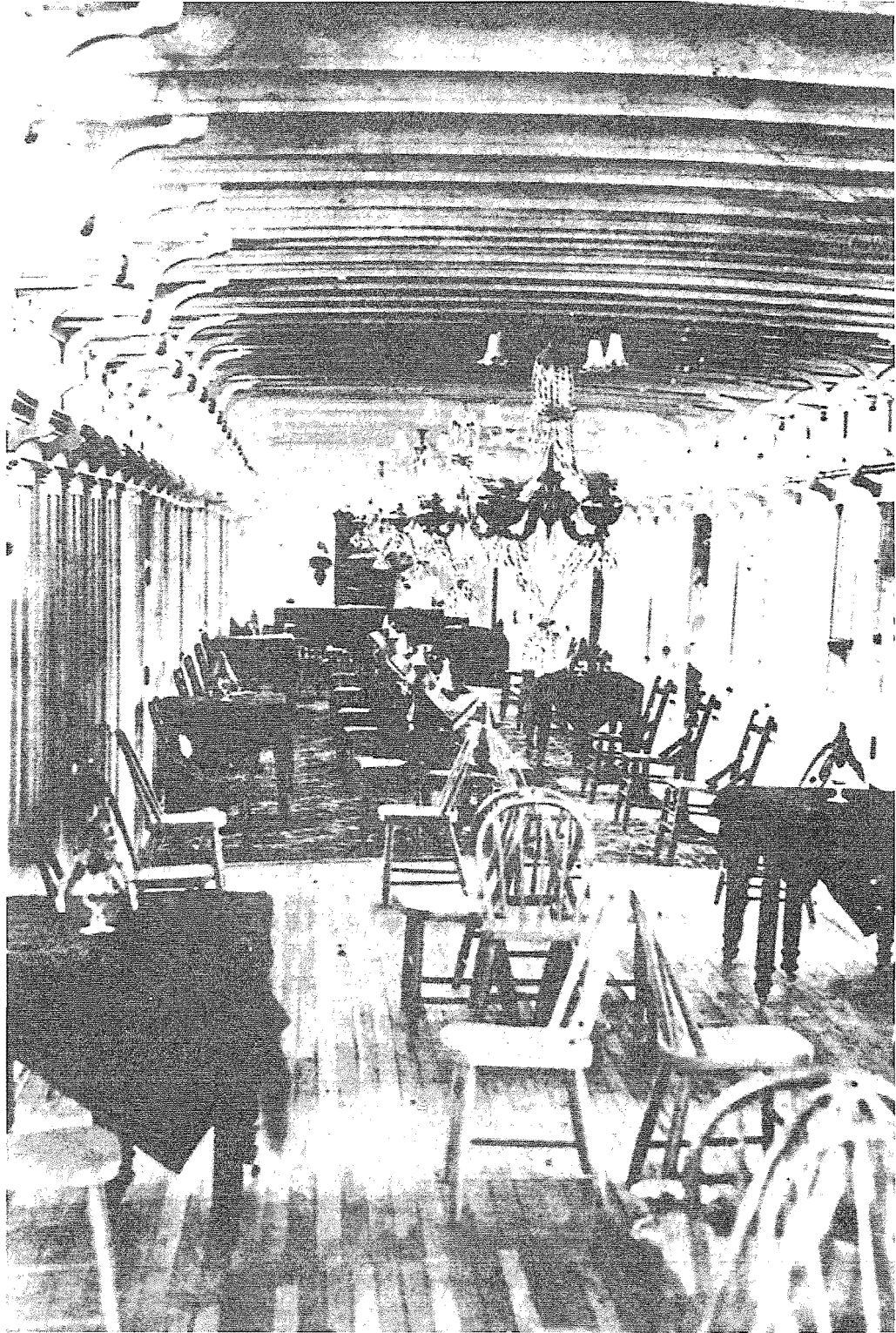
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The Colville, the first steam screw ship on Lake Winnipeg. Destroyed by fire at Grand Rapids in 1894.

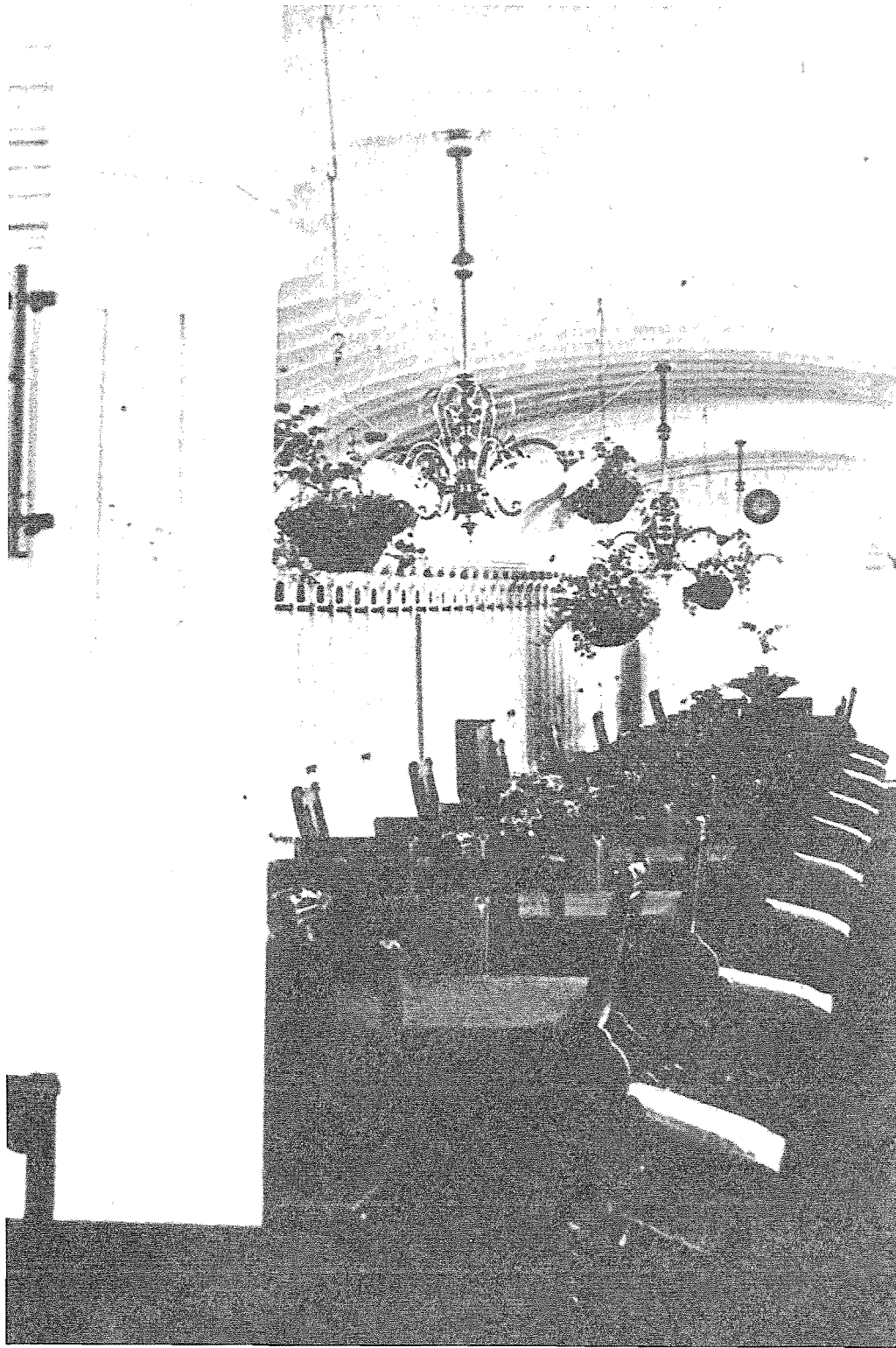


WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX



The general lounge of the S. S. City of Winnipeg in 1881. This room was also used as a dining lounge.

WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX



The interior of the dining room on one of the lake excursion boats, the S. S. City of Winnipeg, in 1881.
WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX

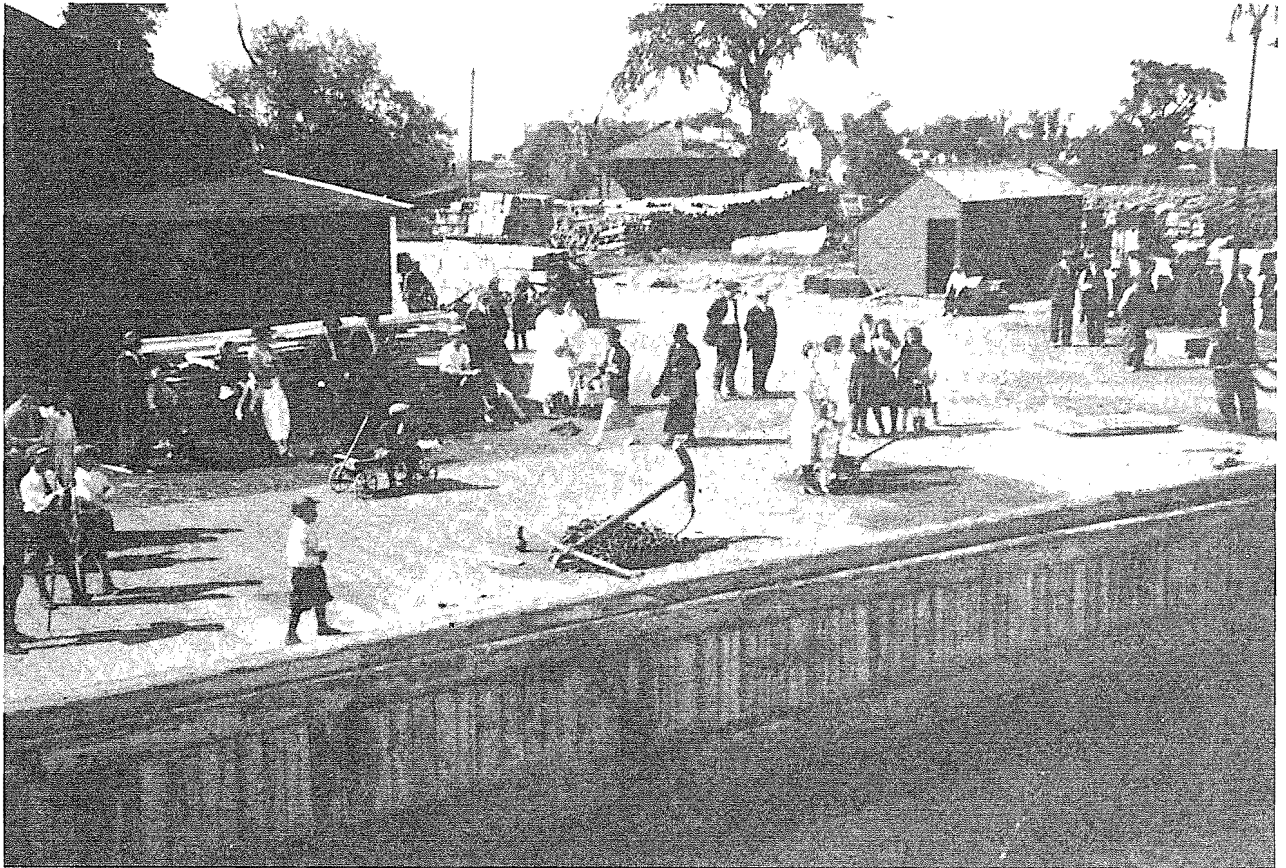
The excursion was a side of life on the lakes that only the rich could enjoy. To most Selkirk residents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the boats were merely floating places of employment. In those days, before the construction of the lock at St. Andrew's, Selkirk was truly the head of inland navigation in the west and to its docks came all the natural resources and trade of Lake Winnipeg and its tributaries. This meant profits for the enterprising businessmen of the community, and work for hundreds of prairie sailors. Of all the ingredients in this maritime economy, none were more important to Selkirk than lumber and fish.

Cordwood mattered most to Selkirk businessmen in the early years. The Indians of St. Peter's had long cut wagonloads for sale to the settlers along the river and to the people of Winnipeg, but with the settlement of Selkirk control of this lucrative trade passed from their hands into those of enterprising men such as James Colcleugh, and the Indians became mere wage labourers working in the bush.

The city was the main marketplace. It had grown at an incredible pace during its early days, skyrocketing from 241 people in 1871 to nearly 8,000 by 1881 and then to over 20,000 in 1886. This growth created a demand for cordwood, which sold for \$4.00 a cord in Winnipeg as opposed to \$1.50 at Selkirk. In the winter of 1879-80, Colcleugh purchased a small steamer called the *Lady Ellen* to haul cordwood into the city. He calculated that he earned a profit of \$184 on each trip, and he had "contracts for all I can deliver."²¹ Business was so good, in fact, that he hired master boatbuilder Malcolm Marten to build the schooner *Wallace*, a shallow draught vessel with a 52-ton capacity that could transport 64 cords of wood or 60,000 feet of lumber on every trip.

This was clearly profitable, but it compared poorly with the money to be made in dressed

lumber. Until completion of the C.P.R. branch line into Selkirk in the autumn of 1883, the timber trade was exclusively the territory of businessmen across the river in East Selkirk. Those enterprising men constructed a spur from the mainline down to the docks at Colville Landing and could move lumber very quickly in great quantities. In addition to the demand for construction materials in Winnipeg, there was a substantial need for ties in the building of the Canadian Pacific. At first this timber was dressed at mills located along Lake Winnipeg, with one of the largest mills being at Fort Alexander, but early in 1883 plans were afoot to build a mill at dockside in East Selkirk. James Walkley and T. A. Burrows formed the Northwest Lumbering Company and began to negotiate for land near Colville Landing, Selkirk businessmen, under the leadership of James Colcleugh, moved quickly to quash these negotiations and to secure the sawmill for themselves. Colcleugh immediately corresponded with A. G. B. Bannatyne, who owned virtually all of the property around the West Slough, and made him an offer. He explained that Walkley and Burrows had come up with a sound proposition to cut logs on the lake, tow them upstream in rafts (something never done before), and dress them at one of the settlements. Selkirk was able to offer them a tax exemption, but nothing more because of the burden of the railway bonus. Would Bannatyne be willing to give them free land for the millsite, because the industry would certainly increase the value of his adjacent lands. They would need 200 feet of frontage along the slough and piling grounds running all the way back to Main Street. If the promoters failed in this enterprise, the property would revert to its original owner. After protracted negotiations and three full months of suspense, Bannatyne agreed and Selkirk assumed the mantle of chief lumber port for the entire North West. East Selkirk, robbed of a vital industry, began its slow decline as



Waiting for an excursion boat to arrive at the Selkirk docks, c.1923

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The Lady Ellen, c.1878

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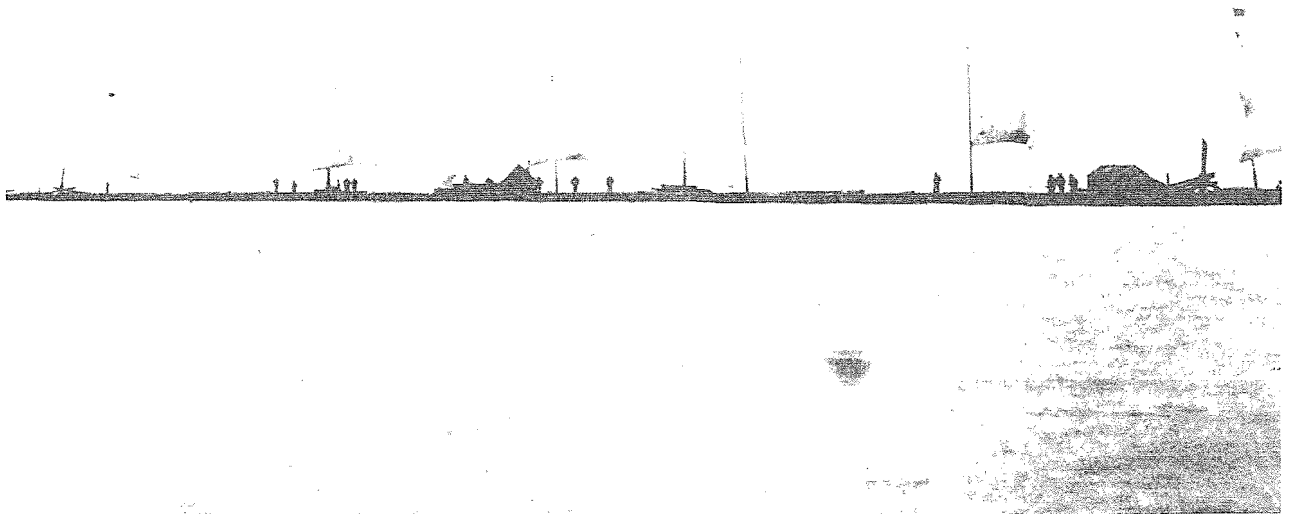
A. G. B. Bannatyne, an early Selkirk land speculator, c. 1875

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a shipping centre for the lakes.

With completion of the railway into Selkirk, the lumber trade boomed. It seemed that new companies were being formed monthly, and names like Brown and Rutherford, Drake, William Robinson, H. B. Mitchell, S. Jonasson, and Hooker and Company became synonymous with the prosperity of the timber business. These firms provided work for hundreds of local men, both in the bush camps along the lake and in the sawmills themselves. The boatbuilding industry took off, too, as a great fleet of steamers and tugs was needed to transport the rough logs and finished lumber into town, where C.P.R. cars waited on the siding to take them off to distant points. Once or twice in a season, the rarest sight of all could be seen from town: the huge log rafts, hundreds of feet long and wide enough that small shacks could be built upon them to shelter the men, would drift upstream with sails billowing in the wind. Then the crews

A lumber raft sailing down Lake Winnipeg, 1891
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would break apart the giant rafts and channel the individual logs into the slough where the rip-saws and planers waited, and the mills would run around the clock for days on end until the air was heavy with sawdust and the unmistakable smell of newly-cut spruce. As early as 1884 the lumber companies were producing in excess of three million board feet annually, with a peak production of seven million feet in 1905.²²

However important the timber industry was to the local economy, Selkirk was better known as a fishing port. Knowledgeable men might—and did—argue the worth of each trade for hours, but it was the nickname ‘fishtown’ that stuck. The local newspaperman might write glowing editorials about both lumber and fish, but when it came time to change the name of the paper, it was Selkirk *Record and Canadian Fishing Gazette* that he chose. Even the jokes that made the rounds in town were decidedly fishy:

Lawyer (to witness): What is your gross income?

Witness: I have none, sir.

Lawyer: No income?

Witness: I have no gross income. Mine is a net income. I am a fisherman.²³

Such trivial incidents and good-natured stabs at humour seem inconsequential in the life of a community, yet they nonetheless expressed a great truth about the people of Selkirk. They were, above all else, a maritime people.

The first bold attempt to start a commercial fishery on Lake Winnipeg occurred in 1881, when two former Ontario men, Daniel F. Reid and his brother-in-law, David Clarke, set their nets about ten miles from the mouth of the Red River. Failing to catch a single fish there, they moved their camp to Big Island, about 70 miles farther north, where they managed to land about four tons of whitefish.²⁴ This could hardly be called a commercial success, but it was enough to encourage them to return with their single sailboat in

the following year, when the catch amounted to more than 127,000 pounds. Apparently they had learned something about fishing Lake Winnipeg in the intervening year.

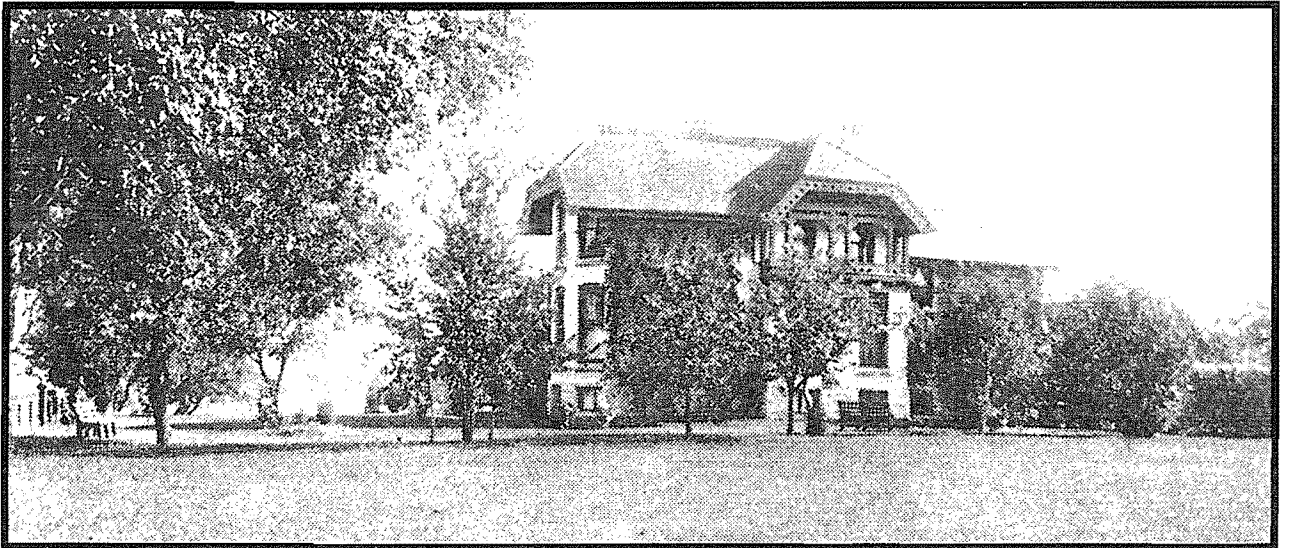
These men were not novices at the business. Both had been involved in commercial fishing at Collingwood, the great boatbuilding centre on Georgian Bay. Their training in Ontario and the first experiences on Lake Winnipeg must have convinced them that commercial fishing in Manitoba was a sound prospect, for in 1883 they expanded their operation to include a second sailboat, and in the next year they purchased the *Lady Ellen* from Colcleugh. By 1885 they handled 167 tons of fresh whitefish and 2270 half-barrels of salted whitefish, and had fishing stations at Big Island, Swampy Island, Beren's River and the mouth of the Little Saskatchewan River.²⁵

In his New Year editorial of 1886, the editor of the *Selkirk Record* reviewed the great untapped resources of Lake Winnipeg and then lamented that “the only business that Selkirk has gone into so far has been the lumber business.”²⁶ What appears at first glance to be editorial nearsightedness emerges as the truth upon closer examination. Reid and Clarke were Winnipeg businessmen, with offices on Alexander West and Main Street, and their profits lingered in Selkirk only in the form of wages for 30 employees. But during early 1886, a second commercial fishing concern took an interest in Lake Winnipeg and opened an office in town. This was C. W. Gauthier and Company, a firm with headquarters at Windsor, Ontario. By late summer Gauthier had constructed a refrigerator near the West Slough, a cleaning plant, and an ice house near the spur line.²⁷ Reid and Clarke realized the threat this posed to their business, and they approached the Selkirk town council for permission to erect a dock at the foot of Clandeboye Avenue with a ten-year tax exemption. Council agreed. It seems clear, however, that Reid and Clarke



Unloading lumber at the Selkirk docks, c.1910

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Residence of fishing fleet owner D. F. Retd. 1913

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were over-reacting, for while Gauthier's 1886 catch was worth \$1206., theirs was worth \$22,360.²⁸

Then tragedy struck, and brought a dramatic change to the local fishing industry. David Clarke died of typhoid fever on October 21, 1887. The young man had become a "favorite of all"²⁹ during his brief stay in Selkirk, and his funeral was one of the largest ever held in town. All the flags flew at half mast on that sad day, and when the service was over two of the mourners went home to compose poems in his honour for publication in the next issue of *Record*. Reid was apparently unable to continue the business on his own, and before the year was out he had sold it to Captain William Robinson.

Will Robinson, an unassuming man with a thick brush of a moustache and a worn whiskbroom of a beard, was certainly no stranger to Selkirk residents. He had long been a captain on the steamboats that plied the North Saskatchewan between Edmonton and Grand Rapids, and it was said that he built the first steamer in Selkirk in 1878. When the C.P.R. finally reached the west coast in 1885, and steamer traffic on the Saskatchewan began to dwindle, Robinson moved to Winnipeg and became president of the Northwest Navigation Company, which seems to have been associated with the Hudson's Bay company.³⁰ Under his direction, commercial fishing operations on Lake Winnipeg expanded tremendously and before the century was out Robinson owned most of the fish companies with facilities at Selkirk.

The fleets grew rapidly after 1886. To Reid and Clarke's four Collingwood-built boats, which had been brought in at the start of the 1887 season, Robinson added his four large steamers, the *Colville*, the *Glendevon*, the *Marquette* and the *Princess*.³¹ His ownership of the *Glendevon* seems to suggest that he had also purchased the C. W. Gauthier firm, for that steamer had previously been listed as their property. Seven other fishing com-

panies, mainly small outfits, had steamers on the lake at the same time.

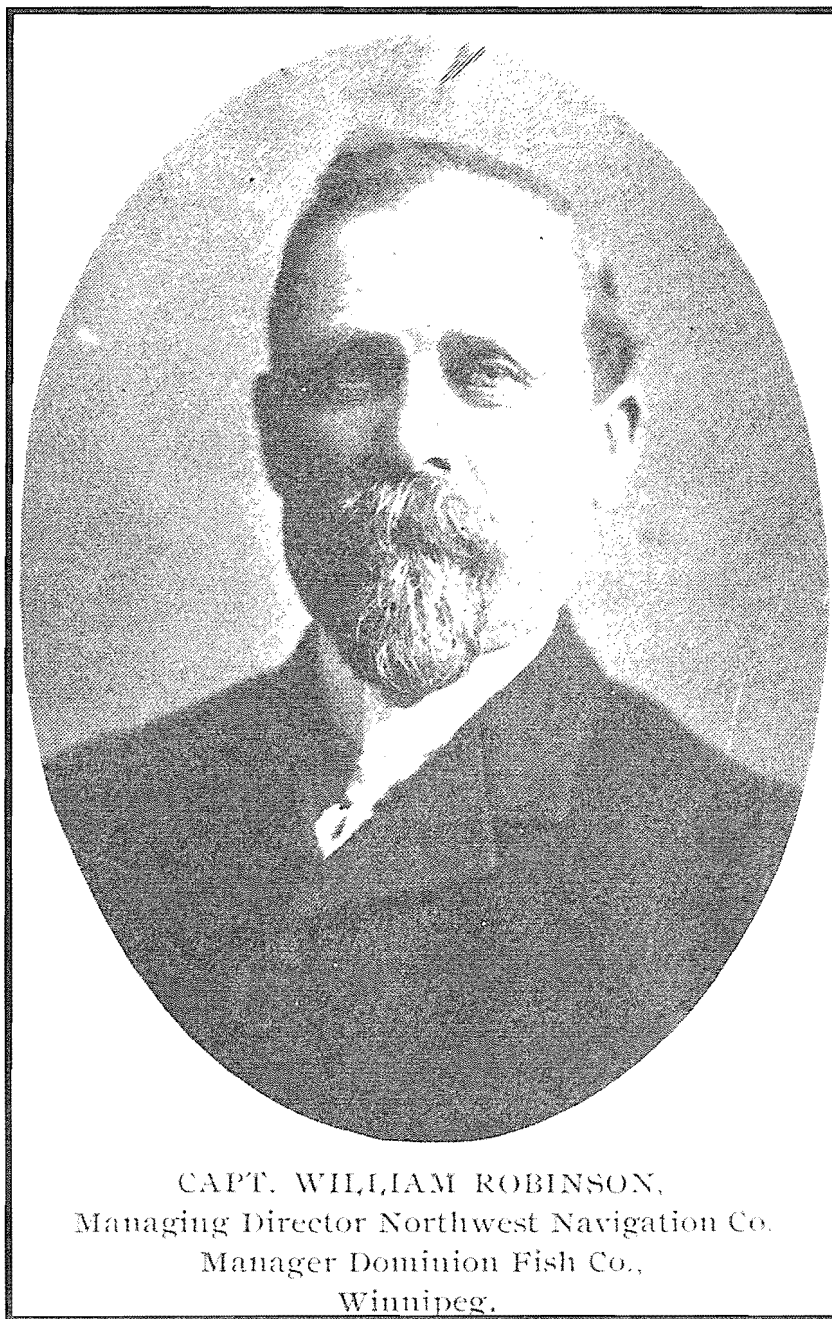
LIST OF VESSELS DOCKING AT SELKIRK, 1886

Name	Tonnage	Owner
Alice Sprague	36	D. Kilpatrick
Colville	165	Northwest Navigation Co.
Glendevon	100	Northwest Navigation Co.
Marquette	354	Northwest Navigation Co.
Princess	531	Northwest Navigation Co.
Millie Howell	24	Howell and Daly
Ogema	62	Reid, Clarke and Co.
Lady Ellen	19	Reid, Clarke and Co.
Kathleen	8	Waterous Brothers
Victoria	238	Jonasson and Company
Regina	7	G. S. Whittaker
Lotus	Unknown	C. W. N. Kennedy
Gold Seal	27	T. Bamford

Source: Selkirk Record, 18 March 1886

All but two or three of these steam vessels, presumably the smaller ones with shallow draught, worked on Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba.

As the fishing companies gained experience on the lake, the number of stations grew and the dockside operations at Selkirk expanded. Reid and Clarke had fishing camps all over the lake, and in the winter they moved their operations to the mouth of the Little Saskatchewan River. All together, the company was worth about \$25,000.³² Gauthier, with 40 whitemen, 30 half-breeds and 100 Indians in its employ, operated chiefly at Swampy Island and the lower Saskatchewan River. Like Reid and Clarke, it boasted a total plant value of about \$25,000. The remaining companies were small, independent concerns, without facilities at Selkirk, and it seems they



CAPT. WILLIAM ROBINSON,
Managing Director Northwest Navigation Co.
Manager Dominion Fish Co.,
Winnipeg.

Captain William Robinson

MANITOBA ARCHIVES

sold their catches to companies under the Robinson umbrella. As time went on, the fishing companies diversified into the manufacture of fish oil from the refuse of whitefish and others that could be sold in Winnipeg for 40¢ a gallon as a lubricant for machinery. The technique was simple, consisting of nothing more than boiling the fish in vats and then rendering the oil from them, and after a while the Indians who lived at Grand Rapids, Little Saskatchewan River and Fort Alexander went into the business for themselves and sold the oil to the fishing firms. One enterprising businessman even went into the sturgeon canning business, and by 1888 C. W. Gauthier was producing sturgeon caviar at Pigeon Bay and Grand Marais, which sold for 60¢ a pound in New York. No doubt this explains why sturgeon was virtually extinct in Lake Winnipeg by 1909.³³

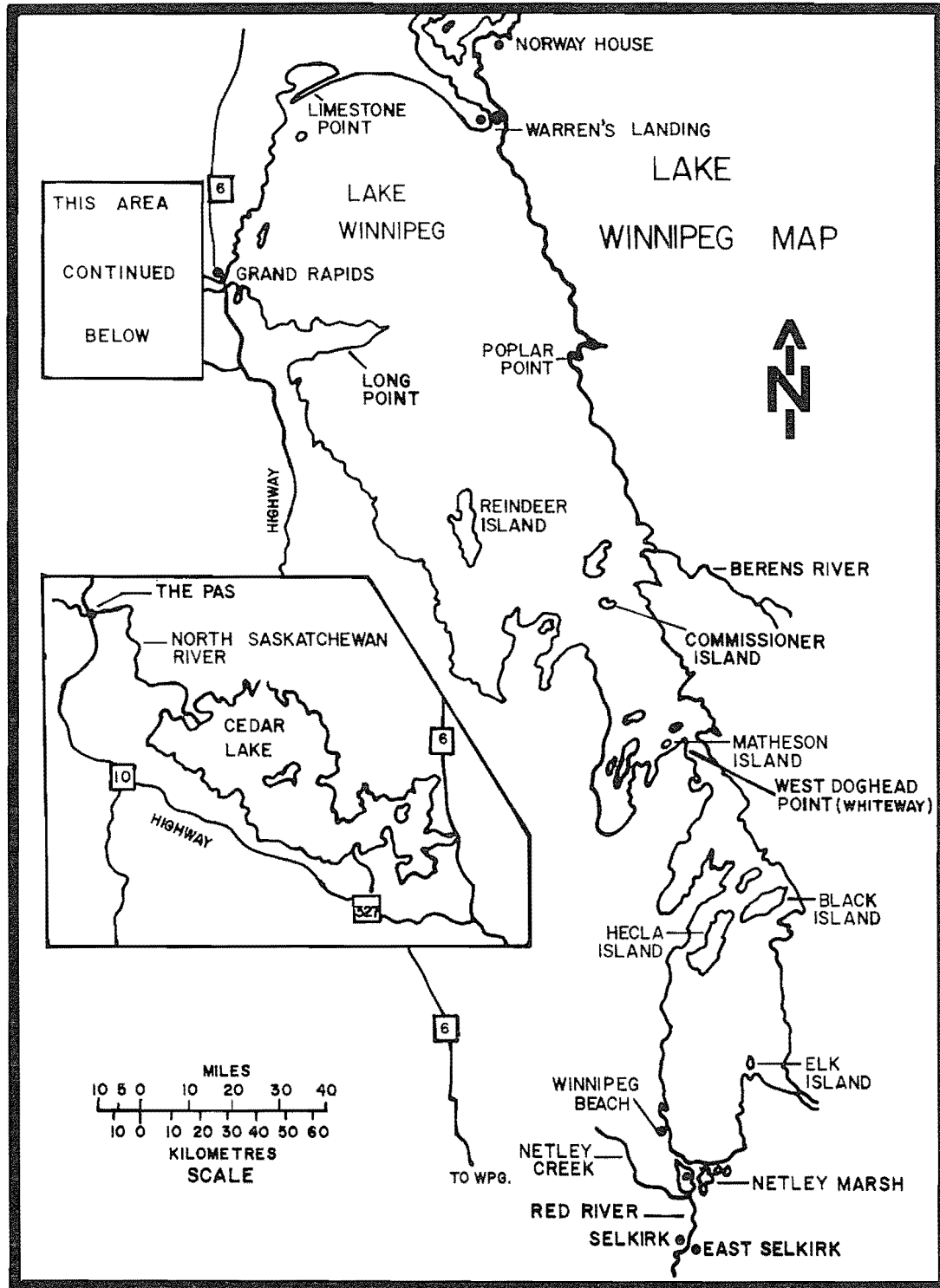
Most of the fish taken from the lake were marketed in the United States. C. W. Gauthier's first shipment in 1886 travelled by train to Windsor, location of the firm's headquarters, and was then reshipped to various points throughout the States. Reid and Clarke's first carload found its way to Kansas City, and subsequent shipments ended up in Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Buffalo. The value of the American market is evident from the 1887 records, which show that of a total catch of two million pounds of whitefish worth \$100,000, only about 80,000 pounds (or \$3978 worth) stayed in Canada.³⁴ As time went on and officials of the government learned more about the Lake Winnipeg fisheries, it became increasingly evident that the Americans were more than mere consumers of Manitoba fish: they were, it seems, owners of almost all the companies operating out of Selkirk. In 1889 the Selkirk Fish Company, managed by William Roberts, was taken over by Booth Fish Company of Chicago.³⁵ Two years later C. W. Gauthier changed its name to Manitoba Fish Company which was, according to local Member of Parliament

George Bradbury, "an American concern, 96 per cent of the stock being owned or controlled by gentlemen living in Detroit."³⁶ And by 1900 all but the small independents had been taken over by Captain Robinson's Dominion Fish Company, which was a front for Booth as well.³⁷ In 1901 five Selkirk men and a Winnipegger formed the Northern Fishing Company which was to become one of the town's largest fishing concerns. But, as Bradbury informed his colleagues in the House of Commons,

I am sure that the minister and the department [of Fisheries] knows that the majority of the stock of the Northern Fish Company belongs to what is called Buck Eye Fish Company and Buck Eye Fish Company is controlled by Booth Fish Company of Chicago.³⁸

The sole fishing firm at Selkirk that does not seem to have been controlled by Americans was J. K. McKenzie Fish Company Limited, also formed in 1901. This firm later became Imperial Fish.

The American takeover of Selkirk's fishing industry, which seems to have been fairly common knowledge in town at the time, was a repetition of the events that had taken place earlier in the Great Lakes fishing industry. In the late nineteenth century, it was strictly illegal for anyone but a British subject to fish commercially in Canadian waters. Indeed, in order to obtain a fishing licence, the fleet operator had to declare that his boat and gear were owned by a British subject. But this made marketing the fish something of a problem, for while the best markets were situated in the United States, the American government imposed a tariff on all Canadian fish to make them less competitive in price. By secretly financing the Lake Winnipeg fisheries through men of reputation such as Captain Robinson, American investors were able to avoid Canadian regulations about ownership, and then by declaring to American customs officials that the fish being imported were actually caught in American-owned



Lake Winnipeg, showing the main physical features and ports of call for Selkirk fishing and excursion boats
GARY PURPUR

nets, they were able to bring them in free of all duty. It was a clever bit of manipulation.

With new companies being formed all the time, it was to be expected that the issue of whitefish depletion in the lake would soon arise. Close seasons had been established as early as 1885 for whitefish (November 1-February 1), pickerel (April 15-May 15), and speckled trout (October 1-January 1), the intent being that

as civilization extends and territory becomes settled it is necessary to have some effective means of controlling and regulating fisheries for the benefit of residents and settlers, particularly in the area of Lake Winnipeg.³⁹

As it turned out, the fisheries inspectors were usually much more concerned about the welfare of the white settlers than of the native residents. Year after year the inspector's annual reports suggested that close seasons were well observed except by the Indians. This mattered less as time passed, for the natives' catch was nothing compared to those of the great fleets from Selkirk. In 1893 the Dominion Commissioner of fish, S. Wilmot, warned that a further increase in the annual catch of over three million pounds would seriously jeopardize lake stocks. Wilmot retired shortly after making this report, and was replaced by an Englishman named Prince. In 1895 Prince toured Selkirk and the new fish hatchery just off Eveline, and then steamed around Lake Winnipeg inspecting all the fish stations. His subsequent report was glowingly optimistic about the fisheries, which is understandable given that his guides were none other than Captain Robinson, William Overton (manager of Manitoba Fish), Daniel F. Reid and James Tait (of Reid and Tait, successor to Reid and Clarke), Robert Bullock (who also owned fishing boats), and LaTouche Tupper, the hatchery superintendent of whom Bradbury said "if he had been a paid official of that great American combine, he could not have done more to assist in the destruction of the





fisheries of Lake Winnipeg than he did."⁴⁰ A more sober voice entered the debate about depletion in 1898, when F. W. Colcleugh became Inspector of Fisheries for Manitoba. Colcleugh pointed out that with each new year the fleets moved farther north on the lake, suggesting that the southern end had already been depleted, and he called for stricter control of the catches. But his appointment lasted only two years, and his every recommendation was totally ignored by federal authorities. His replacement, W. S. Young, was said to be Robinson's nominee and also said to be unable to tell "a whitefish from a tullibee or a tullibee from a pickerel."⁴¹ His explanation of declining catches was that they resulted from "less vigorous prosecution of fishing."⁴² Obviously the debate would not be settled by government appointees, and in 1909 the Dominion government acceded to public pressure and created a commission to investigate the depletion question.

The editor of the *Selkirk Record* was wary of the commission. Although he was pleased to have an investigation take place, he pointed out that the commissioners were "strong party men" and anticipated that "the inquiry will amount to the customary whitewashing affair."⁴³ He was to be surprised. The commissioners visited Selkirk, the hatcheries on the lake, and many of the fishing stations during the 1909 season, and tendered their interim report in December. To the outrage of most Selkirk residents, the commission found that depletion was serious and recommended changes to the fishing regulations that would have meant the end of commercial fishing in Selkirk. The citizens petitioned their town councillors to protest the commission's findings, which they did, and in the final report the commissioners indicated that while depletion was a recurring problem, the lake seemed remarkably resilient. The

Stvedores unloading the S.S. Keenora (on right) at a Lake Winnipeg port of call. The Bradbury is shown on the left

WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX

original recommendation about the closing of the summer season disappeared completely.

The summer season was crucial to the fishing companies. From June to November about 1000 men were employed on the boats, at the fishing stations, and in the refrigerators and the cleaning plants at dockside in Selkirk. Weeks before the season started officially on June 15th, the men were taken by steamer to the stations along the lake to make ready for the fishery. The dock was piled high with boxes and barrels as they prepared to leave, fishing gear for the crews, government provisions for the Indians, and Hudson's Bay Company freight for the trading posts. These farewells were as exciting as the great excursion departures, but they were tinged with sadness too, as many of the men were married and would not see their families again for several months. The youngsters and older bachelors of the crew could be seen, as often as not, pacing impatiently around the gangplank, more than ready to leave, with a grip in one hand, a new coal oil can of 'medicinal spirits' in the other, and with the long necks of suspicious flasks poking out of their pockets.⁴⁴ When all was made ready, the captain tugged at the whistle cord, and as the steamer moved slowly from its moorings, the last of the lingerers leaped aboard, some more successfully than others, as might be judged from the number of brown bottles bobbing under the wharf.

Shortly after passing the mouth of the river, the steamer usually encountered long stretches of ice floes and often the captain had to put in at George's Island or Horse Island to allow the crew to nail planks to the bow to prevent damage from repeated collisions with the ice. At times the floes were 100 miles long and progress was slow as the steamer threaded its way up the lake. Eventually the stations were reached, one by one, much to the relief of the fishermen who never found galley food as palatable as that which their own cooks managed to concoct on shore.



Fishing boats in Swampy Harbour, Manitoba, 1889

PUBLIC ARCHIVES CANADA



even though gull and pelican eggs often ended up on the table for the sake of variety. The work began immediately, for the boats needed caulking, the sails and nets needed mending, and the stations themselves needed repair. Then, at dawn on the morning of June 15th, the men set out for the fishing grounds aboard the smacks, two men to a boat, with tackle and nets at their feet. They set their nets for nightfall when most of the fish would be caught, and returned in the morning to haul in the catches. This was the whitefish season, which lasted about five or six weeks, and then the pickerel fishing began.

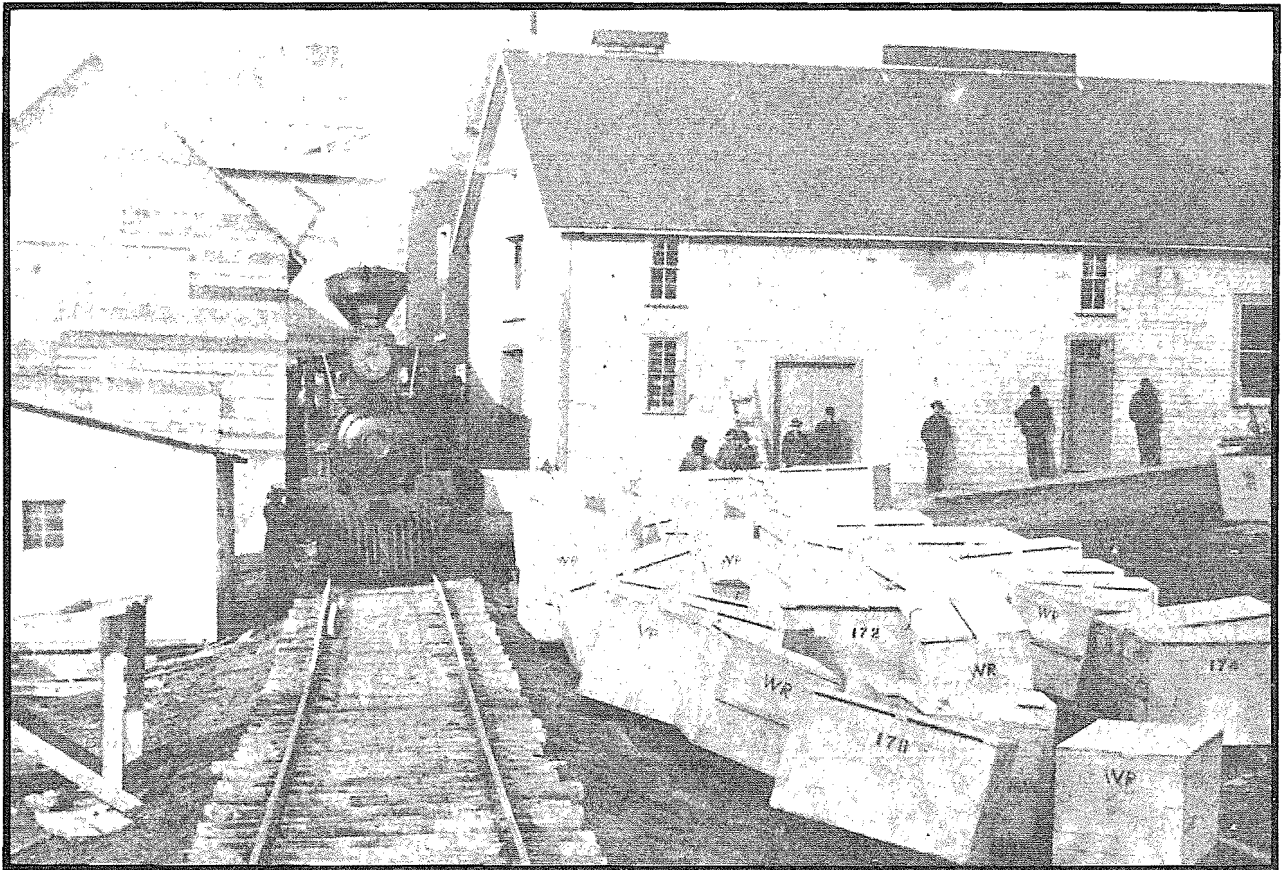
When the smack was full, the fishermen returned to the station. They discharged the fish into long sluices where Indian workmen waited to clean them before packing them loosely into boxes half-filled with ice and placing them in the freezing chambers.⁴⁵ Twice a week at the large stations, and once a week at the small ones, the steamer would pick up the cases. Each steamer was equipped with a freezer plant of its own, and few fish spoiled on the return trip to Selkirk. There the fish were placed in the storehouses, re-packed, refrozen and despatched across the continent aboard the special refrigerated boxcars of the C.P.R. During the winter season, the crews fished beneath the ice with gillnets and jiggers. This was cold work, but at least the temperature solved the problem of preserving the fish. Once the catch was crated, it was hauled by team to the nearest shipping point, which might be anywhere from 75 to 200 miles away. Not until the Great War were gasoline tractors used for the cartage work.

The routine lasted six days a week. On Sunday, some of the men simply rested and wrote letters to their wives or sweethearts. Others brought their coal oil cans and bottles from hiding, rosinned up their fiddle bows, and soon had their friends dancing jigs and reels. Still others, possessing more mischievous natures, delighted in playing prac-

tical jokes on the unsuspecting. Usually these were fairly mild pranks like placing dead fish in someone's bed or freezing a gold watch in a block of packing ice. On occasion, however, matters got out of hand, such as the time one unlikable fellow had his ankles tied with rope during the night and awoke to find himself dangling from the ceiling, or the time when one merryman ran Harry Seach's Sunday trousers up the flagpole, only to have the rope foul, making it impossible to retrieve the pants until there were only tatters left. Worse still, perhaps, was the incident involving a clever and industrious young man who manufactured a cheesecloth netting for around his bed to keep the vicious bulldog flies and mosquitoes at bay during the night. In the morning he was covered from head to toe in itchy, swelling bites from the cloud of mosquitoes that his comrades had generously added to his refuge while he slept.⁴⁶

Tragedy was just as much a part of life on the lakes. In the last week of August, 1906, the *City of Selkirk* steamed into port bearing the unbelievable news that the *Princess* had just gone down off Snake Island.⁴⁷ To many Selkirk residents, it seemed like an accident that should never have happened. The *Princess* had just taken on a load of fish from the Dominion Fish Company station at Poplar Point when she sprang a leak out on the lake. It was early evening and the crew was confident about repairing the damage. For the next three hours she took on water constantly, until Captain Hawes decided to turn back towards George's Island. By early morning the fireroom was filled with water and the wind was hard to the northwest. Then the water rose above the dampers on the boilers, killing the fires and stopping the engines. The *Princess* was adrift, in the worst sea the first mate had ever seen. Captain Hawes said he hoped to keep her afloat until daybreak, when the crew and passengers would have a better chance in the lifeboats. By 4 a.m. the hold was full and the mate instructed the

passengers to don their lifebelts and prepare to take to the boats. But, for reasons no one quite understood, the captain refused to give the order to abandon the boat. The two stewardesses and three of the passengers took the captain's actions to mean that there was no emergency, and they did not even put on lifebelts. By dawn, Captain Hawes and those who preferred to rely on his judgment were dead.



Captain William Robinson's warehouse on the docks at Selkirk, c.1900

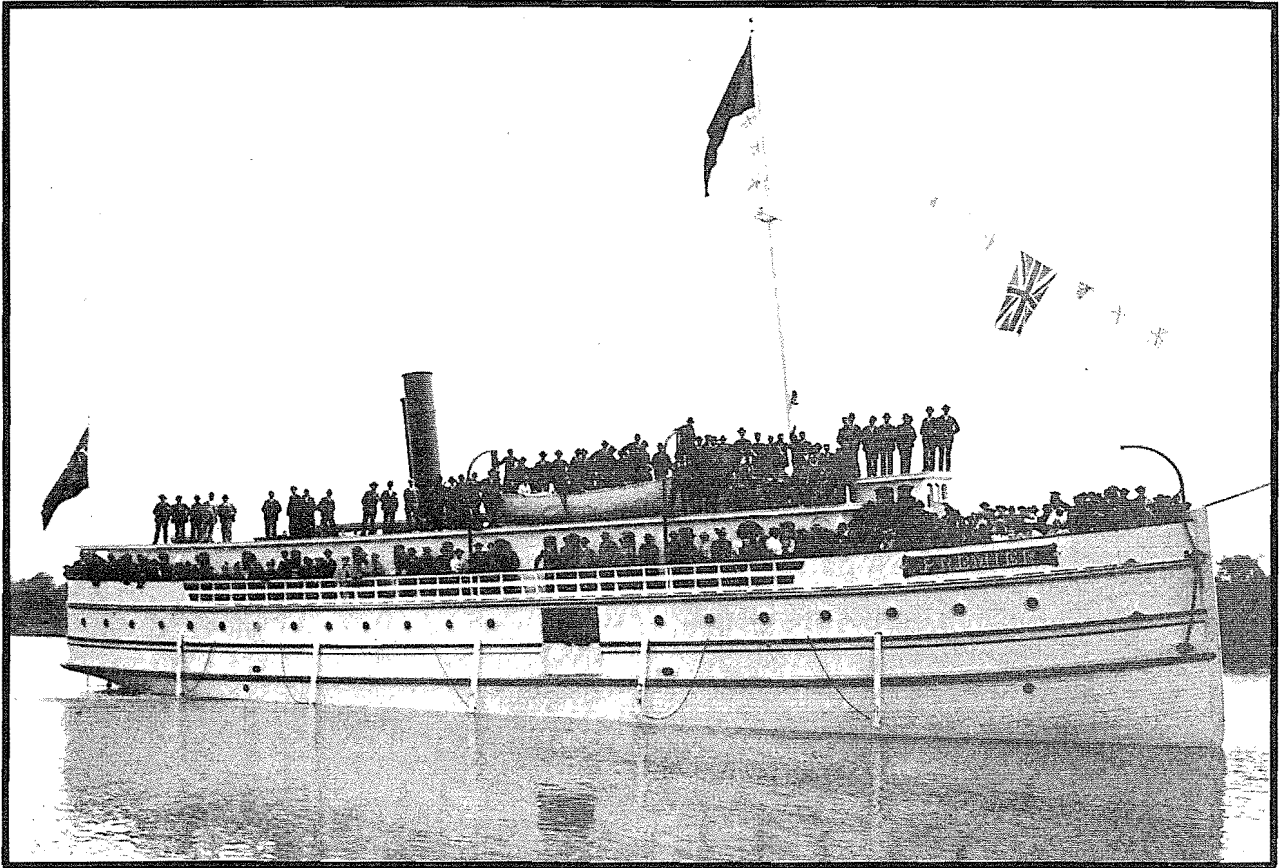
MANITOBA ARCHIVES

Two years later, almost to the day, the *Premier* burned at Warren's Landing with the loss of eight lives. The first reports of the disaster indicated the *Premier* had been caught in a heavy gale which she battled all day and half the night before being driven upon a reef where she capsized and caught on fire. As the investigation proceeded, however, a very different story emerged. The *Premier* had, in fact, been docked at Warren's Landing when she started to burn around midnight. Almost everyone on board was asleep, including the captain, John Stevens, who had given orders to leave for Selkirk at 4 a.m. A Dominion Fish watchman on shore first noticed the flames about 1 a.m., and as they burst through the roof of the vessel near the smokestack, it became apparent that the fire had been burning for quite some time before it became visible. Soon people could be seen madly scrambling across the decks to the safety of the water or to the deck of the tug *Idell* that was lying alongside. The dry wood of the cabins and the piles of cordwood in the hold and on the deck were kindling for the fire, and those who attempted to rescue passengers still asleep could get no closer than 25 feet to the intense heat of the flames. The stricken steamer broke from her moorings and drifted downstream a few hundred yards until she grounded on a shoal to the northward. There she burned for the next 14 hours, until enough water had poured in to drown the fire. In the first light of morning, a crew from Warren's Landing pumped the water out of the hull and searched for the remains of those who had been trapped on board. "All that remained of eight bodies were small portions of some of the bodies and a few handfuls of charred bones...these remains could only be identified from the places in which they were found."⁴⁸ Two passengers, the cook, a fisherman from Spider Island, a cook's mate, and three little boys perished in the blaze. The investigation that followed this tragedy only

deepened the grief of the families involved. It was learned that the only person on watch that night, the fireman, was fast asleep when the blaze started. No attempt was ever made to ring the alarm bell, no water had been pumped or even thrown on the flames, and little effort had been made to alert the 77 slumbering passengers before the heat from the blaze made this impossible. Worst of all, Captain Stevens seemed to be in a state of shock throughout the calamity, standing about "like a dead man and...giving no orders" to his disorganized crew.⁴⁹ His only action was to call to the skipper of the *Idell* to come alongside to take him off the burning boat. "When you got into that skiff," an investigator asked, "why did you not go round the *Premier* and see how bad the fire was and whether it could be put out? Too rattled to try were you?"⁵⁰ Stevens did not answer. He had been a captain only two months.

However grievous life on the lake might sometimes be, Selkirk residents remained proud that their town was the inland port of the entire west. Whether a man worked in the lumber camps at Bad Throat River, at a fishing station on George's Island, in Hod Gates's fish-packing barrel factory on the flats in Selkirk, or as a deckhand on one of the dredges, he could be confident he was doing vital work unavailable in any other prairie town. And, if editorials in the local paper and articles in booster pamphlets were to be believed, the lake country still contained more natural resources than the total number already being exploited. Best of all, the townspeople knew that the future trade in these resources would all flow into Selkirk, for the St. Andrew's Rapids—the only serious clot in the watery artery that flowed past the town—were situated upstream and effectively ruined Winnipeg's chances of participating in the lake traffic.

Since the mid-1880s Winnipeg businessmen had been trying to convince the Dominion government of the necessity of building a



The S.S. Premier, c.1907

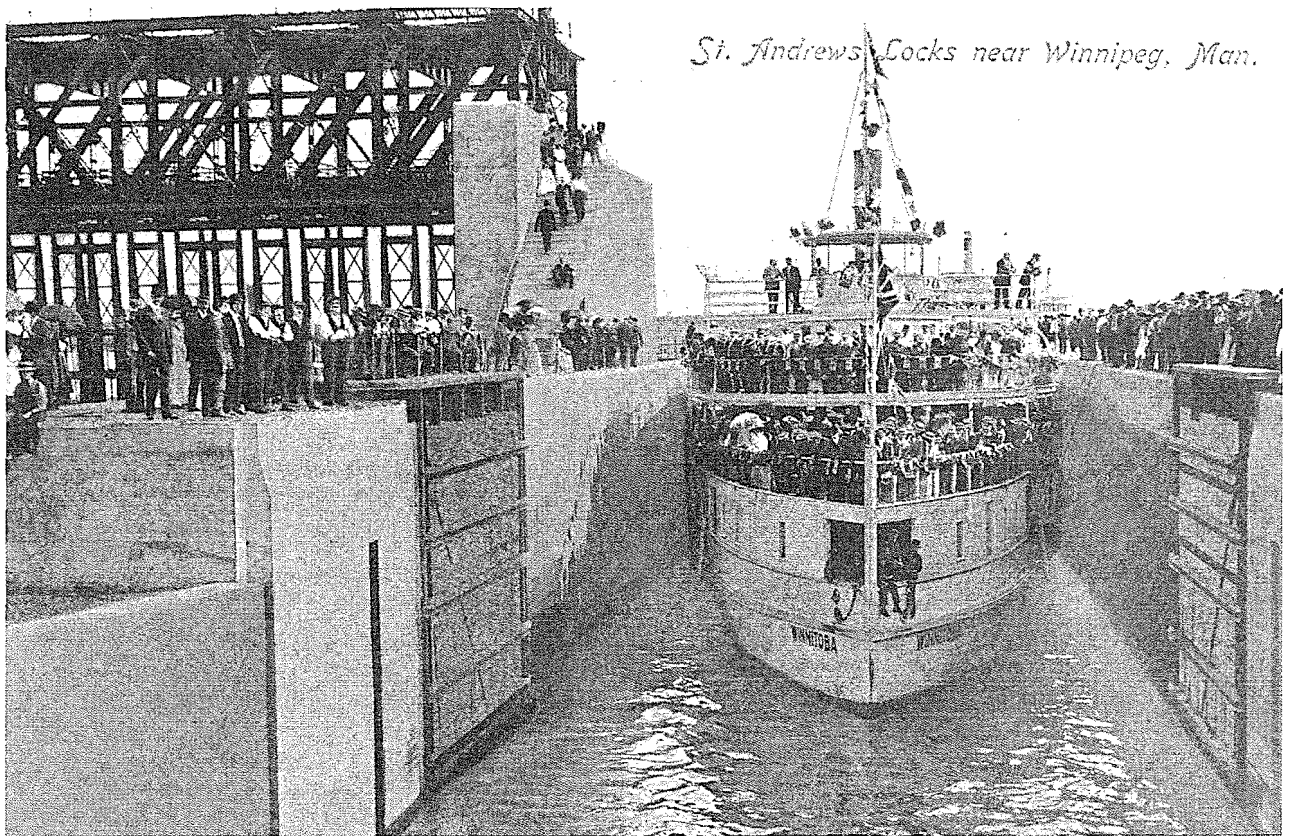
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lock-gate at St. Andrew's, or at least of dredging a deeper channel through the obstruction. Selkirk reacted by calling the project impractical due to cost, and unnecessary because of the excellent transshipment facilities offered by the C.P.R. in town. It was estimated that clearing the rapids would cost at least \$500,000, and the local editor felt this money would be better spent on government docks at Selkirk, and he initiated a petition to obtain as much local support as possible for this position.⁵¹ Ottawa tended to agree about the cost, and remained uncommitted to the locks project for the next decade, although the Winnipeggers seldom flagged in their lobbying.

In 1895 the Winnipeg Board of Trade doubled its efforts and attempted to secure a bonus of \$100,000 from the Manitoba legislature with which to entice the Dominion government.⁵² Before this could be accomplished, the federal Minister of Public Works announced that not only was the project too expensive, but it seemed the town of Selkirk did not favour the scheme. The government possessed petitions from the town council and from Selkirk citizens to prove this, and the federal member for Lisgar, A. W. Ross, confirmed that construction of the locks had never been an issue of importance in his constituency. Again the Winnipeggers changed tactics, stating that if the government would grant \$500,000 towards the cost of the project, the city would undertake the work itself. Dominion authorities merely replied that if the project were of such financial importance, then a private contractor or the city should be willing to attempt it without any government assistance. It was not until the general election of 1900, in fact, that Winnipeg made progress on the issue. As the editor of the *Selkirk Record* noted in October, "Mr. Kelly, the contractor for the building of the St. Andrew's locks, is down again fooling around the river banks, which is a sure sign that the elections are on."⁵³ In this instance, however,

the Dominion promises to construct the locks were more than political rhetoric, and before the decade was out the rapids were navigable.

It seemed that, once again, Winnipeg had outmanoeuvred Selkirk in a matter vital to the economic health of the little lake port. As it turned out, the Winnipeggers had no sooner won the prize than they lost interest in the contest.⁵⁴ A full year after the locks were completed, the city had still not built any docking facilities. One coal and wood dealer complained that he had brought a barge of lumber into the city, only to have to return to Selkirk and load it onto railcars for shipment to Winnipeg because of the lack of docks. With the same spirit of neglect, the city failed to provide accurate charts of the river, to establish important navigation aids, and to satisfactorily complete the locks. As a result, insurance rates on boats passing through the locks were exorbitant. As soon as river captains became aware of all these difficulties, the amount of traffic into Winnipeg fell off sharply. In Selkirk, by contrast, river traffic had risen greatly and lake business was up 25 per cent by 1912.⁵⁵ More men than ever before were engaged in the fishing industry, and plans were afoot to provide the town with a railway dry dock that would ensure that all boat repair work continued to be done at Selkirk. And of course, no other place along the river could afford boats the security of winter shelter that the famous West Slough could. "Selkirk," as the town editor noted in 1913, "will always continue to be the port of Canada's great inland waterways."⁵⁶



The Winnitoba passing through the lock-gate at St. Andrew's. 1912

PRIVATE COLLECTION