

CHAPTER FOUR

A New Industrial Era, 1911-1929

ON A COLD THURSDAY EVENING in January of 1911, members of the Selkirk Board of Trade assembled at the banquet-hall of the Merchant's Hotel for their ninth annual meeting.¹ It was to be a gala affair, befitting a community on the threshold of unparalleled progress, and special care had been taken to ensure its success. The organizers arranged an excellent menu and hired a city orchestra to entertain the guests during supper. Attendance was large. The Board had been recruiting new members at a furious pace, and on this occasion invited some 50 guests from various Winnipeg business associations to share their experiences in civic promotion. C. N. Bell, secretary of the Winnipeg Board of Trade, gave the keynote address in which he stressed the importance of harmonious effort, the application of sound business sense, and the avoidance of partisan political bickering as central ingredients of an effective commercial organization. But it was Charles Roland, commissioner of the spirited Winnipeg Industrial Bureau, who gave the most stirring speech of the evening. His topic was "The Helping Hand." "In order to obtain the results looked for," he said, "the helping hand must be extended by the community at large; and to be successful two things are necessary,

cooperation and confidence in the future."² In the years ahead, his advice became the guiding principle behind every action of the boosters as they led Selkirk away from dependence on the fishing fleets and into a new industrial era.

It was necessary to foster optimism among the townspeople if Selkirk were to become a progressive and prosperous community. Ever since the arrival of the electric railway, which brought the people of Selkirk into close contact with the attractions of Winnipeg (now a city of more than 136,000) for the first time, the town seemed split into two camps. There were those who could now see nothing but the dullness and limitations of smalltown life, and there were others who could envision a new age of solid growth and more cosmopolitan lifestyle built on modern technology and progressive thought. R. W. Stewart, inveterate town enthusiast that he was, sided with the forward-looking group and turned the *Weekly Record* into a powerful weapon of their cause. In his view, it was a veritable war between the 'boosters' and the 'knockers'.

This war to decide Selkirk's future was fought on many fronts. One of the first threats to growth that Stewart noticed was the loss of local revenue resulting from changing

shopping habits of the townspeople. When Selkirk was still a frontier community, the only menace to local merchants was the travelling pedlar who skulked through town with his wares each spring and fall. Such undesirable characters were usually run out of town by the local constable. But now the ease of transportation and the growth of free rural mail delivery offered the Selkirk and district shopper greater selection and competitive prices. In 1913 *The Commercial*, a leading business magazine published at Winnipeg, summed up this new trend.

In town and country, both men and women now want all kinds of merchandise. They want new fabrics and new styles: they want tropical fruits, breakfast foods, olives and delicacies of all kinds. If they don't find merchandise that they like at the home store, they will go to the city for it or order it from mail order houses.³

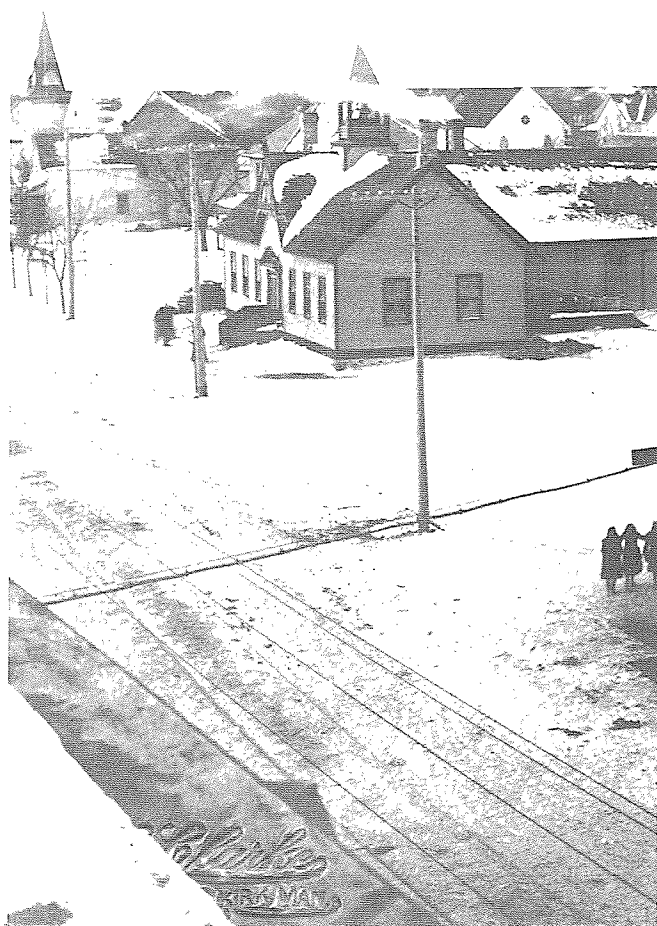
Soon every town and farm family had its own, well-thumbed Eaton's catalogue, from which to order vast quantities of merchandise that was not carried locally. The amount of money leaving the town can be grasped by a glance at the number and value of the money orders issued at the Selkirk post office. In 1902 about 800 money orders worth a little more than \$12,000 were issued; in 1908 (when free rural mail delivery began), 2,283 were issued at a cost of \$35,937.⁴ The average value of a money order remained about \$15, but three times as many people were purchasing them. This posed a genuine threat to local merchants and, of course, to the town itself.

These figures do not include the amount of money that was spent in Winnipeg by customers who travelled there aboard the W. S & L.W. As Stewart observed in 1909,

One loss of business, which we hear of so often, is the steadily growing practice of people going to Winnipeg for their merchandise. With such easy access as the electric line to the city, people may be seen alighting from every car laden with parcels...We believe that full half

of our people have acquired the habit of scanning the departmental store advertisements in the daily papers and frequently make special trips to the city for 'bargains'.⁵

Stewart tried to convince his readers that once the railway fare and the cost of meals eaten in the city were added to the value of the merchandise, it was no less expensive than goods



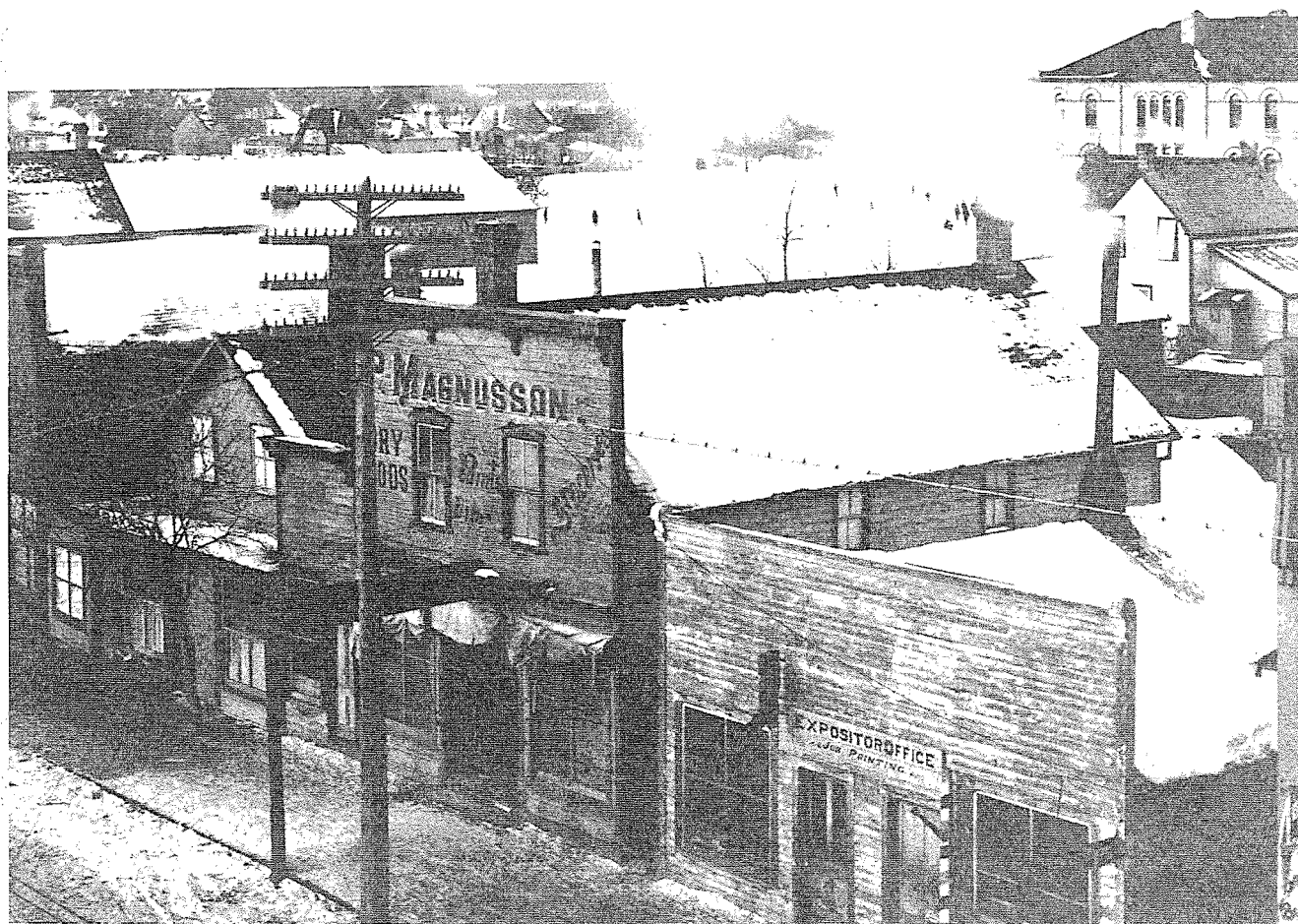
West Selkirk, Manitoba, c.1910

which were sold in Selkirk stores. At the same time, however, he found it difficult to show much sympathy for many town merchants, who seemed to believe the problem would go away if they ignored it.

They quietly submit to the inevitable, and think advertising a burden and unnecessary expense. If they get in a shipment of goods

nobody but themselves and the railroad company knows anything about it. They take pot-luck at having people call to see what they have in their store. As for prices, it is a crime to divulge them. Is it any wonder people are lured away by outside firms.⁶

In time, some of the larger businesses in town, such as Robinson's, Bullock's, and Shepard

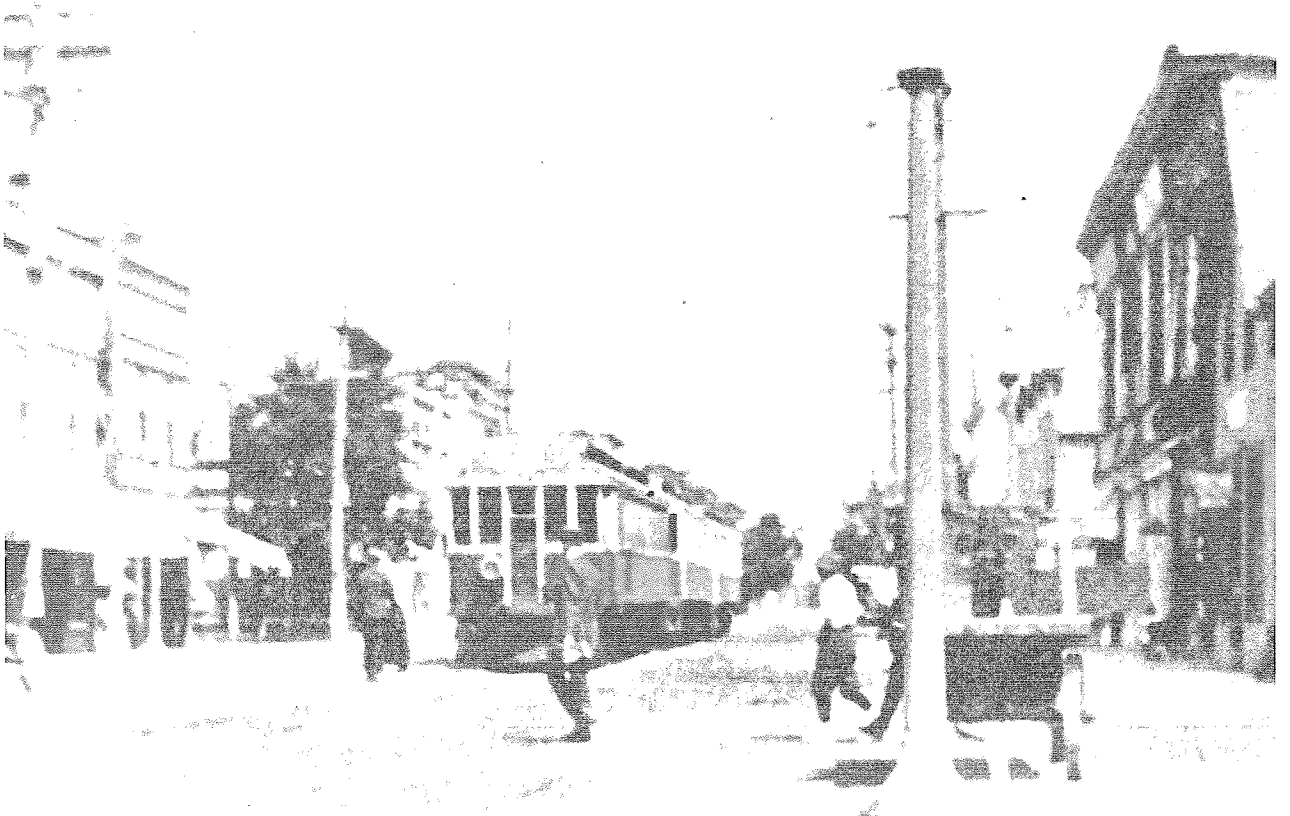


PUBLIC ARCHIVES CANADA



Eveline Street in 1913

MANITOBA ARCHIVES



W.S. & L.W. car on Eveline Street in 1919

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and Peers, did run sale advertisements in the *Record*, the first of their kind, and gradually the newspaper gave over much of its space to full-page notices about new merchandise and weekly sale items.

While Selkirk merchants learned to recapture wayward customers, local entrepreneurs attempted to boost the town's attractiveness in novel ways. The Board of Trade was in the vanguard of this movement. Since 1902, in fact, it had been advertising Selkirk in Winnipeg newspapers, in popular western periodicals and in special publicity numbers issued by the *Weekly Record*. By 1906, it was printing small booklets that extolled the virtues of Selkirk and area, such as the town's links with the untapped resources of Lake Winnipeg and the vast unsettled farm lands of the district. The content of these booklets changed with the times. One 1913 booklet, for example, concentrated on the inexpensive industrial power and abundant recreational facilities available at Selkirk, an obvious indication of the tremendous impact of the W. S. & L.W. These were all handsome publications, and their smartness was due, in large measure, to the work of Bruce Campbell, Selkirk's own public relations officer. His services were acquired in 1910, when the Board of Trade announced that "our citizens should wake up, get busy, boost Selkirk and secure a share of the wave of prosperity which is now passing over the west,"⁷ and recommended employment of a publicity agent as a first step in that campaign. The Board contributed \$1000 towards his salary, the town council matched this, and other citizens subscribed an additional \$1945.⁸ Nothing could have illustrated the growing town spirit more concretely, for the Board had indicated that only \$2500 was required.

The Board of Trade might make endless recommendations about Selkirk's needs and might, from time to time, persuade government officials to assist a local scheme or two, but it was the town council that possessed the

spending power needed to implement most development plans. Urged by the Board of Trade and by many other concerned citizens to take a progressive view of civic affairs, the councillors began to take small but necessary steps to modernize the town further. Beginning in 1910, they provided funds for the gradual replacement of all the rotting and decrepit wooden sidewalks in the business area with up-to-date granolithic walks.⁹ In 1911 they talked the Dominion government into providing street letterboxes in various parts of town, making it possible for the first time to mail a letter without walking all the way to the post office.¹⁰ Swift rail transportation into Winnipeg boosted the fortunes of local market gardeners, and in 1912 the councillors purchased a larger market site west of Main Street.¹¹ They acquired a gravel pit in the same year to provide for better street maintenance¹² And they passed the town's first building code to regulate the sort of construction that might take place in Selkirk for, as Stewart commented, "the haphazard, do-as-you please in the way of building will not go any longer."¹³ The councillors even solicited the advice of Professor A. A. Stoughton of the University of Manitoba architecture school on the development of a comprehensive town planning scheme. Among the recommendations that came out of these discussions were the numbering of all houses in town, the immediate acquisition of land for future streets and avenues, the provision of increased playground facilities for children, and the relocation of the W. S. & L.W. tracks from Eveline to Main Street, which would be divided by a grand boulevard in the manner of Winnipeg's Broadway Avenue.¹⁴

While it seems doubtful the councillors proceeded with all these recommendations, they did take steps to ensure better transportation links between Selkirk and other communities. Automobiles were becoming more and more common, and by 1912 Charlie Cornish had opened Selkirk's first garage.

where he handled mechanical repairs, sold gasoline and operated what was probably the town's first taxi service.¹⁵ R. W. Stewart eagerly noted the acquisition of each and every auto in town in his social column, boasted continually that "our 'honk-honk' family is steadily growing,"¹⁶ and ventured that "the next thing in order will be for some of our citizens to invest in a flying machine."¹⁷

With more sobriety, the councillors and the Board of Trade concerned themselves with improvement of the road system. As early as 1911 a rumour had been circulating about a planned 16-foot paved road between Winnipeg and Selkirk, and two years later the widening of Main Street was nearly completed. Once gravelled, this all-weather highway greatly increased the amount of motorized traffic between Selkirk and the city. And, as the number of cars in town increased, the council found it necessary to pass bylaws regulating the behavior of motorists. To the consternation of the town constable, the councillors decided upon four different speed limits: fifteen miles per hour in the outer limits of town, six m.p.h. in the business district, ten m.p.h. around corners, and four m.p.h. at all intersections.¹⁸

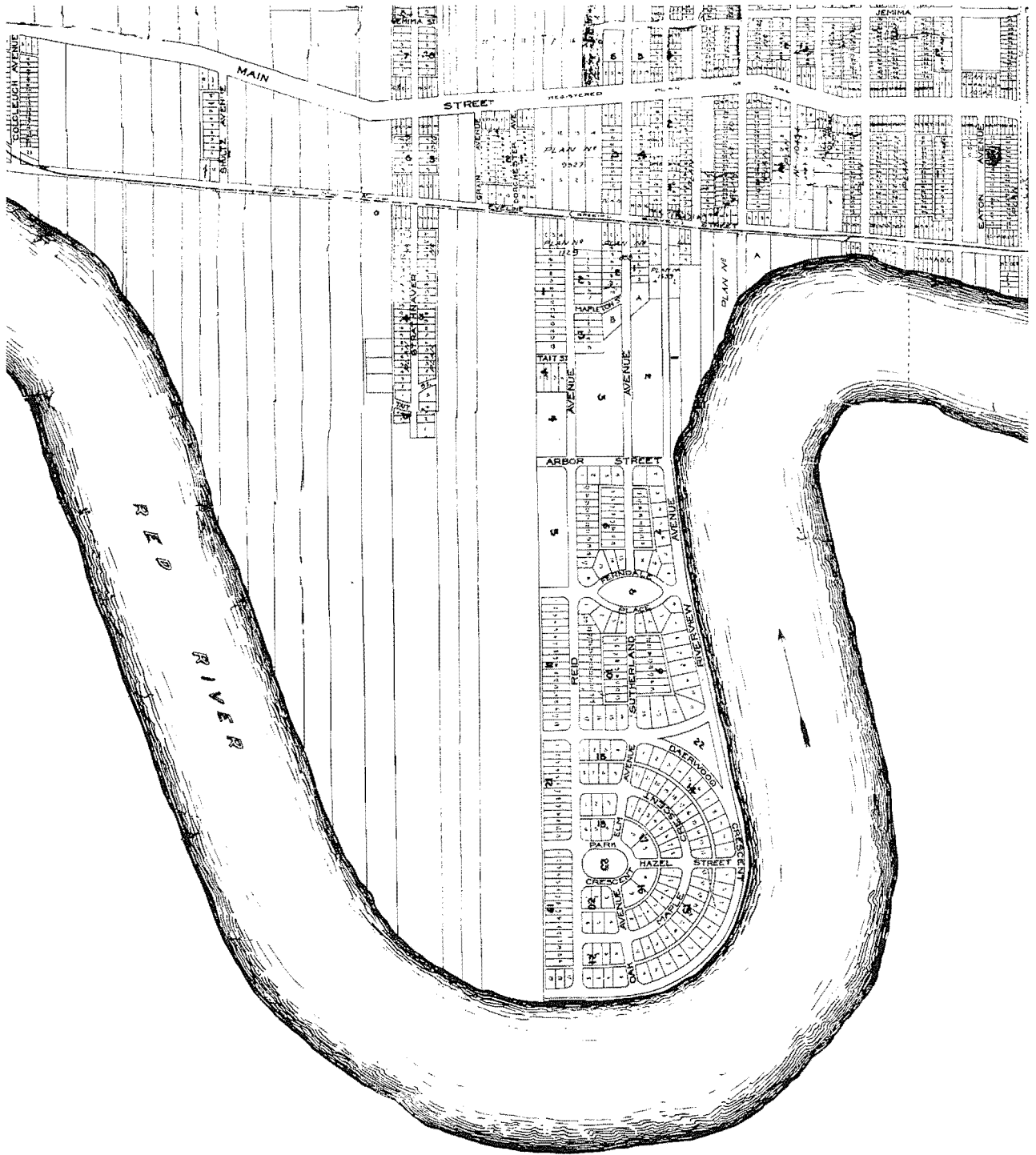
With all these demands on its treasury, the town welcomed the efforts of private land development companies to create the new Selkirk. One of the earliest, and certainly the best-known of these concerns, was the Selkirk Land and Investment Company. It was started by R. C. Moody, J. Grisdale, F. A. Gemmel, D. G. Ross, Robert Bullock, J. Maillhot, D. Morrison, E. F. Comber, and F. Kochen around 1904 to take advantage of the land boom that was anticipated along the route of the W. S & L.W. railway.¹⁹ The principals of the company purchased all available farm land and residential property between Winnipeg and Selkirk at still low prices for resale at what were termed "reasonable" rates once the boom began.

The most infamous scheme of the Selkirk

Land and Investment Company was its development of a northern half of Sugar Point as a prime summer-cottage community. In one of its lavish advertisements, the company referred to this location as

the most ideal spot that Nature has placed for the suburban homes of Manitoba's citizens within the confines of the Province. This plot has been surveyed by the foremost landscape architects of Manitoba, has been gone over inch by inch, winter and summer, and every advantage of Nature has been combined with the principles of modern, expert town-planning to arrive at an ideal plan. One half of the lots front on Red River; the others face concentric avenues that parallel or look onto the river at some point of its majestic sweep around Sugar Point.²⁰

This beautifully-designed subdivision was created with the desires of wealthy Winnipeggers in mind, and several of the promoters actually built substantial summer cottages on the site to attract other buyers. To ensure a certain standard of quality, the company stipulated that any cottage constructed there had to be worth at least \$1000. The promoters even sponsored a contest to name the subdivision, and in 1912 the prize of \$50 was awarded for the name 'Daerwood Park'. There was only one problem with this "vast old English estate," as the promoters liked to call it. Almost every spring ice drifting down the Red would jam at Sugar Island and flood the low-lying land behind it, including nearly all of Daerwood Park. Those who purchased lots in the new subdivision got more than their fair share of river frontage.



The ill-fated Daerwood Park sub-division, 1912

RANDY ROSTECKI

Selkirk's other major land development company was formed in June of 1913. Appropriately called the Selkirk Development Company Limited, this firm was closely affiliated with the Selkirk Land and Investment Company.²¹ Its officers included C. W. N. Kennedy, D. G. Ross, H. B. Stiles, F. A. Gemmel, L. S. Vaughan, G. Shepard, Bruce Campbell, A. J. Norquay and G. M. Newton.²² The company announced that its authorized capitalization was \$500,000, and that it intended to promote local manufacturing as well as the development and sale of its extensive land holdings. While this was true enough, it would have been more to the point to say the company was specifically interested in bringing the Manitoba Rolling Mills to town and in developing and selling adjacent residential properties to the mill workers.

Negotiations between the Manitoba Rolling Mills and the Selkirk Board of Trade (many of whose members later became officers of the Selkirk Development Company) began in late 1912 or early 1913.²³ The iron works firm had outgrown its St. Boniface plant site, and was actively seeking a new industrial location and a bonus of \$250,000 to cover the cost of relocation. Local businessmen immediately formed the Selkirk Development Company, bought up 450 acres on the southern outskirts of town, and offered the Rolling Mills a free 30-acre site on which to build. At the same time the town council, no doubt encouraged by Mayor D. G. Ross, approved a bylaw that granted the firm a 40 per cent reduction of its property taxes for a period of 12 years, in exchange for the company's assurance that it would employ at least 15 local people.²⁴ The deal was concluded on these terms, and by June the *Weekly Record* was proudly announcing "the birth of a new industrial era for our town."²⁵

Construction began in October of 1913. The work proceeded swiftly throughout the winter months, and by February the 16-inch mill of the Manitoba Rolling Mills Company

and the nine-inch mill of its subsidiary, Manitoba Nut and Bolt Works, were completed, together with buildings that housed the immense furnaces, a coal pulverizing plant, scrap shed, machine shop and offices. The installation of machinery followed, and the firm anticipated that the mills would be operative by June 1st. Soon, as one enthusiastic booster observed, "the wheels of a great new factory...will begin to turn out their product, giving employment to hundreds, where there existed before neither work nor people. This is progress, and Selkirk wants more of it."²⁶

Such rapid progress created a serious housing shortage in town. Usually winter was a dull time for local building contractors, but during the winter of 1913-14 their tradesmen logged many long, cold hours in an attempt to meet the demand caused by the influx of mill workers. Late in January the Selkirk Development Company placed its residential properties near the mill on the market and by April nearly one-quarter were sold. The sale of these lots supplied the Selkirk Development Company with funds to meet the \$250,000 bonus requirement of its agreement with the Rolling Mills. As the company's first annual report indicated, "inasmuch as this subdivision will undoubtedly be the one most directly benefitted on account of its proximity to the mills a comparatively large proportion of the bonus and site obligation had to be charged to this subdivision."²⁷ Additional residential properties came onto the market as the Selkirk Land and Investment Company developed sites somewhat farther north, in the subdivision called Strathnaver Park. For three dollars a foot and up, purchasers were assured beautifully-treed and serviced lots immediately adjacent to "the high-class and most desirable residential portion of Selkirk, its de luxe South-end."²⁸ This was the most rapid residential development in Selkirk's history, and it shifted the town's centre of gravity to the

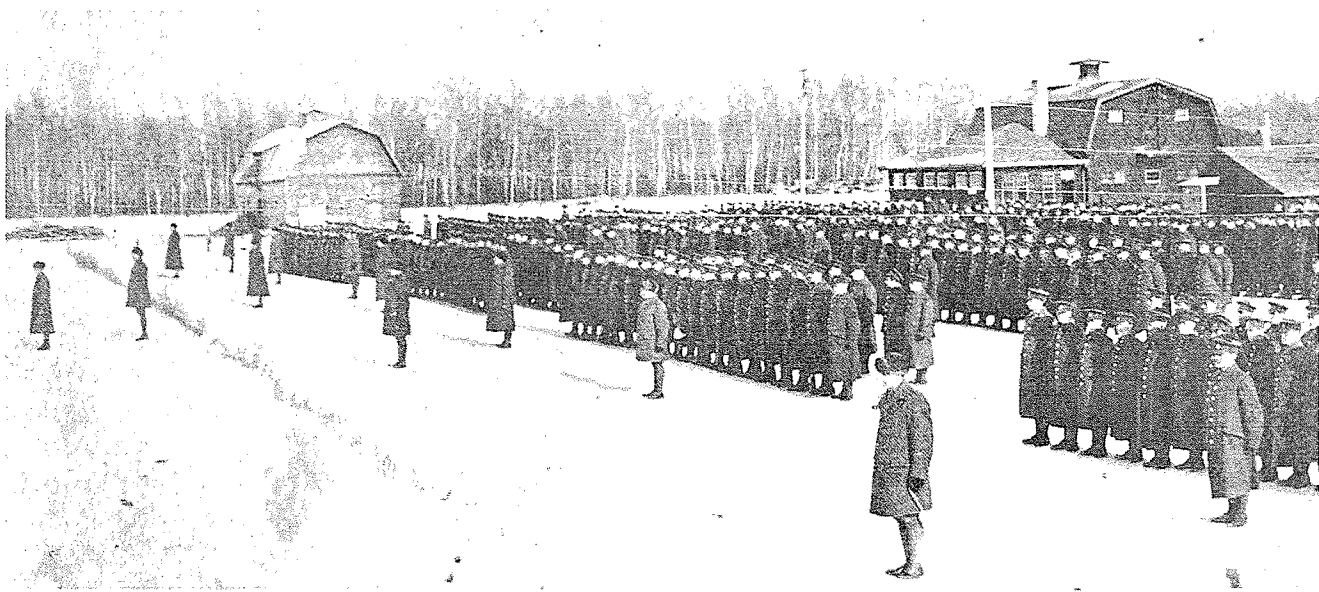
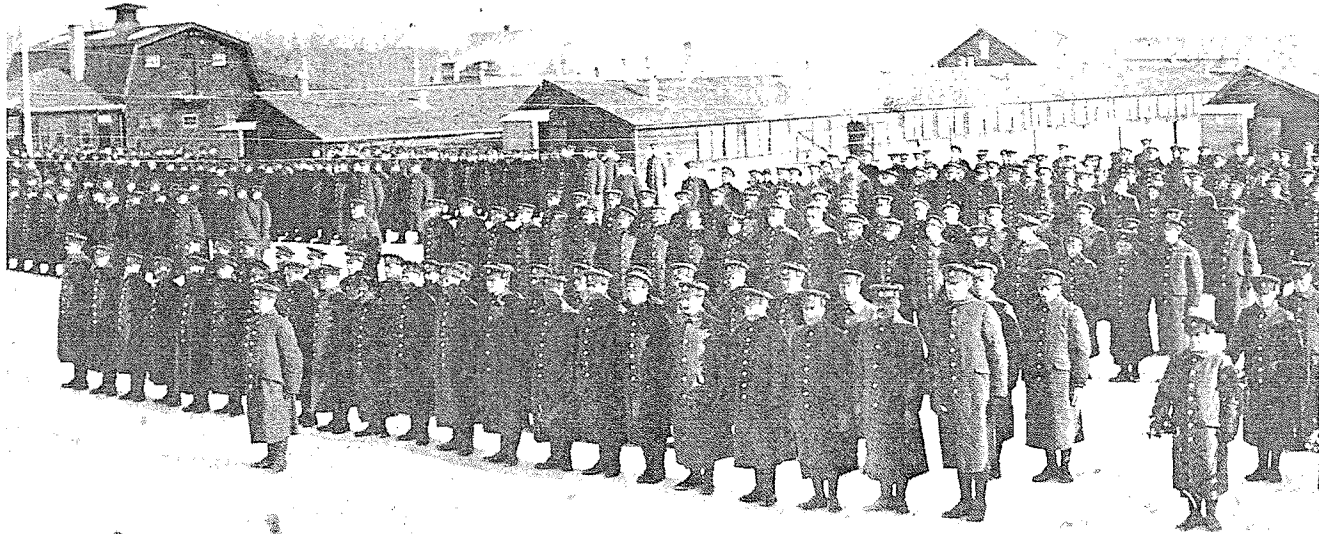
south overnight.

Manitoba Rolling Mills was quickly nearing its official opening when, on August 4th, Great Britain formally declared war on Germany and plunged Canada into the European struggle. On August 6th the Canadian Minister of Militia issued the first call for volunteers to form an overseas contingent, and on the following day the Mills laid off all its construction workers.²⁹ The townspeople were very interested in the European developments and local newspaper vendors could hardly meet the demand for the latest war bulletins. In the streets, in the hotels and at home all the talk was of war, and it was with patriotic enthusiasm that residents agreed that Britain's course was the right one and that Germany would undoubtedly get the worst of it in battle. Not just the young were excited. Those oldtimers who could well remember the conflicts of their day, the Crimean War, the Riel insurrection and the more recent Boer War, trotted out their recollections once again and regaled all who would listen. One Fenian raid veteran announced his readiness to march to the front if his services were needed, and quickly added that he would be willing to supply his own horse.³⁰ Others, who dared to raise a voice in support of Germany, received nothing but denunciation from their fellow citizens. R. W. Stewart remarked that it was with deep regret that local people heard Selkirk's loyalty to the Crown being "sullied by a number of individuals who are a disgrace to the country in which they make a living. Men of that stamp are no good to any country, and the sooner Canada is rid of them the better."³¹ By Christmas, when the news from the front seemed encouraging, nearly everyone was confidently predicting the war would be over within a year.

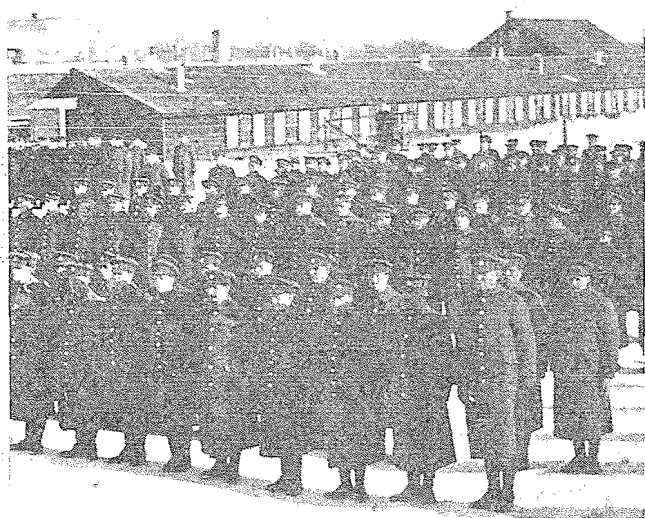
There was no shortage of volunteers at Selkirk. Two young graduates of the local nursing school were among the first to enlist, and in 1915 a third girl joined them. Young men signed up daily, and in 1915 a local battalion,

the 108th, was formed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel G. H. Bradbury, who had long served as Selkirk's Member of Parliament. These soldiers, who were under the direct supervision of Major W. T. Colcleugh of Selkirk and Captain G. C. McLean of Winnipeg, were stationed at W. L. Parrish's Red Feather Farm, just off Eveline Street. Because of the large chicken barn on the site, the battalion adopted the symbol of a rooster, or fighting cock, for its badge. Although the unit was broken up after going overseas in September of 1916, it was the only Canadian regiment ever to have 'Selkirk, Manitoba' on its cap badge.³² Those Selkirk residents who remained at home contributed as much as they could to the war effort. They organized a Patriotic Fund to assist the families of enlisted men, held countless 'patriotic' bonspiels, dances, teas and other social events, rolled bandages, knitted socks and parcelled clothing for the Red Cross, and, before the war was over, contributed \$200,300 to the Victory Bonds campaign. Even the youngsters joined in, forming a cadet league and drill-marching all over town at every opportunity.

Local reformers, convinced that alcoholic intemperance was somehow related to the protracted conflict in Europe, once again launched a campaign to bring prohibition to Selkirk. A similar effort could be found in almost every prairie town in 1916, but in Selkirk the "debauchery" of the 108th Battalion made it imperative that action be taken. Conditions were so extreme that in February of 1916 the provincial liquor commissioners held hearings into the state of the liquor traffic in town. They found ample evidence of repeated drunkenness among both the soldiers and the civilians. Dr. Ross, who was also the mayor, testified that he had had patients who died of delirium tremens; others who had fallen from their bunks when drunk and suffered serious ruptures and, in one case, death; and still others who had collapsed in



The 108th Batallion at the Red Feather Farm in early 1916

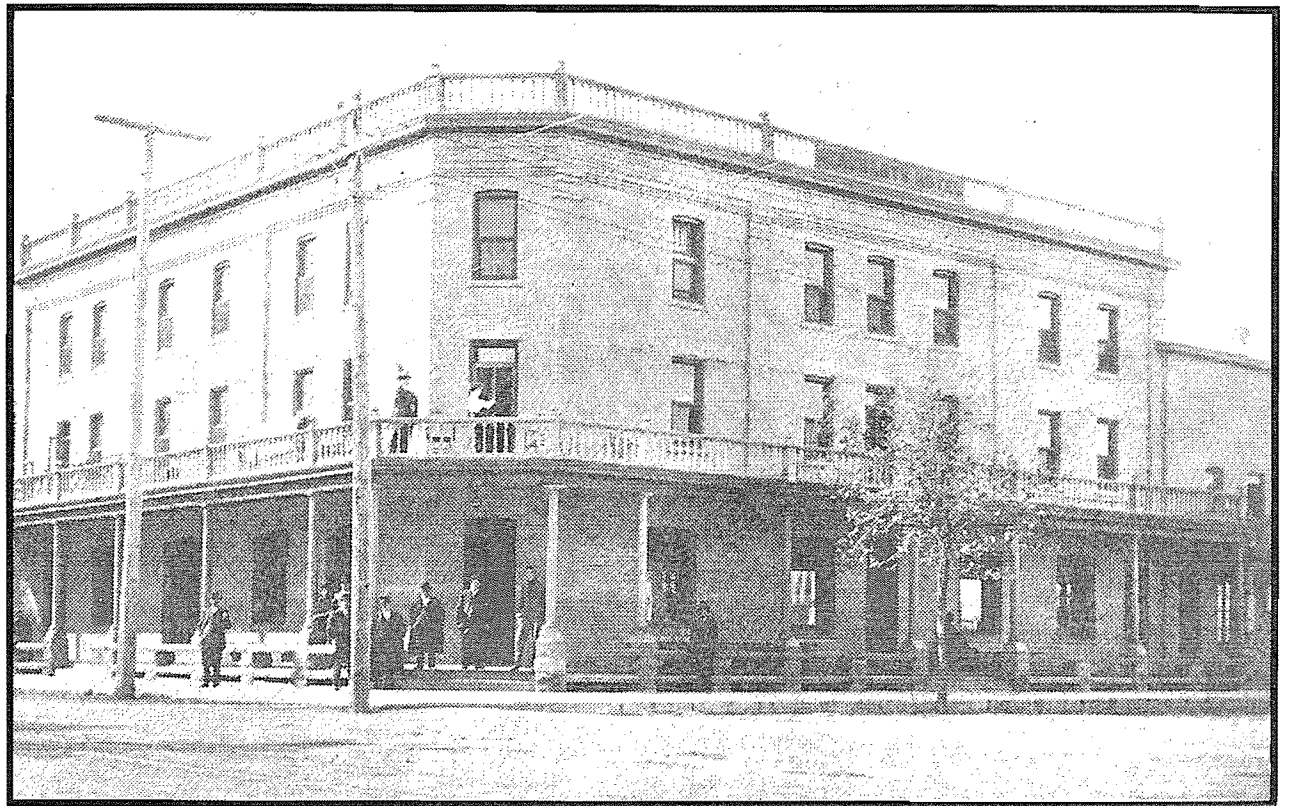


WILLIAM HALL

the snow after a session at the bar, only to lose both hands to frostbite.³³ Other witnesses recalled drunks lying unconsciously across the roadways at midnight, the need for military police on each W. S & L.W. car leaving town, the 'uncivilized' behavior of soldiers at the library where a bar had been fitted up in the basement, and the ease with which the hotel-keepers dispensed liquor to anyone with the money to pay for it. As a result of the government's enquiry, the Merchant's and Canadian Pacific Hotels had an additional two weeks' suspension of their liquor licences, and the wholesaling store of Goldberg and Arnsowsky received its first two-week suspension. As the March referendum on prohibition drew nearer, the Board of Trade endorsed the temperance platform, claiming that it would work in the best interests of the town. The vote in March showed the degree to which the residents agreed with this stand: 424 cast ballots in favour of temperance, only 153 voted against it.³⁴ Once again, Selkirk was a dry town.

Perhaps this reforming zeal at home had something to do with the contrast between the boys of the 108th Battalion and their counterparts in the trenches overseas. While the young men stationed at Selkirk spent their \$1.10 a day on entertainment down at the bars or at the dance pavilion in the park, those fighting overseas were going through an unimaginable hell. Some, when writing home to their parents, tried to put their predicament in a favourable light:

Being under fire is not so bad as one would imagine, and it is surprising how soon one gets used to the bullets hitting the sand bags which form the parapets of the trenches; even though they come so close that the earth is thrown all over one. As our fellows say (and quite right too)...you don't hear the bullet that hurts you.³⁵



The Merchant's Hotel, 1913

MANITOBA ARCHIVES

Others, like Corporal H. C. Fryer, found it difficult to be philosophical about the horrors they saw. "It is an awful strain on one's nerves," he wrote home,

dodging shells and bullets, and seeing friends knocked out, for three days and nights. None of us got a minute's rest during all that time. The [enemy] trenches were so close that we were blowing each other up with hand bombs.³⁶

The glory of the war tarnished quickly as the lists of casualties began to pour in, and those with sons and daughters at the front approached each new list with an inescapable sense of dread. In the spring of 1915 Sapper H. R. Gilhuly became the first Selkirk boy to die in action, and his obituary was soon followed by a legion of others: Arthur Couture, Walter Taylor, Alex Sinclair, John Clark, Alfred Kennedy, Kenneth Asham, and many more. The list of dead was long. Countless others were wounded. In April of 1917 alone, 27 men of the 108th received wounds at the front. Before the conflict was finally over, 156 Selkirk and district boys were dead.

Appreciation of the efforts of the Selkirk recruits was high among the townspeople, and as early as 1917 they organized a Selkirk Returned Soldiers' Association to welcome the veterans and to arrange housing and employment for them. When the Armistice was declared in 1918, they hastily made preparations for a victory parade, only to have their efforts stymied by an outbreak of the Spanish flu. The entire town literally closed its doors until this epidemic, which had enveloped the whole world, passed. No public meetings were permitted, and people were encouraged to remain at home. Both doctors came down with the flu, and for nearly two months Selkirk was a quarantined town. Finally, in early December, the townspeople had recovered sufficiently to take part in the parade. On a Wednesday night a long procession of men and boys bearing torches marched through the main streets and on to the central school

grounds where a huge bonfire was lighted and an effigy of the Kaiser burned. The crowd waited for the fire to die down, and then retired to Pearson's Hall to hold a final patriotic meeting.³⁷

In July of 1919, after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, a peace parade of grander proportions was held. Everyone turned out to watch the marching bands, the boys in uniform, the horsedrawn floats and the sporting events that followed. In the evening a huge dance was held in the park and loudly brilliant fireworks, like the last exploding shells, ended the celebration. In November of 1918 Stewart had remarked that "we have so long been steeling ourselves by saying 'cheer up, the worst is yet to come,' that we have forgotten the right phrase now is 'Rejoice, it is all over.'"³⁸ On that summer day in the park, their relief was almost palpable.



Armistice Day Parade, July 1919

MANITOBA ARCHIVES



Armistice Day Parade, 1919 [July]

MANITOBA ARCHIVES

While the war was over, its effects lingered, casting a heavy pall over the town. "The star in the industrial horizon, which shone so brightly in the spring of 1914...dimmed almost to extinction during the following dark years of war and business stagnation."³⁹ Both the Manitoba Rolling Mills and the Manitoba Foundry, which had been built across the street in 1916, found their orders falling off after the war and had no choice but to lay off many men. Out-of-town buying, which had been a serious concern even in prosperous times, became a threat to the continuation of many businesses in the post-war depression, and prompted many storekeepers to band together in a Retail Merchants Association to boost local business.⁴⁰ The fishing industry appears to have undergone similar stress due to falling prices, and by 1922 only the Northern Fish Company and the North West Navigation Company were working out of Selkirk. The seriousness of the general workers' strike at Winnipeg in 1919 added to the social malaise, and fear spread that the same thing might happen in Selkirk. A committee formed to ration staple foodstuffs, the newly-organized Great War Veterans' Association agreed to maintain law and order if local conditions deteriorated, and special constables were sworn in to prevent vandalism.⁴¹ No one could recall a period of similar unrest, economic instability and general uneasiness. R. W. Stewart, as baffled as his fellow citizens, observed that

there seems to be a strange, apathetic condition prevalent just now, that is very hard to account for, and the deeper one digs for the reason, the harder it seems to get at the solution. It cannot altogether be due to hard times consequent on the war, the present state of unrest, or the prevalence of unemployment....Hand in hand with this want of interest in the serious questions of the day, there is, especially amongst the young people, an everlasting craving for amusement, for things that are superficial and only benefit for the moment, things that affect the wel-

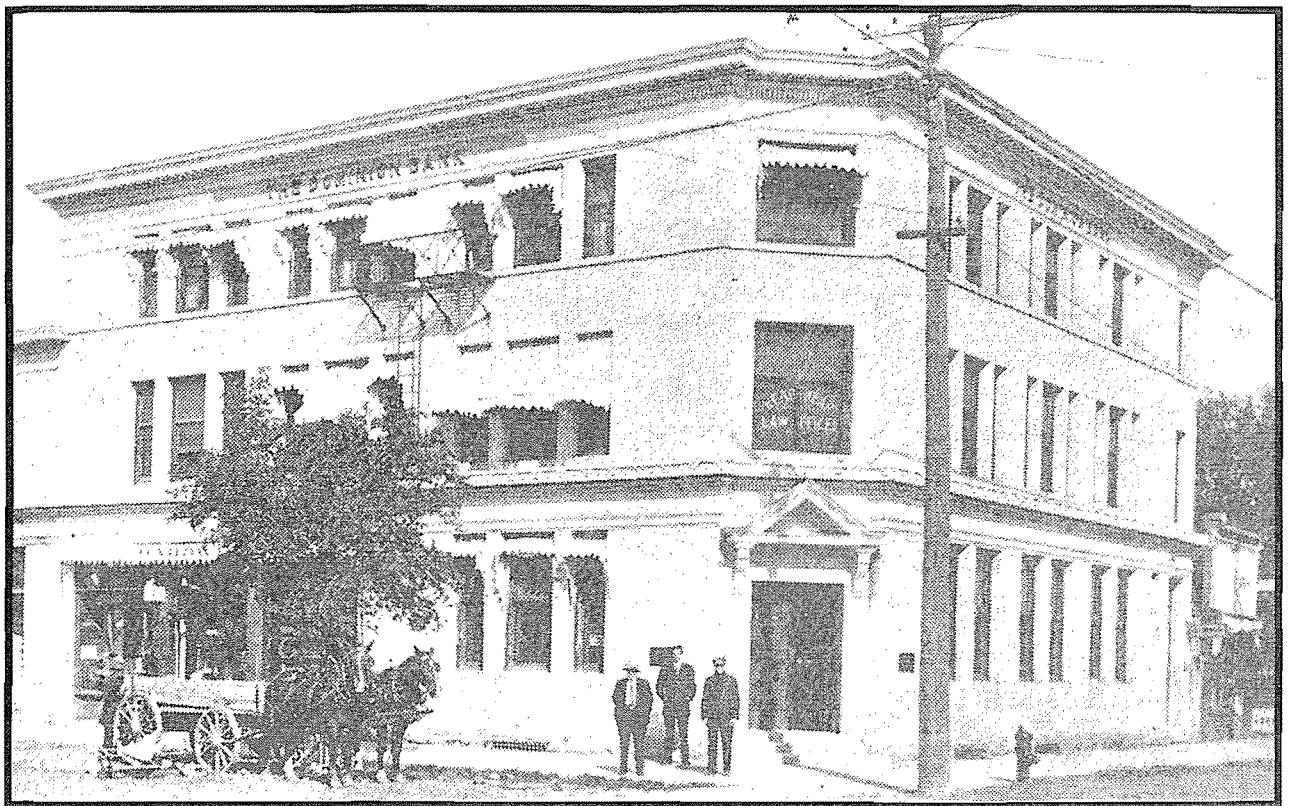
fare of the individual and the present and future prosperity of the country, are allowed to go by the board.⁴²

Adding to the troubles of the town was a new debt crisis. The expansion of municipal services prior to the Great War left Selkirk with a debt of \$260,000⁴³ Industry's slump and the rise in unemployment made it impossible to collect sufficient tax revenue to meet the interest on the outstanding indebtedness. The Dominion Bank, acting on behalf of most of the creditors, refused to advance Selkirk enough money to meet its basic expenses. The town council had no choice but to reduce drastically its costs and those of the school board. Salaries were slashed, work and maintenance crews were reduced in size, burned-out street lamps were replaced with lower wattage bulbs, teachers were dismissed, tax sales were held, and many planned projects were simply abandoned. H. M. Outhwaite, the town's secretary-treasurer, worked assiduously with the provincial government to get that body to guarantee payment of \$75,000 of the debt, an amount sufficient to persuade the bank to reopen a line of credit.⁴⁴

Fortunately, the depression did not last much beyond 1923. Signs of recovery were apparent even earlier. In 1921 the General Utility Company built a factory for the manufacture of automobile tire chains, the Western Chemical Company opened an office at the corner of Main and Manitoba, the Canadian Insulation Factory, which manufactured "Sealofelt" insulation from flaxstraw, expanded its operation, many places of business were remodelled, a new telephone exchange building went up on Manitoba, and rumours began circulating about imminent construction of a large Imperial Oil plant in town. During the next year George Simpson's fish-box factory, which had been in operation since 1916, diversified into dressing rough lumber for local customers. Slowly the housing industry recovered, the ill-fated cottages

Selkirk The First Hundred Years

of Daerwood Park were relocated to Main Street, and several sports-minded residents looked into the possibility of developing the southern half of Sugar Point into a golf course to boost tourist traffic from Winnipeg.



The Dominion Bank, Selkirk, 1913

MANITOBA ARCHIVES



Looking west on Manitoba Avenue in 1923

WILLIAM HALL



Looking east on Manitoba Avenue in the summer of 1924

WILLIAM HALL

It was the election of P. J. Smith to the mayor's chair in 1923, however, that seemed to signal the beginning of another prosperous era in Selkirk. Smith was the general manager of Manitoba Rolling Mills, and his election certainly made clear the importance of that industry to the local economy. In recent years there had been much dissatisfaction with the manner in which civic affairs were conducted, and everyone pointed to the debt crisis as the chief example of administrative incompetence. When D. J. Black, who had been treasurer of the town for six and a half years, resigned suddenly at the height of the crisis because he felt his recommendations were completely ignored by the councillors, the townspeople's suspicions of maladministration seemed confirmed.⁴⁵ Smith, by contrast, seemed to embody good business sense and strong administrative ability. When the election was over, Stewart wrote about the old divisiveness.

Looking back we must all admit that we have not been pulling together, and the town had been split up, more or less into factions, with the result that when trouble came, we were not a united whole to meet it, and if this state of affairs had continued, it could only have lead to one ending and that is disaster.⁴⁶

The election, he said, cleared the air and joined the townspeople under the banner of Selkirk boosterism.

Apart from this restoration of community pride, the election changed little. Certainly it did not bring about a radically new sort of civic administration. It was not that P. J. Smith and his councillors were lacklustre administrators, but rather that heavy industries like the Mills and the Foundry tended to create their own growth momentum in town. They generated local boosterism through the capture of distant markets, the expansion of industrial capacity, and the employment of hundreds of local men. Once the mill's 40 per cent property tax exemption expired in 1925, the firm contributed even more substantially

to the town coffers. Councillors and rate-payers alike found their role in civic affairs diminishing as time passed. Their boosterism was not merely less effective than that of the big companies; it was largely unnecessary. The mills were to this second generation of Selkirkers what the big fishing companies had been to their parents: all-powerful, benevolent, and indispensable. Whether or not the townspeople realized it, their autonomy was eroding.

It was impossible not to notice the mills as one approached Selkirk from the south along the W. S & L.W. line or by automobile or buggy down Main Street. They loomed large, even on the spacious 30-acre site, with their rippling roofs of corrugated steel, their high tapering stacks belching out dense columns of black smoke, and their connecting network of miniature overhead railways. Along the south side of the main building, a 60,000 square foot mammoth, stood an array of box-cars and flatcars on the sidings that linked the plant to the C.P.R. line. In an adjacent structure stood the open hearth furnace that produced the molten metal for ingots. These ingots fed the huge rollers at the western end of the building, and eventually became the ribbons of iron and steel for the marketplace. Directly adjacent was the scrap and shearer building, which housed the raw materials until they were sent down the overhead tracks for reduction in the main building. Slightly to the west, across the street, stood the steel foundry which made castings of all sorts. Outside of Winnipeg, no community could boast an equally magnificent industrial complex. One can almost imagine the heads nodding in agreement as Stewart wrote

No doubt you've heard of Selkirk West
With factories, works and all the rest.⁴⁷

It is difficult to underestimate the value of the complex to Selkirk. By 1920, just after the Manitoba Bridge and Iron Works took over the Rolling Mills, the plant was turning out

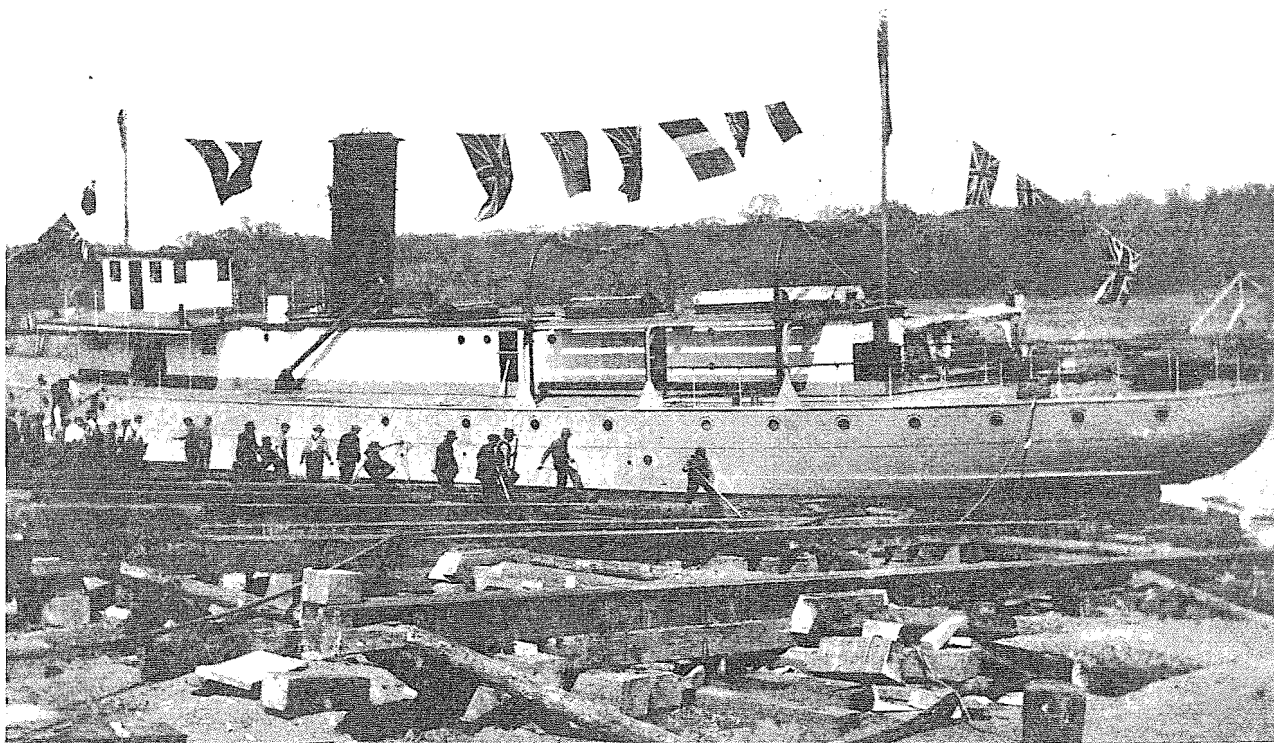
nearly 2,000 tons of bar iron each month. Four hundred tons had been shipped to Japan, and the company was besieged with requests for its products from countries around the globe, although Canada and the United States remained its main markets. The cost of freight alone on the 1919 production was \$170,000.⁴⁸ Wages paid out in just the month of March, 1920, amounted to \$36,000. So many men were needed to operate the factories that housing became a serious concern. It was so troublesome that P.J. Smith informed the town council that his firm was experiencing a very high turnover rate and that the town would be wise to take advantage of the federal government housing assistance programme for returning soldiers. Most of the 300 men at the plant had no choice but to leave their families in Winnipeg while they boarded locally five or six days a week.⁴⁹ As would be expected, the strain on family life was considerable.

The contribution of the Mills to the welfare of the town remained large throughout the 1920s. In 1925 wages paid out to local workers alone totalled \$348,255, or nearly \$1000 per day.⁵⁰ Outside labourers, who were needed to handle the incoming scrap materials and provide transportation services, received an additional \$227,000. It was calculated that these wages turned over seven times in Selkirk, thereby benefitting people not even remotely connected with the manufacturing plant. Tax revenues from the Rolling Mill plant averaged around \$3000 per year, and the president of the firm was careful to remind town residents that these taxes and wages "would have gone to some other town (probably in the East) had the Rolling Mill not been here, and the fact is worthy of the consideration of every citizen of Selkirk."⁵¹ In 1928 the company spent an additional \$40,000 on a second open hearth furnace that increased the steel making capacity to 160 tons per day, or around 50,000 per annum.⁵² and enabled the plant to operate

the rolling department on a double shift whenever demand required it.

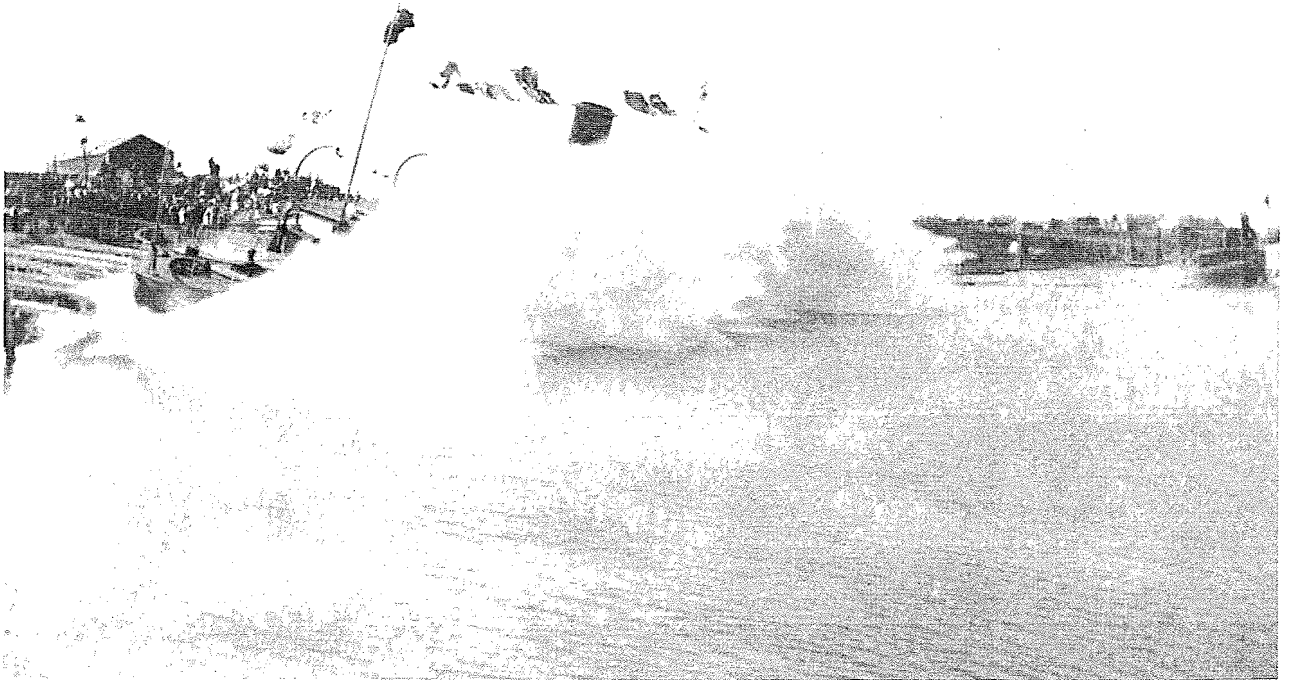
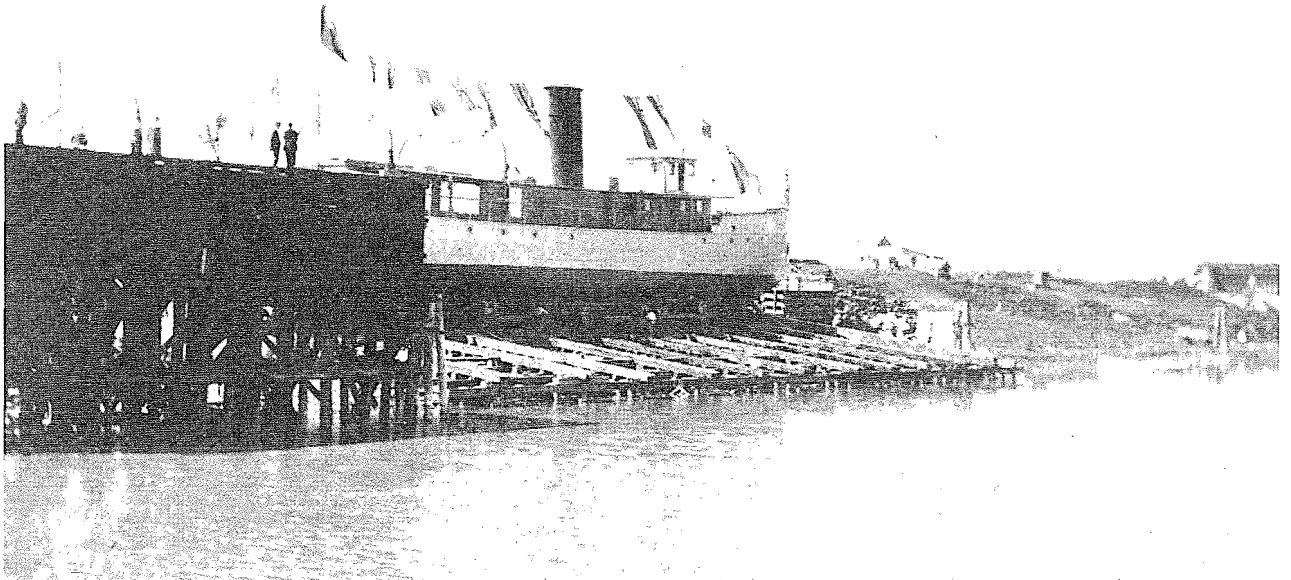
While less is known about the Manitoba Steel Foundries Limited, which was started by Montreal businessman Thomas Arnold at Selkirk in 1916, it certainly complemented the Rolling Mills operation and contributed substantially to the prosperity of the townspeople. The Foundry possessed the first electric smelting furnace in Western Canada, and specialized in the production of railway castings for the C.P.R., the C.N.R. and the Western and Pacific lines.⁵³ When it burned to the ground in 1926, the loss "cast a pall over this town."⁵⁴ Fortunately, the foundry was rebuilt at a cost of \$150,000. By 1928 the wages paid out monthly amounted to \$13,000.⁵⁵

Without a doubt, the new prosperity was won at high cost. Its achievement had strained the community treasury and taxed the unity of the townspeople. And yet, as remaining members of Selkirk's first generation of boosters must have observed, such financial and emotional stress had always been the price paid by their town for economic advancement. Rapid and substantial growth never came easily to a small town with little more to offer than glowing self-confidence, and it was a tribute to Selkirk's progressive leaders that they had successfully courted these industrial giants with so limited a dowry.



Launching of the S.S. Bradbury at the government boatyard in Selkirk. c.1915

MANITOBA ARCHIVES





Manitoba Rolling Mills in the 1920s

WILLIAM HALL



Telephone operators at the Selkirk exchange. c.1927

WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX