

CHAPTER SIX

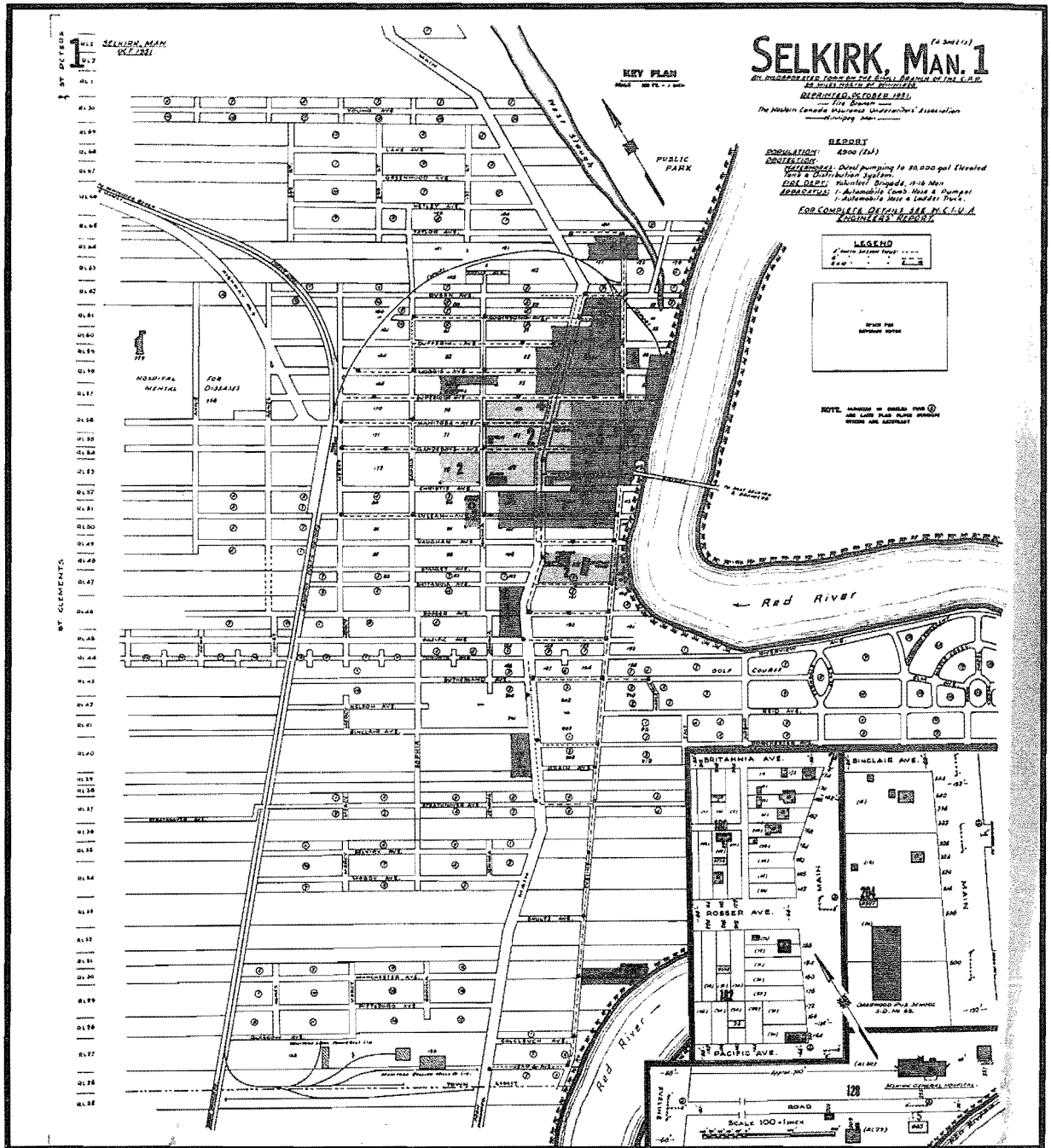
The Modern Town, 1947-1980

SINCE 1875 Selkirk had been struggling to achieve economic growth, to fortify its sense of community, and to bestow upon its citizens those amenities that blunted the sharp edge of material progress. These were the constants in the life of the town, the unchanging objectives that overcame every difference of opinion and outlasted every generation. The precise character of these civic goals altered as the community matured, but the underlying motivations of the town's leaders and the sentiments of the townspeople never varied. They sought only to build their community and to better their lives. This had been the case in years past, and it was just as true as Selkirk approached its first century as a community.

Money was the lifeblood of the community. When it was in good supply, as it had been around the turn of the century, the town surged forward, everyone pulling together, everyone benefitting; when it was lacking, as it had been after the Great War, the community spirit flagged and progress stalled. Experience taught these lessons and it was not surprising that, after the catastrophic economic reverse of the depression years, the townspeople attempted to reap the benefits of the unexpected post-war boom.

One of their main aims was the capture of local farm trade, an accomplishment that had always eluded their forebears. Farming in the Selkirk district had changed greatly in recent years. Between 1941 and 1951 the number of tractors had doubled, as had the number of trucks, and the value of machinery on a typical farm had risen an astonishing 600 per cent.¹ The farms were growing larger as well, and gained, on average, about two quarter sections between 1941 and 1956.² The farming community was now mechanized and mobile, and Selkirk gained from both these developments.

In 1949 alone, local businessmen invested \$150,000 in the construction of farm implement dealerships.³ The volume of grain being trucked to the new Selkirk Co-operative Elevator rose steadily from 297,285 bushels in its first year of operation to more than 597,000 bushels by 1951-2.⁴ Two years later the farmers' co-operative found it necessary to build an annex which more than tripled the elevator's storage capacity, despite the recent flooding of farmland in the district. The Agricultural Fair, which had languished for years, was revitalized and by 1954 its backers could boast the largest dairy cattle exhibition in the entire west and the participation of more than 400 4-H clubs. Even the



The Selkirk townsite in 1951

local newspaper reflected the changing nature of trade in the town, as it modified its name to *Selkirk Enterprise and Lake Winnipeg Argus*, and weekly columns from rural correspondents appeared in unprecedented numbers to inform readers of the latest happenings in Gimli, Cloverdale, Clandeboye and other small settlements. Selkirk was finally becoming the farm service centre it had always hoped to be.

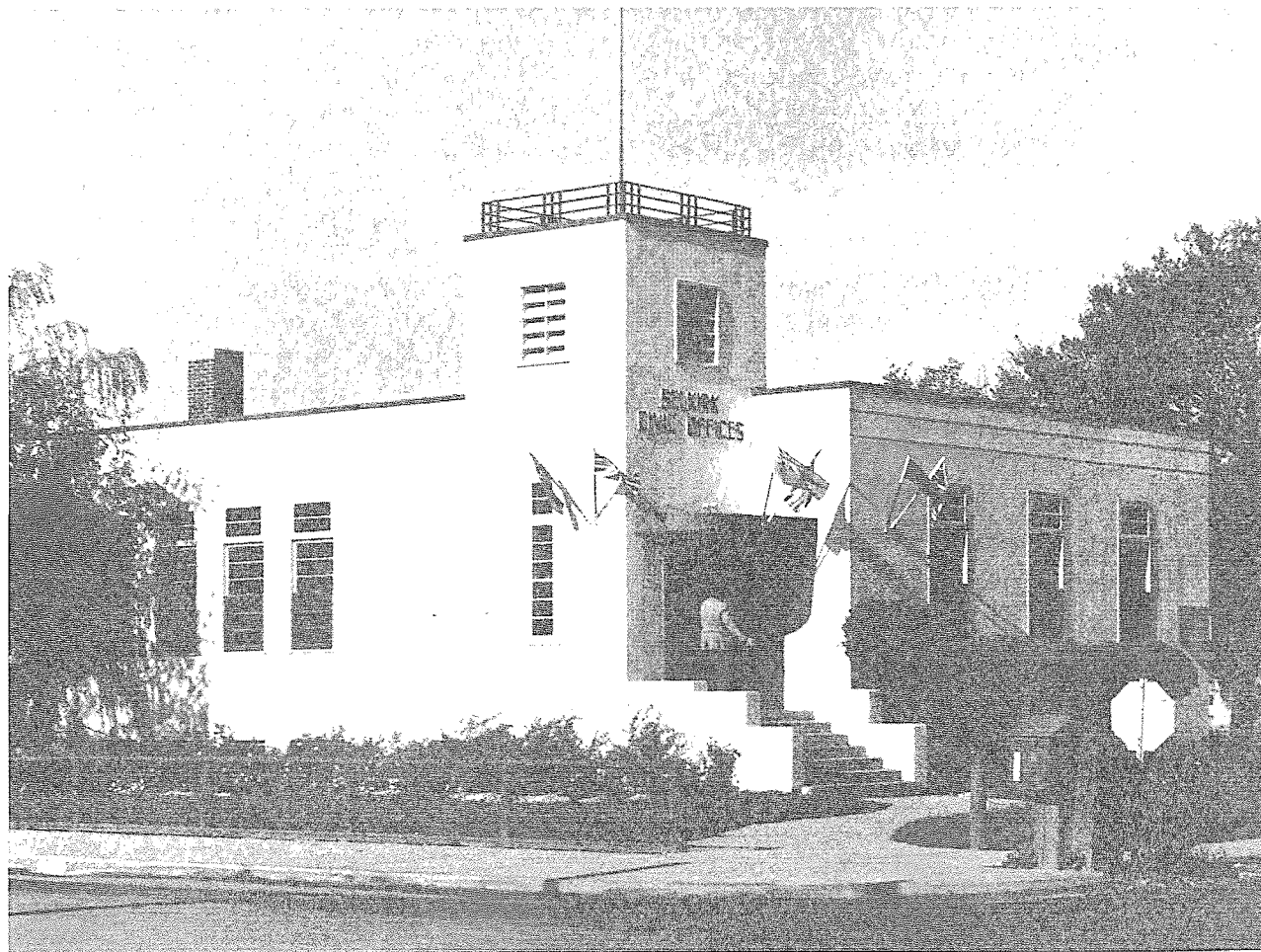
Not satisfied with the industries already situated in town, civic leaders embarked on yet another campaign to boost Selkirk as an industrial centre. Like their predecessors, they continually extolled Selkirk's abundant labour supply, its fine geographical setting, and its excellent transportation links with outside markets.⁵ Their efforts were not, however, capped with immediate success. The only new industry to locate in town was a Coca-Cola beverage plant, which employed a mere 15 people. In the next year, 1951, the Manitoba Rolling Mills began a \$1,000,000 expansion that created work for another 100 people, but this had little to do with local promotion. In fact, it was not until the spring of 1955, when the Dyson Pickle Company and E.R. Gardiner chose Selkirk as the site of a drying and screening plant for their silica sand operation on Black Island, that significant change took place in the manufacturing sector.

Yet the town did stride forward during the 1950s, mainly because of its growing population. In 1951 there were 6,218 people in Selkirk; a decade later the population was 8,576.⁶ While slightly more than half of this increase was attributable to a climbing birth-rate, the rest seems to have been due to the arrival of new residents who found work in existing industries that were expanding and in various service, retail and government jobs.⁷ This rapid growth had a profound impact on the town. The construction business boomed as about 50 new houses were put up in each year between 1948 and 1956.⁸ The value of

building permits skyrocketed from \$184,000 in 1948 to nearly \$2,000,000 by 1959.⁹ And, with more people earning more money than ever before, the value of retail trade and service outlet revenues shot up as well.¹⁰ This was the sort of prosperity that had not been experienced for decades.

The rising population created new demands for better services and increased amenities, which the town council met through a rather lavish outlay of public funds. As soon as the war was over, the council launched an aggressive sewer, water and street paving programme. Between 1948 and 1951, \$55,000 was spent on new sewer and water mains, and \$65,000 on new streets.¹¹ Those residents whose homes were now located on serviced streets were compelled to install indoor plumbing and slowly the backyard biffy became a relic of the past. A new garbage collection system had been inaugurated in 1942, and this went far to ensure more attractive surroundings. Miles of cement sidewalks were poured as well. The few remaining remnants of the old town were either swept away completely or camouflaged beneath artificial brick facades and neon signs.

Health services in Selkirk underwent remarkable changes after the war. In 1948 a local diagnostic unit was set up and X-ray facilities were purchased for the Selkirk General Hospital. This vastly improved early detection of tuberculosis and saved Selkirk residents thousands of dollars that would otherwise have gone to clinics in the city. Rising costs were more of a burden than the town alone could bear, however, and in 1952 the Selkirk General became the centre of General Hospital District No. 31, serving the rural municipalities of St. Andrews and St. Clements as well. This redistribution of financing worked well, and soon the combined ratepayers agreed to build a new hospital with assistance from the federal and provincial governments. Over 5,000 people attended the official opening of the modern facility in 1955.



Selkirk Civic Offices, 1957

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The new Selkirk General Hospital, built in the mid-1950s

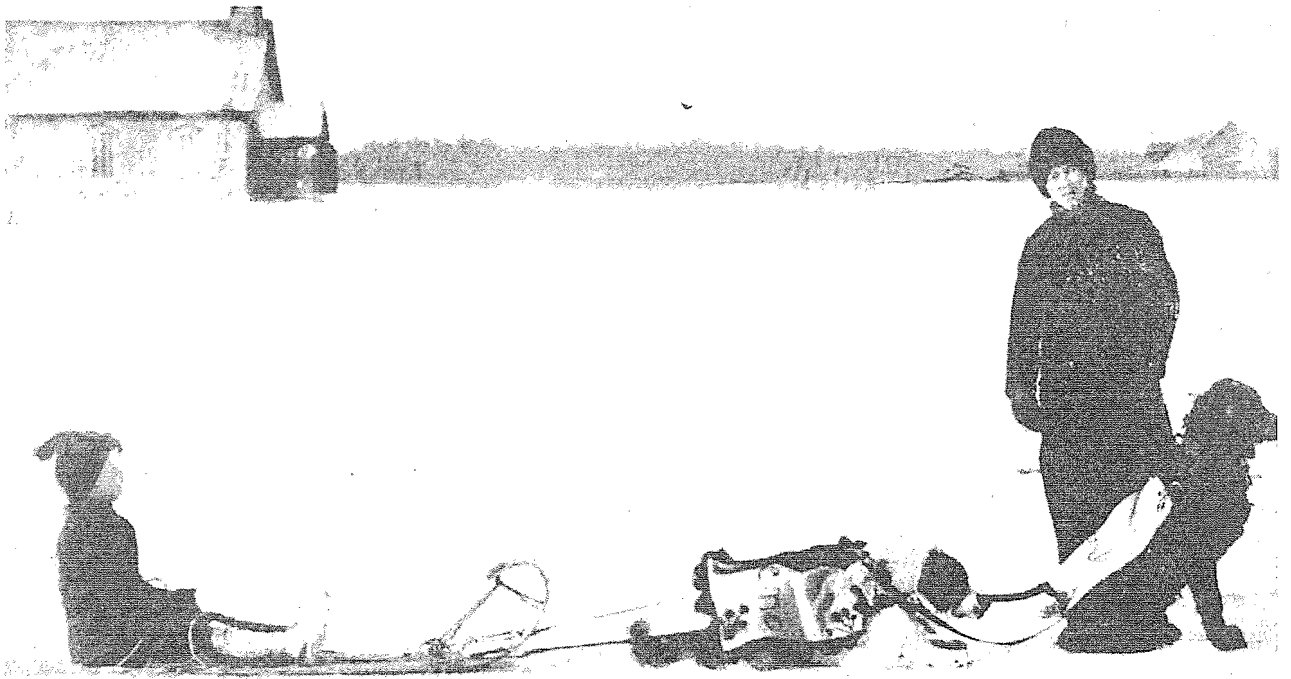
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Of all the new demands on the town treasury after the war, none was more pressing than the need for improved educational institutions. Even before the baby boom started, attendance records were being broken as 1000 students crowded into Selkirk's four small schools. All had been constructed before 1920 and could no longer provide adequate instruction facilities. In 1949 the ratepayers approved funds for a ten-room building to be called Daerwood School, but just four years later all the schools were overcrowded again. The problem was particularly acute in the north ward. During the following year a four-room extension was built onto Devonshire School and the school board found it necessary to prohibit enrollment of non-resident students.¹² Still, it was impossible to accommodate all the students and the school board had to resort to staggered class hours to meet the demand.

As school district consolidations began around 1959, and rural students were bussed into town, the school board had little choice but to build new facilities. The Robert Smith School went up in 1959 and in 1965 an

addition was built onto the nine-year old Collegiate. In 1967 yet another elementary school was needed. While each facility marked a genuine advance in the quality of education offered in Selkirk, together they increased the tax burden to the point of strain.

The growing ranks of the young in Selkirk made it imperative that adequate recreational facilities be provided. The people of Selkirk were very conscious of the generally good behavior of their youth, and as late as 1950 were proudly proclaiming that their town had none of the young vandals and juvenile gangs which plagued Winnipeg. They attributed this to the abundance of sports committees and youth clubs, which they believed instilled the values of co-operation and responsibility in their teenagers.¹³ Local service clubs had appointed a director of physical fitness for all school-age children, and a swimming club was organized to provide instruction and supervision at the West Slough until a pool could be built. When the campaign for a new rink started in 1948, its supporters extolled sport as second only to the church as an influence for good.¹⁴



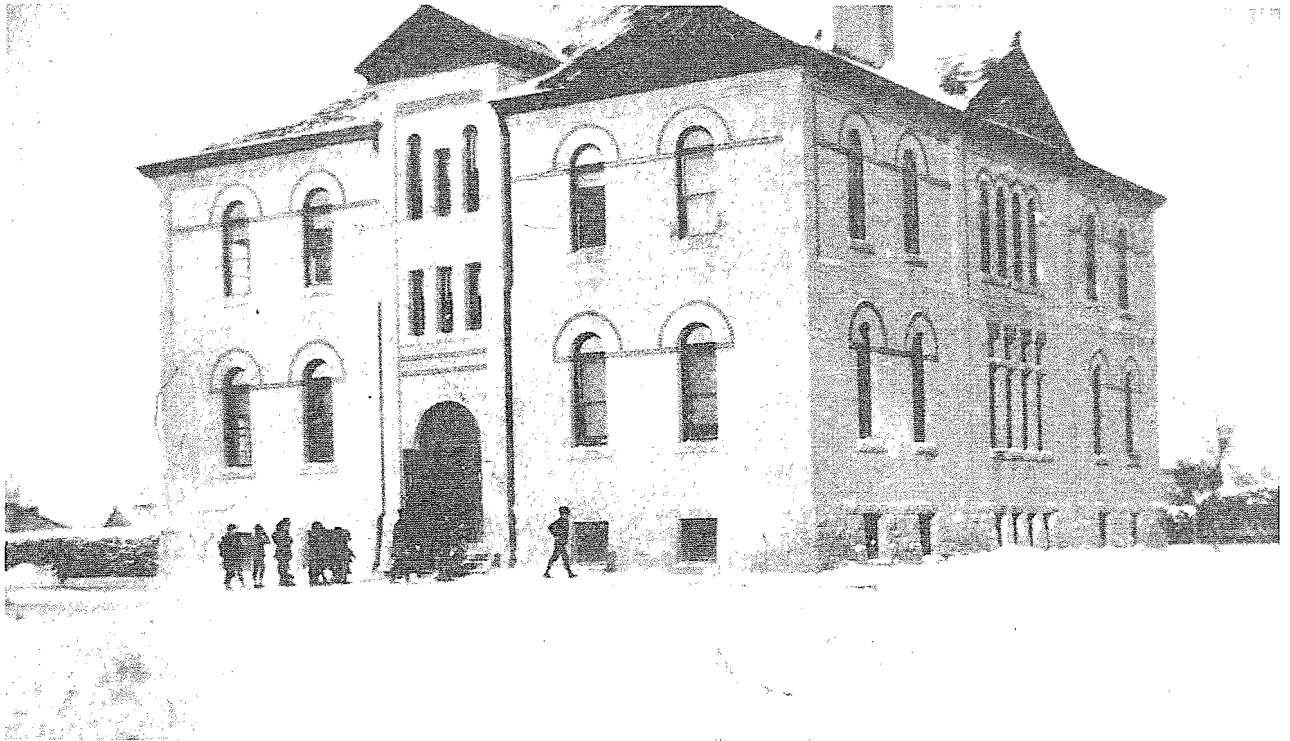
Mushing around Selkirk's first school, 1886

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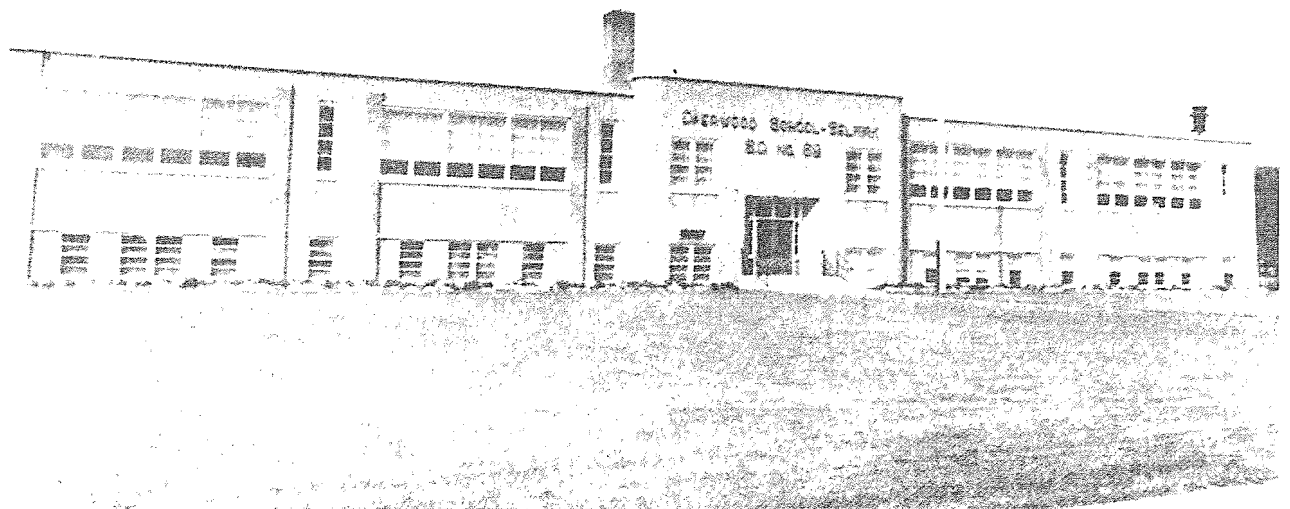
The Class of Selkirk School, c. 1890

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Central School, Selkirk, 1897

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Daerwood Elementary School, 1960

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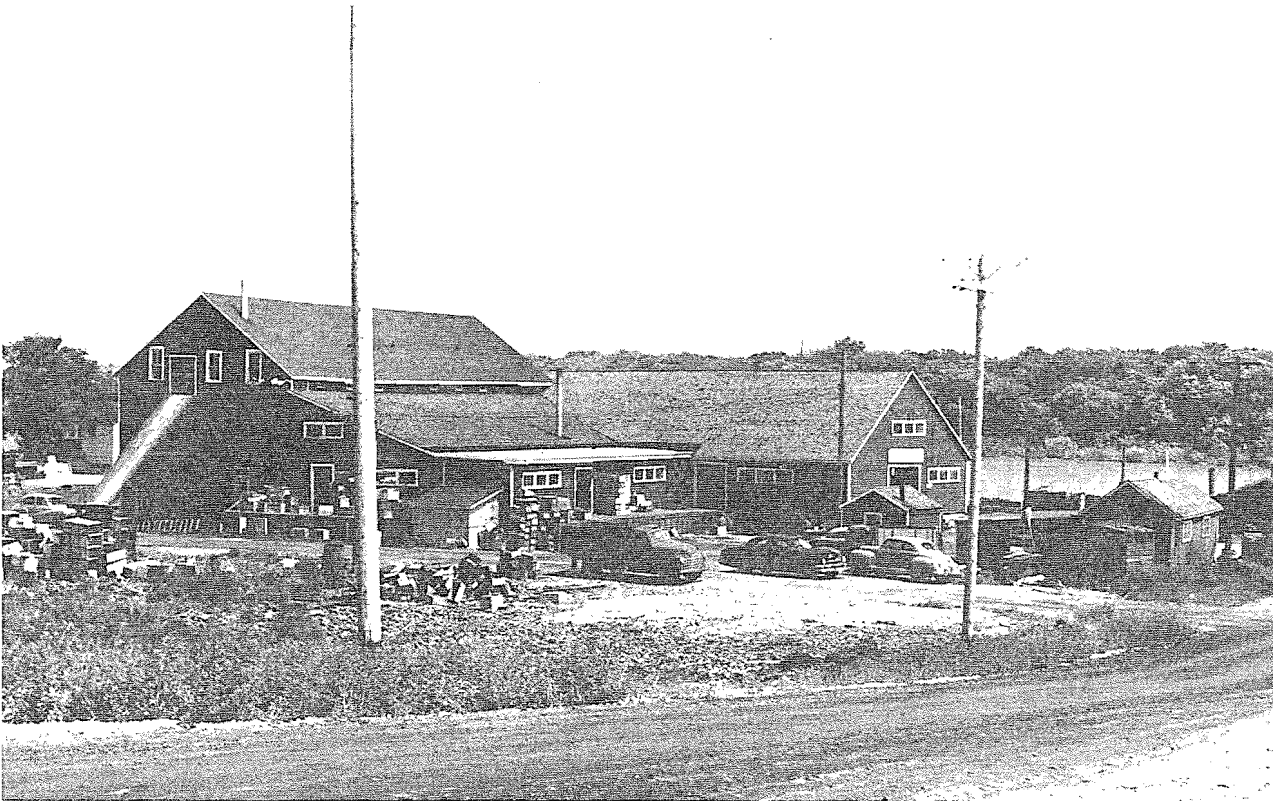
Unfortunately, this widespread belief in sport as a builder of character did not prevent the rise of vandalism in town. By 1952 the *Enterprise*, which had just two years earlier declared Selkirk to be free of delinquency, was lamenting its prevalence. Break-ins and burglaries were most common, and many of the incidents were liquor-related. When this local problem received considerable attention from the Winnipeg press, it was seen as a blemish on the entire community.¹⁵ The *Enterprise* appealed to the townspeople to become more involved with the youth, especially since the youth director was no longer able to handle the task himself. The problem did not abate, however, and by 1956 Selkirk had a juvenile crime rate that exceeded that in the worst district of Winnipeg.¹⁶

The concern that was expressed about this delinquency was quite appropriate, yet it tended to obscure the fact that most of the young people in Selkirk were not vandals. And, when local probation officers suggested that Selkirk lacked sufficient recreational facilities, they clearly failed to notice the high participation rate among youth in local sports. Selkirk was, in fact, extraordinarily proud of its record in sports, and justifiably so. In 1949, for example, the Junior B's hockey team carried off the Manitoba championship by defeating Shoal Lake 3 to 2 in a game that attracted 1,300 fans. This team of local high school students, which failed during its first season to win a single game, could easily claim the support of the entire community. These youngsters took the Baldy Northcott Trophy again in 1950, and then once more in 1956, while their older counterparts, the Flyers, won the Intermediate "C" hockey championship of Manitoba in 1952 and 1953. Some local players even went on to greater glory in the professional leagues. In 1951 Paul Meger started his career with the Montreal Canadiens, having spent several years in the American Hockey League with the Buffalo Bisons. Not since Paul Goodman tended net

for the Chicago Black Hawks in 1939 did the townspeople have a National League pro to applaud. Then, during the 1954-5 season, Jimmy Skinner, a Selkirk native whose father had owned the Alexandra Rink, became coach of the Detroit Red Wings. As the *Enterprise* noted, Skinner had "permanently stamped the name of Selkirk in the annals of professional hockey."¹⁷

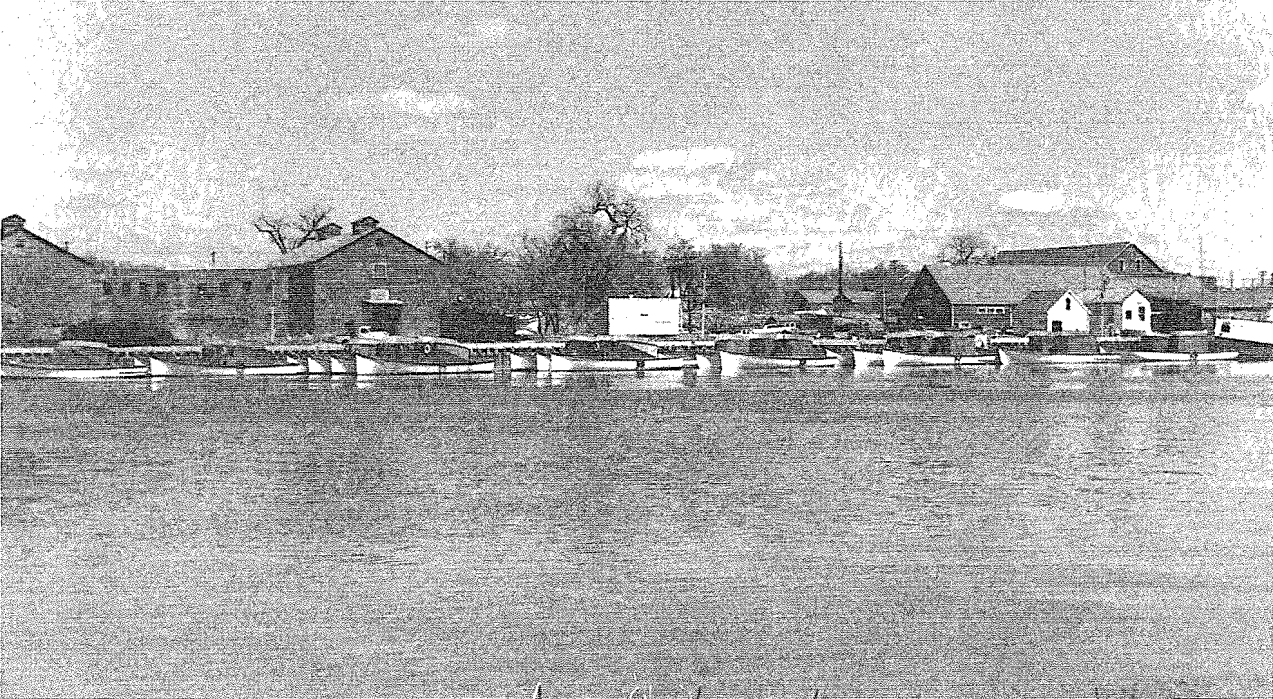
Those who wished to teach Selkirk's youth the virtues of co-operation, hard work and benevolence received a remarkable, if tragic, opportunity to do in the spring of 1950. The Red River spilled over its banks to cause the worst flood within living memory. And while there were those who pointed to the inundation of Winnipeg with a certain smugness from their high ground at Selkirk, the majority of the townspeople unhesitatingly pitched in to assist their neighbours. Hundreds of local workers helped to build dikes around the city: shift workers from the mill and the foundry spent their off-hours sandbagging; fishermen and dock workers, who could not pursue their work because of high water levels, assisted in any way possible. The town council sought and received the hearty co-operation of the townspeople in providing temporary accommodations for homeless families, food for the dike workers, and clothing for the destitute. Even when the flood waters had receded, the local outpouring of benevolence continued. A relief fund was established, with most Selkirk workers contributing a day's wages. "We have always been proud to be part of community life in Selkirk," the local editor said, "today we are just a mite more proud."¹⁸

It was not until the late 1950s that the first wrinkles appeared in the usually smooth complexion of civic affairs. No single event can be pointed to as the cause of the discontent welling up in the community. On the town council, there was dissatisfaction expressed about issues ranging from the location of public buildings to inequitable taxation to the general direction of town growth. Among



Booth Fisheries, 1957

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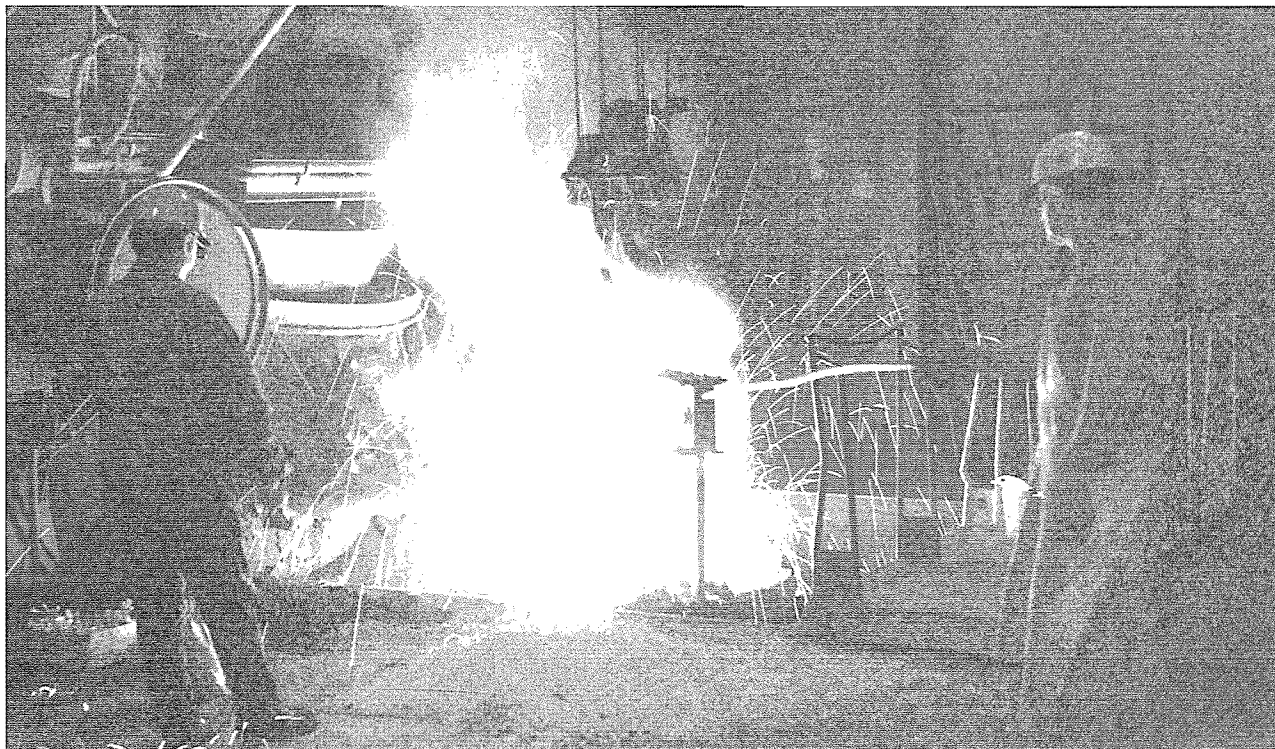


A view of the Selkirk docks, c.1960

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the industrial workers, complaints were heard about current wage levels and in 1957 a strike at the mill was narrowly averted. As the new thermal generating plant took shape in East Selkirk, a dispute arose about the employment of non-union workers and 400 union men walked off the job. While the newspaper berated residents for spending too much money in Winnipeg, local construction firms retorted that the town council might set a better example by awarding contracts to them instead of contractors from the city. Juvenile delinquency was still rampant, making it necessary to enforce a 10 p.m. curfew bylaw more strictly. Ratepayers were smarting from increased taxes due to new school construction. And when donations to the Red Cross blood clinic began to dwindle in 1958, the Society took full advantage of the traditional north-south rivalry in town and divided Selkirk into competing sections.

The tension only grew worse as 1960 ushered in an economic downturn. For the first time since the war more people were leaving town than were moving in.¹⁹ The constantly rising costs of street paving, sewer construction, hospital maintenance and educational facilities obliged the town council to seek provincial assistance.²⁰ But perhaps the most serious blow to civic solidarity came as fierce competition in the steel industry led to massive lay-offs at the mill in 1960. In May the company cut its payroll by 300 workers, only to precipitate a major labour crisis. Negotiations between the United Steelworkers of America (Local 5442) and the Manitoba Rolling Mills stalled completely. When the firm flatly rejected the union's position, the steelworkers voted to strike if no settlement was reached by August. August brought no change, aside from a further lay-off of 120 men, and the remaining workers



Working in the Manitoba Rolling Mills, 1964

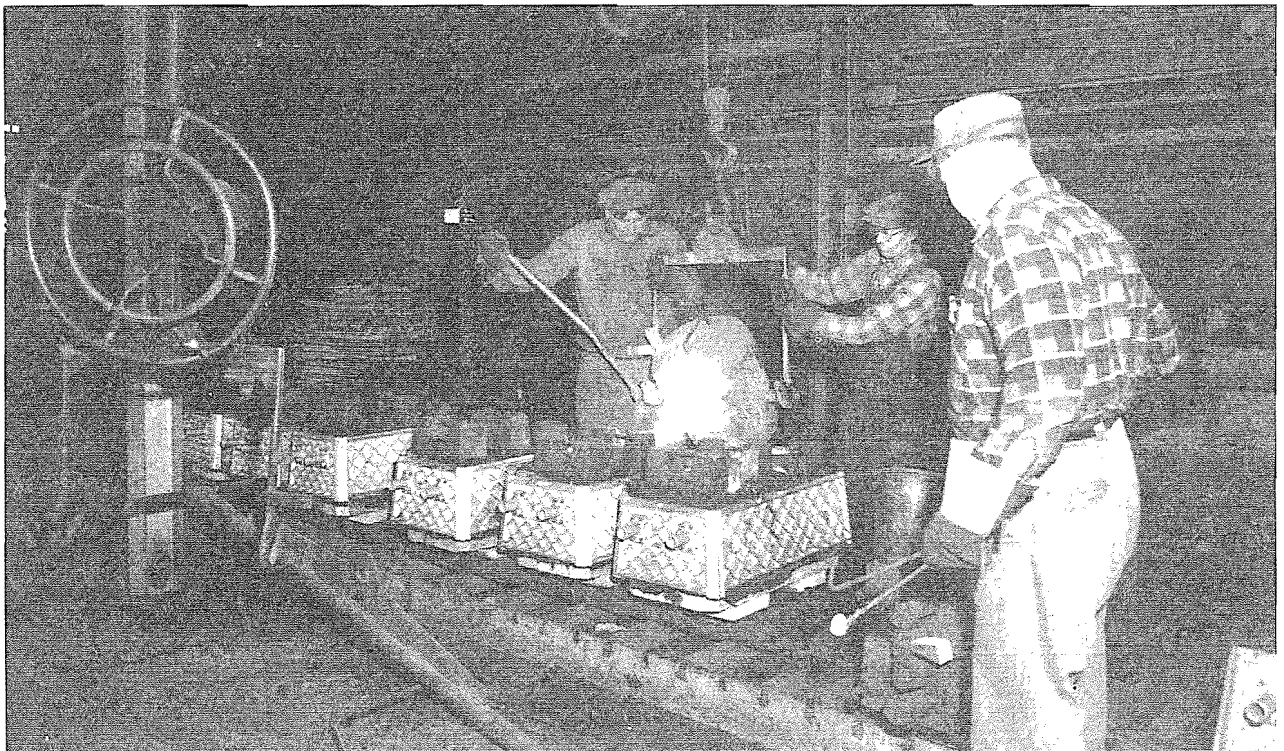
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walked out. During the ensuing 92-day strike, feelings ran high in town as this disruption at Selkirk's largest place of employment began to hurt local businesses. Not until 1961, when most of the men were rehired to provide steel for the Manitoba Power Commission's hydro-electrical project at Grand Rapids, did the conflict abate.

The strike of 1960 pointed not only to the difficulty of labour-management relations, but to the fragility of Selkirk's industrial base. As a result, town planning schemes that had languished during the 1950s were revived. Prospects brightened further in 1962 when a group of West German industrialists purchased a large tract of land in town for development as an industrial park. Yet little came of this. Even a multi-million dollar modernization of the Rolling Mills between 1964 and 1966 created few new jobs because of its automated nature.

If there was a lesson in the failure of this promotional campaign, it was one that past generations of Selkirk leaders also learned the hard way. Townsite promotion was an intensely political affair. To be successful in the increasingly competitive sphere of industrial boosterism, a town needed much more than an abundant labour pool, or good transportation connections, or a serviced industrial park. It needed, above all else, the sympathy and active support of those in the larger political arena. Only with their cooperation was it possible to direct government funding assistance, which was critical if large manufacturers were to be wooed and won, to a specific town.

In 1967 Selkirk received the political support it required. The federal government implemented a new program, called the Fund for Rural Economic Development (FRED), to boost the economic fortunes of relatively



Casting at the steel foundry in the 1960s

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undeveloped rural regions and chose the Interlake as one of the first areas for development. Selkirk, as the acknowledged capital of the Interlake, was marked for special assistance. As the formal agreement between Ottawa and the Manitoba government noted

Selkirk...provides excellent opportunities for industrial expansion. It has a highly-skilled labour force and all utilities, including natural gas; it is close to recreation areas and to Winnipeg, has good business services and progressive civic and community leaders. It is ideally located to serve as a major centre for expanded fish processing based on the production potential of the [Interlake] Area, and there is already a nucleus of industrial and manufacturing activity which could serve as a base for further growth. In particular, there is potential for further development of the primary iron and steel industry, and development of farm equipment and related steel products industries based on the existing steel industry. The refined silica sand at Selkirk could provide the basis for a glass container plant, and labour surveys indicate the feasibility of a garment plant operation.²¹

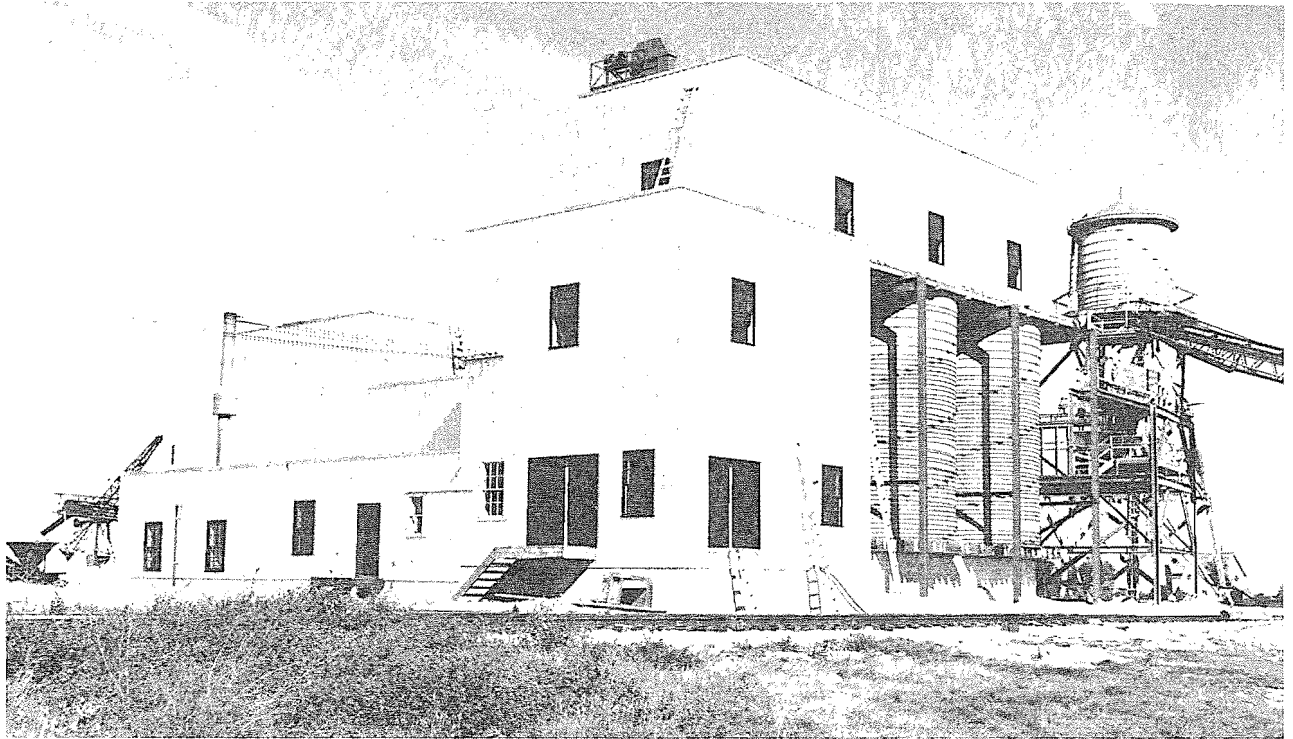
Under the FRED agreement, which was to last a full decade, Selkirk was considered "an urban, industrial centre that could provide a choice to people who wanted to live in the Interlake. Selkirk also acted as a transition point for people making the jump from a rural community to the city."²²

This artificially-induced boom was backed by an \$85 million federal-provincial contract. About one-third was to be used to develop land, water and transportation resources, another third would be spent on adult training and the remaining third would assist in the development of educational facilities.²³ Its benefits were quickly realized. More than eight million dollars were allocated for educational purposes, according to the list of priorities established by Interlake residents during negotiation of the FRED agreement. By March of 1975, these funds had created 610 new classrooms throughout the Interlake, includ-

ing the Lord Selkirk Comprehensive High School at Selkirk. The industrial training programme was handled through a Manpower training facility in town, where as many as 50 trainees learned new skills at once.

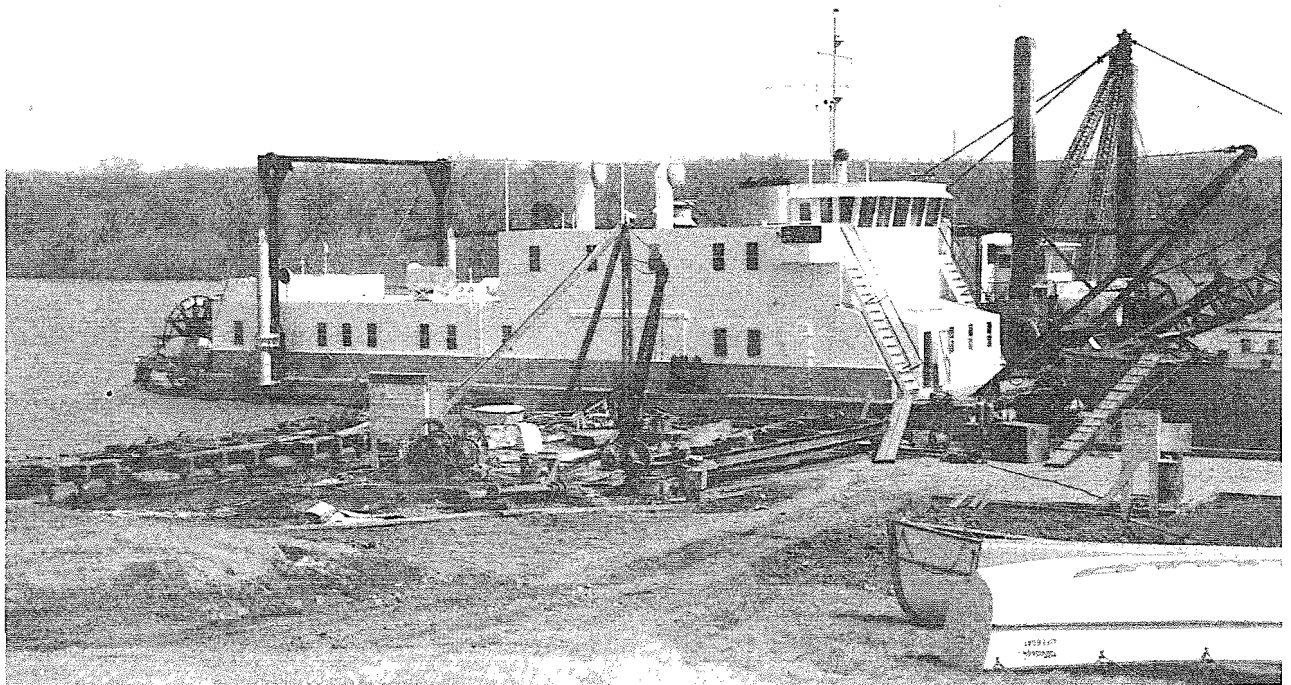
It was the fully-serviced industrial park at Selkirk, however, that truly embodied the aspirations of the townspeople. The agreement provided an initial grant of \$400,000 for the development of the park in the north-west part of town, to be matched by an equal grant in 1976.²⁴ While the town was ultimately responsible for development of the facility, government officials actively promoted it to prospective manufacturers. It did not take long for industrial growth to begin. In August, 1967, Consolidated Plastics announced it would locate a plant employing 30 people in the park. Electro-Knit, a Montreal-based textile firm, built a two million dollar fabric manufacturing plant in the next year. Then Futronics, a company that produced sophisticated electronics circuitry, started its operation. In 1969 Union Carbide and Mandak Metal Processors moved in. When Noco Drugs opened its facility in 1969, Selkirk gained new status as a small pharmaceutical manufacturing centre. Complementing all these heady developments was the provincial government's decision to assist with the construction of 100 new housing units in town in 1970, which was followed two years later by the important selection of Selkirk as the site of a new Manitoba Liquor Control Commission outlet, a mail order office of the Manitoba Lotteries Commission, and the Lake Winnipeg Regional Office of Northern Affairs.

Spurred on by such rapid expansion, the town councillors embarked on several ambitious development projects of their own. Chief among these were the hiring of a national public relations firm to promote the industrial park and the creation of a comprehensive land-use plan to regulate future growth. Included in this study were plans for a huge



Silica Sand screening plant, Selkirk c.1956

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One of the many dredges built at the Selkirk boatyards, 1965

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The S.S. Keenora, which operated on Lake Winnipeg for half a century beginning in the early 1920s

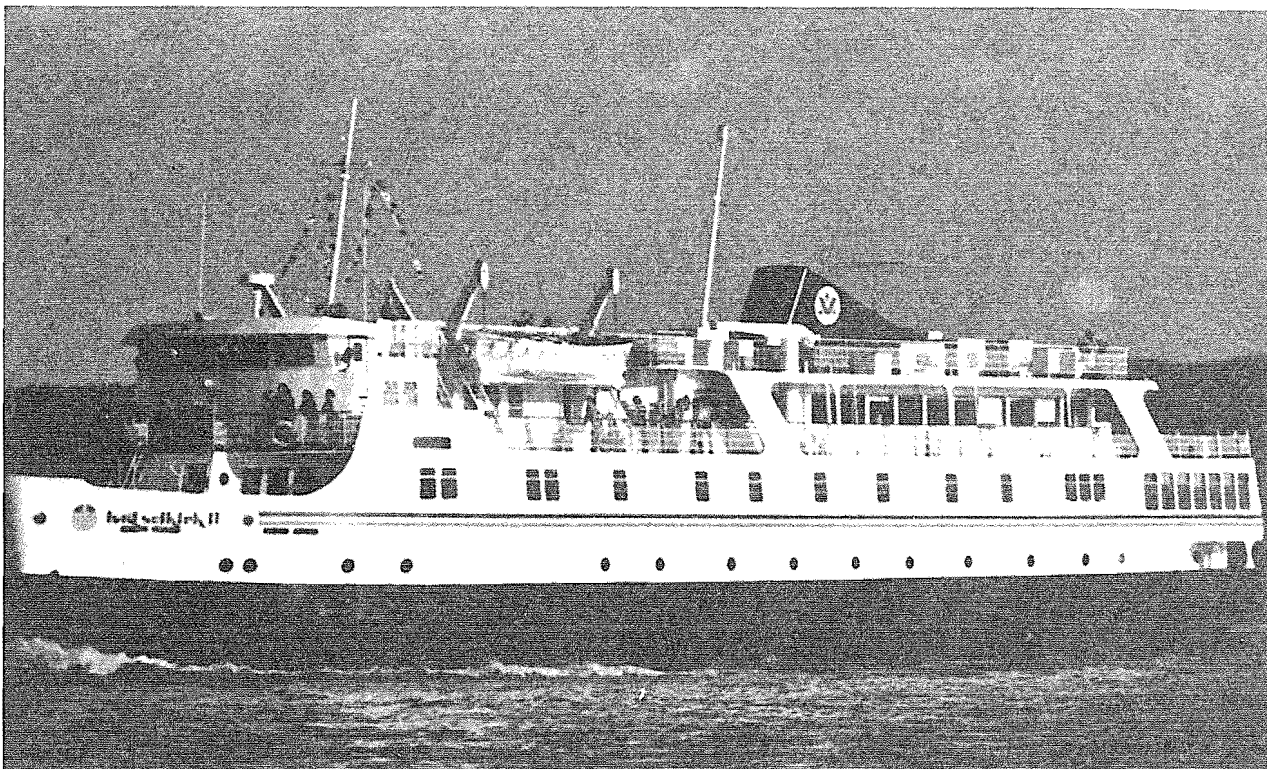
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new residential district west of the mental hospital, a second industrial park and an area zoned for institutional structures.²⁵ Yet as these grandiose plans matured, it became clear that the townspeople were not of one mind about the future of Selkirk. Citizens' groups protested the proposed location of the industrial sites, claiming that property values would decline precipitously. When a major construction company proposed a low-cost housing project in the area east of Eveline Street, residents attempted to block the development on the grounds that it would ruin the character of this traditionally prestigious neighbourhood. Efforts to introduce parallel parking in the business district met with concerted opposition from local merchants who feared a loss of business. It soon became obvious that the townspeople would accept progress only to the extent that it did not threaten to disrupt the lifestyle they had

come to know and love.

Some of the townspeople, must have looked upon the subsequent decline in Selkirk's fortunes with relief. As early as 1970 there were intimations that all was not well. The central change was that the federal and provincial governments jointly revoked the town's special status under the FRED agreement.²⁶ In that same year Selkirk lost a proposed Fresh Water Fish Marketing Corporation office to Transcona. To compensate for this multi-million dollar loss, the federal government agreed not to phase out the Selkirk Fish Plant, but in 1973 it burned to the ground. Then the C.I.L. plant across the river started to close down its operation. Balancing these misfortunes was the opening of a two million dollar laundry facility to service the mental hospital and Winnipeg's municipal hospitals.

The degree to which a belief in progress and a belief in the *status quo* co-existed in Selkirk



M.S. Lord Selkirk II, successor to the great excursion boats of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in 1976

WESTERN CANADA PICTORIAL INDEX

can best be seen in the 1977 debate over the federal prison issue.²⁷ With many factories closing their doors or at least reducing their staffs, many local people were gratified to hear that the federal government had offered to locate a new maximum security prison near town. Such a facility would create considerable employment, either directly or in service industries. Yet a very vocal citizens' group saw the project as a serious threat to the quality of life in Selkirk. Petitions and counter-petitions were circulated and emotions ran so high that the town council finally decided to hold a public referendum on the issue. When the vote was in, more than two to one had cast their ballots in favour of the prison, believing that the employment and taxation possibilities were too substantial to refuse. With this hurdle cleared, the federal government announced its intention to build at Selkirk. But in 1978, much to the relief of

the protesters, the federal government introduced a drastic restraint programme that aborted the entire scheme.

Like James Colcleugh and his cohorts in 1879, these modern Selkirk residents were now fully acquainted with the fickleness of politicians. Yet they knew, as did their forebears, that the recession would lift and the future would bring ample opportunities for new growth in Selkirk.

Aerial View of Selkirk, 1964



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