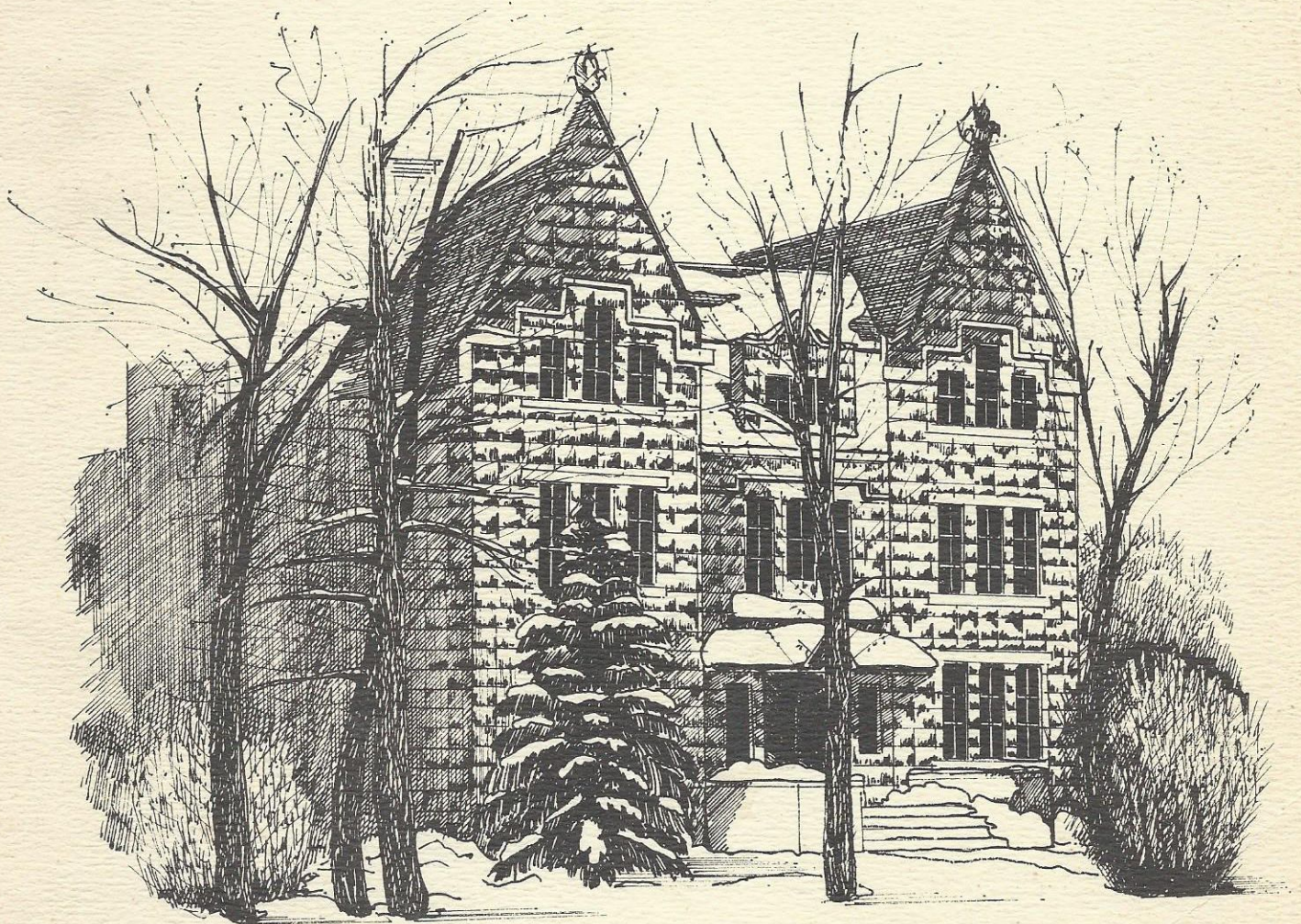


LILLIAN GIBBONS'
STORIES HOUSES TELL



Drawings by Arlene Osen

STORIES HOUSES TELL

Lillian Gibbons' articles about Winnipeg houses, written from 1935 to the early nineteen sixties for *The Winnipeg Tribune*, appear here under their original dates. Information about the current status of the houses has been appended and demolition dates are included where applicable. Through the descriptions of the houses, the furnishings, and the social activities and daily interests of the people who lived and worked in Winnipeg during this time, the stories unfold a life-style that is now gone. They tell of an era of adventure and splendor when coureur de bois and Lieutenant Governor, when frontier plainness and late Victorian elegance met and mingled at this prairie crossroads.

The publication of these stories houses tell celebrates the fiftieth year of the Junior League of Winnipeg. The book contains sixty-four articles and sixty-four sketches of historical Winnipeg houses.

LILLIAN GIBBONS was born in Winnipeg and is now one of the city's most active senior citizens. She was awarded a B.A. (Hons.) from The University of Manitoba in 1928 and later completed an M.A. in history. She was a reporter for *The Winnipeg Tribune* for forty years during which time she wrote the articles "Stories Houses Tell." Now retired, she continues her education at the University of Winnipeg's Senior Citizens' classes. Miss Gibbons is a member of the Manitoba Historical Society and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. She is also active in the Winnipeg Historical Society's attempt to preserve 99 Euclid Avenue. Her current research involves the regicide in 1649 when Charles I was beheaded. A relative's name, Goffe, appears on Charles' death warrant.

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HYPERION PRESS



Introduction

For many years Winnipeggers were able to follow the adventures of reporter Lillian Gibbons in the pages of *The Winnipeg Tribune*. Her articles, "Stories Houses Tell," appeared from 1935 to the early nineteen sixties. Each house story was filled with interesting facts and anecdotes about the people and the times. Readers were able to visualize the setting, the architecture, and the interior decoration as Miss Gibbons conducted each tour. Her interviews and visits with owners, family members, and neighbors recalled memories and events that belonged to another era.

The stories were more than pleasant tales however. They were a special record of Winnipeg's beginnings, for woven inextricably into the articles is the history of the development of the city. This history is inseparable from the people who built the houses, decorated them, lived in them, and thus contributed to the life and settlement patterns of this prairie crossroads.

There was a fur trade network here before the settlers came. Fort Gibraltar, located near the forks of the rivers, belonged to the North West Company. Herds of buffalo grazing near the Fort provided food for the canoe brigades.

Permanent settlement of the area began with the coming of the Scottish settlers sponsored by Lord Selkirk. After suffering much adversity both at the hands of nature and the fur traders who felt the threat to their freedom, the colonists established themselves around Fort Douglas, their main stronghold. Lord Selkirk himself visited the colony in 1817, at which time he gave the land grants mentioned in two of the stories. He also made provision for improved conditions for the settlers who were barely surviving the ordeal. In advance of his arrival he sent a group of soldiers, the Des Meurons, to protect the settlers. The Des Meurons located along the Seine in order to be close to Fort Douglas. A treaty with Chief Peguis was made securing the title to the strips of land along the Red and Assiniboine for two miles back. North of the Fort, Lord Selkirk provided land to the Anglican Church for a school, a church, and a burial ground. This became St. John's. He set aside land on the east side of the river for the Catholic Church, and the Presbyterian settlers were promised a church, a school, and a cemetery north of St. John's at Kildonan.

Lord Selkirk died in 1820 and shortly afterward the North West and the Hudson's Bay Companies were united. Retiring employees of both companies took homes in the settlement at Red River.

Following the high flood of 1826, the colony was agriculturally successful after many years of hardship. When Fort Gibraltar and Fort Douglas were destroyed by

the flood a new settlement at Fort Garry was built in the early eighteen thirties on the site where Main Street now crosses the Assiniboine River. The Scottish farms were now established on both sides of the Red River from Point Douglas to St. Paul's (Middlechurch). Then Lower Fort Garry, the stone church at St. Andrew's, and adjacent stone buildings filled out the settlement to the north. Satellite farms spread west on the Assiniboine. The Metis, still living off the annual buffalo hunt which provided the pemmican for the fur trade empire of the Hudson's Bay Company, had their homes south on the Red and farther west on the Assiniboine.

The colony had an insulated, quiet, sociable time for many years. The rivers were the main highways. The houses were predominantly log, cut from the stands of trees along the river banks, since the prairie was a barren place in those days. As they could afford it, the settlers covered the logs with plaster or clapboard which could be painted to protect the exterior from the elements. Some of the log buildings are still in existence. Those that have been made into museums provide valuable insights into our past.

Supplies were not plentiful. Most goods, in fact, came in from England via the northern route because the Hudson's Bay Company wished to enforce its monopoly.

Winter turned the rivers into grand avenues. Inside, social activities included parties and receptions that were attended by the entire community. At this time the Red River jig was a popular social dance. In summer the area adjacent to Fort Garry might be crowded with Red River carts, tents of the visiting traders, and buffalo hunters. The schools here attracted the children of Hudson's Bay Company employees who came from across the tracts of Rupert's Land. The continuing story of these schools is followed through several articles.

Gradually the community grew, becoming a factor on the national scene as the new nation of Canada cast its eyes westward to the vast hinterland beyond the Great Lakes that remained British territory. The appearance of Canadian surveyors precipitated the Red River rebellion, which had the effect of publicizing the existence of the colony as a destination for those inclined to adventure and enterprise. Of the troops sent out under Colonel Wolseley to quell the rebellion, many remained or returned to take part in this opportunity.

The founding of the Province of Manitoba in 1870 brought a greater influx of people from Ontario. The city of Winnipeg, situated between Point Douglas and Fort Garry with its centre at Portage Avenue and Main Street, was incorporated

without ever having had the status of a village or town. Commerce was a major priority in the lives of the leading citizens as witnessed in the original motto "Commerce, Prudence, Industry."

At this time the major residences in the city were between Main Street and the river, particularly near old Fort Douglas on Point Douglas. The names of early residents such as Ashdown, Logan, Barber, Fonseca, Black, Palk, and Hutchings appear in the stories.

The Hudson's Bay Company had a large reserve of property around Fort Garry. When the city was incorporated, the property tax leveled against the Company was \$595,312 (A. F. Artibese, *Winnipeg, A Social History of Urban Growth 1874 to 1914*, 19). In 1881, J. W. Vaughan was brought in to survey the major portion of this reserve and the streets Fort, Garry, and all the others through to Vaughan have names associated with the Company. The lots in this newly opened area were sold at a handsome profit.

Brick was the construction material of the time, some of it being made locally. The fine wood for the interior would have been imported from Ontario or the United States. Many homes had plaster ceilings with molded decoration. Interiors of the grand homes were heavy by our modern standards. Dark toned natural woodwork, leather, and tapestry were the wall coverings then in style and Persian or oriental carpets were laid on oak floors.

In 1859 the first steamboat arrived in the startled colony, and from that time forward, furniture and other belongings could be brought from the East much more readily. The American transcontinental railway came through St. Paul and in 1878 the rail link south was completed.

The greatest impetus to growth was the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway which pushed westward out of Winnipeg in 1881. Thousands of workers converged on the city that spring. Land speculation proceeded night and day; the buying and selling of lots in the "Chicago of the North" preoccupied all. Although the boom broke the next year, many Winnipeg merchants had made gains and would consolidate their holdings over the next decade. An interesting personal view of the boom is presented in the story about 160 Syndicate Street.

The new CPR link opened up the west. Winnipeg then became the warehousing and distribution centre for the towns and cities of the prairies. The Grain Exchange and the elevator companies made the city a commercial centre.

The homes built in this period, during the eighteen nineties, were truly Victorian in the sense that the owners

chose style features from many periods of architecture. The houses on Broadway had an unbelievable potpourri of columns, turrets, bays, baroque carving, dormers, and verandas. Each expressed the personality of its owner.

The availability of turned woodwork enabled homes to be decorated relatively inexpensively with spools, spindles, and semicircles which broke the monotony of brick or clapboard. Unfortunately, the best examples of Victorian gingerbread described in this book have been demolished. The house at 51 Lily Street became visible to all briefly when the Disraeli Bridge opened. Macdonald House on Carleton gives a good impression of this style, both inside and out.

After the turn of the century, new districts opened up on the south side of the Assiniboine and the large houses on Wellington Crescent were constructed. The rooms were spacious and larger windows admitted more light. Fine craftsmanship still prevailed and the woodwork, carving, and stonework required for the homes of Crescentwood provided a boom for builders. The new Legislative Buildings were being built at this time, so Tyndall stone became popular for private homes as well. Perhaps the culmination of this period was the building of the Davidson home at 10 Ruskin Row. Its modern conveniences, the elevator and the turntable in the garage, were the talk of the neighborhood. It was truly a mansion. With the outbreak of World War I, however, this building expansion was brought to a temporary halt.

By following the procession of houses built for J. H. Ashdown it is possible to see the development of the city that is described in this time period. The first Ashdown home was at 109 Euclid Avenue. The family moved from there to James Street and then built 337 Broadway in 1898. The last home was built at 529 Wellington Crescent and is preserved today as the office of the Shriners and Scottish Rite Masons.

During the early years of the twentieth century, as the boom cycle was building again, the prominent citizens of Winnipeg were very conscious of "Society." Government House was the social focal point where royal visitors were entertained. In 1901, the first royal visitors, The Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, later King George and Queen Mary, were entertained at Government House. "Town Topics" kept its readers informed in detail about the many lavish receptions, teas, and balls. Included in the information were descriptions of the gowns worn by all the ladies, the setting of the tea table, and the floral arrangements. This tradition in reporting was then carried on by the society columns of *The Winnipeg Free Press* and

The Winnipeg Tribune. The young Edward, the bachelor prince, created a great furor in 1919, when he attended a ball at the Galt home on Wellington Crescent. Miss Gibbons' article relates this event.

It was late in the depression of the nineteen thirties that Lillian Gibbons began to share with her readers her love of history and the collective memory of a progressive and more affluent past. Her interviews were conducted over a cup of tea and the articles project this informal social setting. Since the mid-twenties the city had remained very much the same and it did so until the end of World War II. As the stories were written over a span of about twenty years, the reader will find they contain incidental comment on the contemporary scene as it unfolded.

In the article about Sir Daniel McMillan's home on Wellington Crescent the effects of the depression are reflected in the diminished value of the household items that were auctioned. The effects of the suppressed economy were also evident in the fact that the house was demolished, even though it was relatively new, because no one could afford to live in such a large house. Many other larger homes were saved from a similar fate by becoming institutions.

The effects of the war years can also be seen. People mention sons or daughters in uniform, special entertaining for the troops, and the housing shortage. Again, as no new construction was being started, older, larger homes were divided into suites to fill the need for more accommodation.

The bulk of the demolition dates reflects the boom of the sixties. The downtown streets of the old Hudson's Bay Company Reserve—Carlton, Edmonton, Kennedy, and Vaughan—lost their residential character but were not yet ready financially for building development. In 1961, thirty per cent of the downtown area was taken up by surface parking.

The Downtown Plan was subsequently devised to remedy this situation. The City and private developers joined hands to provide modern, highrise buildings. Gone were the fine craftsmanship evidenced in the mahogany or oak woodwork, the plaster ornaments, the stained glass, and the wrought iron which embellished the homes described in this book. It is the passing of this evidence of our early roots that is to be regretted the most in these changing times.

With the renewed interest now being shown in the preservation of buildings from earlier years, the histories of these older buildings have taken on much importance. Researchers are finding that, in many cases, Miss Gibbons' articles are a prime source of information about the

building that had formerly occupied the site of some modern high-rise apartment. These reminiscences represent one of the few remaining links with these buildings of the past.

This book was originally printed in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Junior League of Winnipeg. Throughout the course of several history-related projects, League members began to feel that it would be worthwhile to publish "Stories Houses Tell" in book form. Miss Gibbons, herself, had made a beginning, updating many of the articles, and making an initial selection of those that would be suitable. She relinquished further editing to members of the Junior League. Sixty-four articles were chosen for publication, and those houses were researched for building and demolition dates where needed. The articles are presented with the dateline under which they first appeared in the newspaper in order that the contemporary reader may understand references relating to the time in which the article was written.

The articles that appear here were chosen because of the physical features of the house, the cultural or social setting that the story unfolds, or because of the influence the owner had on the history of the city. Many of Winnipeg's early citizens, for example, have been commemorated in the names of city streets.

The people of Winnipeg and many other parts of Canada have reacted with enthusiasm to the book and it has been a best seller in local bookstores. It is gratifying to those involved to look back on a successful project. The book now appears in its second printing, without the sponsorship of the Junior League of Winnipeg. Errors that were brought to my attention by readers have been corrected. I hope these stories of the fascinating background of our city will continue to reach a widening audience.

Rosemary Malaher
Executive Director
Manitoba Historical Society

160 Syndicate Street

Building constructed 1884

Article appeared February 4, 1948

This old house on Point Douglas was built in 1884 from the packing cases the glass came in to construct the first CPR roundhouse in 1882.

The glass came from Pilkington's at St. Helen's, Lancashire; the glazier came from Monmouth, Wales. He was Thornton Simmons who arrived in Winnipeg at the height of the boom, June 14, 1882. "It was known as the Canvas City then," recalled a son, George Simmons, 164 Syndicate Street. "All my life I've heard the stories of those tents. I was one of the kids who lived in a tent where the Royal Crown soap works was later [SE King and Henry]. Lots changed hands so fast that this piece of ground sold for nine hundred dollars; a year later Father bought the adjoining lot for one hundred and fifty dollars." After the boom broke there was no money in circulation. That was how the packing cases came to be used for house building.

"Some of the pieces of lumber were no longer than twenty-four inches and only six inches wide. But Father was a patient man. He pieced them all together and made this house in the sketch. Yes, inside and out, the only thing bought was the siding to cover it. Later, when the contractors remodeled it, you should have heard the language! Their saws wouldn't cut through nails," chuckled the son. The sketch is made from a photograph which was taken in 1898.

The packing case house stood west of Main Street on Henry Avenue. It was called Common Street then. In the winter of 1885 it was skidded down to its Syndicate Street site. During the moving a thaw came "and we camped for two days where Watkin's factory now is [Higgins and Annabella]. Then a cold spell came and more snow and we finished the trip."

In 1888 Thornton Simmons built a second house next door, now the family home at 164. The packing case house was added to with the years and eventually a married son moved in. It stayed in the family until eight years ago. You'd never recognize it now with its covering of red insulbrick.

Leaded stained glass windows in Winnipeg's early churches (Old Christ Church and All Saints) were made by Thornton Simmons. Number 164 has many samples of his art as a glass fitter. The front door has scores of tiny pieces set in lead. The outer border is made of rectangles, all different colors. You can peek through a red piece and see red snow, a lavender piece and see houses the color of violets. Yes, you may even choose a rose-colored world. The centre is made up of rounds, diamonds, pear-shaped pieces of plain and opaque glass, studded with "jewels" faceted like precious stones. The door at the end

of the hall leading into the dining room has a varicolored border. The polished oak corner cupboard in the dining room has leaded glass. "Father did it as a sample for a big log house, but the people decided against leaded glass. So I made it into a cupboard for mother's dishes," said George.

Mrs. Simmons was adept in the glass cutting art too. When her husband got the contract for the CPR roundhouse at Salter Street he fell ill. Unperturbed, she went "week after week to the railway yards and cut the glass for the men. Yes, in the days of skirts sweeping the ground. She never put on overalls, not mother."

All over the house were glass cases of Manitoba birds mounted on branches. "Seton Thompson said it was one of the best collections he'd seen. Father was a great bird man," added George. The dining room had fox and deer heads leaping out from the walls. "We mounted those ourselves," he said. The housekeeper showed more bird cases in the upstairs bedrooms and gun cases in the hall.

Thornton Simmons had seven sons and one daughter. One son died last week. The others are: George, Owen, Thornton, Robert, Francis, Oscar, and Mrs. John Murray. Oscar, who is foreman at Winnipeg Paint and Glass, was given the glass cutting diamond his mother used to make the roundhouse for the railway.

Owen, the last surviving member of his family, muses about his home. It is still liveable while the Royal Alexandra Hotel, the best building on Point Douglas, was pulled down. "Imagine that," he says, "and we lived in Canvas City, right there!"

