

Museum Musings: Gentlemen's Clubs

I was researching the McKay family when I came across an article written by Harry Ross in February of 1932. At that time, Ross was a retiree who was active in the local Historical Society. Born in Nova Scotia in 1859, Ross came west with the North West Mounted Police in 1879, and to Prince Albert in 1880. He retired from the force in 1884 and became the community's deputy sheriff. He later became the District's sheriff in 1887, and then became the collector of Inland Revenues at the Land Titles Office, from which position he retired in 1927.

In his article, Ross described the first gentlemen's club in Prince Albert, formed in 1881 by such old timers as Colonel Sproat, Elliot Napier, and Lawrence Clarke. They initially managed to attract up to thirty members, all of whom enjoyed well prepared meals in their cozy retreat.

The club was housed in a one-story building on property which is now bounded by 2nd Avenue West and 13th Street. It employed a steward to manage its affairs in a manner similar to such clubs in the much larger eastern communities. Ross noted that whist, rather than poker, was the predominant card game played on the premises as the members were "middle aged, sedate individuals".

During this time, it was necessary for the Lieutenant Governor to issue liquor permits not exceeding two gallons per person a year. So, Ross indicated, there was not much drinking involved.

Whether this resulted in difficulties attracting and keeping members, the club could not be sustained financially and the building was eventually sold to Ex-sheriff Hughes who rented it to the Indian Department for their office. When their tenancy ceased, Hughes sold the building to a hotel company which added two stories to the structure and named it the Royal Hotel. According to her diary, one of the rooms in the hotel became a school room in which Lucy Maud Montgomery received her local education. It also continued as a centre of the community's social life. Maud wrote about how the classroom was used as the women's cloak room during functions such as dances.

It is unclear when the next gentlemen's club was opened. I have seen several references to how Charles Mair's home was the centre of many entertainments within the community during his second residency in Prince Albert. Both Mair and his wife welcomed people into their home for both business and social occasions. One of these stories tells of an evening's entertainment that was planned very quickly. It came together so quickly, apparently, that there was no



time for those attending to receive a liquor permit from the Lieutenant Governor. Rumour has it that both the local Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy were in attendance and that, just possibly, the wine was of a sacramental variety! Regardless, the evening was apparently enjoyed by all.

A second club room was eventually opened on the upper floor of Kernaghan's Hardware store at 800 Central Avenue. A small club, but according to Harry Ross, it developed into a "booze joint" and quickly failed.

About 1911, A.J. Manville and several others formed a social club which met in a room in the upper floor of the McKay and Adam Block (1028 1st Avenue West). However, a fire occurred in the block, putting the club out of commission.

These failures did not forestall the impetus for a gathering place for Prince Albert's leading citizens, and the following year Manville, along with individuals like financial broker Peter Jack, started a campaign for the formation of the Prince Albert Club. A suitable building was erected east of the Empress Theatre, with a tunnel connecting the two buildings. It was run in the manner of the Halifax Club, one of the oldest clubs in Canada. The Prince Albert Club was well appointed and carried a stock of the finest imported liquors. At each chair there was a push button, or buzzer, for use by its occupant if he were to become thirsty. Ross indicated that the playing cards, which were printed in London, England, were occasionally used for poker, but that this was infrequent and for small stakes only.

Unfortunately, like the first gentlemen's club in Prince Albert, the local money market became tight as a result of the Great War and the debacle of La Colle Falls, and the Prince Albert Club ceased operations in 1916. The building was then utilised by the Saskatchewan Provincial Police, and later by the provincial government. Many of us still recall visiting it when it was the city's library, never realising that it was probably the only library in all of Canada to have both a wine bar and police cells.

By 1925, with Frederick Taylor as its president and J.P. Curror as its secretary treasurer, the Keewatin Club had been organised. It apparently ran without a permanent club room until 1932 when, with Hilary Agnew acting as its secretary treasurer, it was located in the City Park Apartments (the former police station on Avenue B). By 1934, the club had moved into its own building just north of the City Park Apartments, and remained there until 1947 when it relocated to a new building on the corner of 1st Avenue East and 13th Street. Another change had occurred in 1943 when the Keewatin Club became the Prince Albert Club. Today, after considerable renovation and expansion the building houses the Prince Albert Indian-Metis Friendship Centre, as it has since June of 1970.

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January 30th, 2020