



## **ASSINIBOINE PARK PAVILION**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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## ASSINIBOINE PARK PAVILION

A stately landmark in Winnipeg's largest park, the Assiniboine Park Pavilion, and its earlier prototype, provide a visual focus to the centre of the park.

Winnipeg's first Public Parks Board, formed in 1893,<sup>1</sup> conceived the idea of a large city park based upon the formal parks developed in England and Europe in the nineteenth century. In 1904, the Board purchased the initial 283 acres of woodland along the Assiniboine River, and hired a landscape architect from Montreal to draft a plan for the park.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, spaces were levelled, curvilinear paths and roads laid out, and thousands of trees, shrubs and flowers planted. The decision was made early to keep zoo animals exclusively at this one park, while other parks were planned and built.<sup>3</sup>

Although the park did not formally open until 1909, it was in general use before that time. The first pavilion was erected in 1908, the design of John D. Atchison of Winnipeg. This was a true pavilion: ornamental and visually striking, and of light frame construction intended for summer use only. Built at a cost of \$19,000, the pavilion was broad and sweeping with many windows and partly enclosed loggias. Above the broad hipped roof rose a capped 90 foot tower which permitted the pavilion to be seen over the trees, and which housed a massive water tank and pump for the water system carried from the river to the park.

Two pergolas, or vine-covered walkways between two rows of columns, led from the pavilion on either side of a pond. These walkways, which still exist, were very popular in the early days and led to a small open annex where strollers could rest in shaded comfort. The pergolas are formal and highly stylized, compatible with the manicured gardens and stately promenades which typified the early park.

Within the pavilion were a dance hall, a banquet hall, as well as lunch and catering facilities. It became a centre of social life in the park but also served the city for many official functions of a social nature. Patrons were less mobile than at present, and tended to stay at the park for longer

periods so that the pavilion provided an essential service, and one that was heavily used.

As the park and zoo grew and developed, demands on the pavilion continued to expand. While funds were prioritized to other parts of the park, the pavilion fell into a state of disrepair until by 1925, the Parks Board urged a complete rebuilding of the pavilion. The building had chronic structural problems which, minor repairs simply could not resolve. The problem was abruptly solved on 27 May 1929 when the original pavilion burnt to the ground in a violent early morning fire.<sup>4</sup>

The loss of the building was complete, although the goldfish in the pond survived. In an emergency meeting the next day, the Parks Board unanimously approved the construction of a new pavilion, and named architects Northwood and Chivers to the job.<sup>5</sup> As the city carried insurance to the value of \$16,000, the board determined to raise funds to a maximum of \$75,000. They hoped to have the new pavilion open by the end of that summer but as it turned out they were overly optimistic.

In July, bids were out for the pavilion construction with eight firms tendering and the firm of J.A. Trembly awarded the contract.<sup>6</sup> Progress was steady, with the frame erected in early September, but a shortage of steel later slowed the construction.<sup>7</sup> The final touches were made the following spring and the new pavilion opened 24 May 1930, a year after the fire. Parks Board retrospectively viewed the fire as a mixed blessing, because the old pavilion was in a terrible state and with the onset of the depression, it would be impossible to build a new one.<sup>8</sup>

Although the new pavilion is much larger, it imitates the shape of the old one. It is also broad, with two wings of truncated gable roofs joined by a centre section which serves as a base for the tower. The new pavilion tower, which is strictly ornamental, also serves as the visual centre of the park. The impact of the tower is as deliberate as the old pavilion tower.

Cyril Chivers, the pavilion's architect, designed it as an "international building" with elements of style drawn from various cultures.<sup>9</sup> The overall impression is of an English cottage, with half timbering, small-pane windows, and a roof that is very European. The rough-cast stucco, wood,

glass and shingles give an impression of proper country living while the scale and textures compliment the surrounding trees. The pergolas from the 1908 building were retained and continued on either side of the new pavilion.

The pavilion is 72 feet wide and 110 feet deep.<sup>10</sup> It cost \$96,000 to complete and furnish.<sup>11</sup> The ground floor contained large "refreshment rooms" with access from either wing. The kitchens were in the two wings. On the second floor they introduced a dining room and a dance hall with accommodation for 500 people.<sup>12</sup> The third floor was never furnished.

Architects Northwood and Chivers designed several prominent Winnipeg buildings, as well as working independently. Among their best-known works together, are the Canadian Wheat Board Building (1929), the Winnipeg Auditorium (1932) and the Federal Building (1935) on Main Street.

The zoo and park continued to grow, with many more acres being acquired by Parks Board, and more animals added to the zoo collection. The pavilion saw use mainly as a refreshment stand while most of its space stood empty. It was never the social centre that the old pavilion was, although in the 1930s and 40s, the upper floor was used on occasion. The nature of visits to the park changed while the park itself took on a more casual and sporty air.

More often the pavilion was used as a backdrop to events taking place on the open grounds immediately north of the pavilion. Band concerts were very popular right up to the present, and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet dances on summer evenings with the pavilion and trees as their stage set. When the fur levy ceremony was reenacted before Queen Elizabeth in 1959, the park used the pavilion setting and a new bandstand to stage the event before 15,000 people.<sup>13</sup>

The year 1961 saw Winnipeg's park system transferred to the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Corporation of Winnipeg, which prompted a decade of revitalization in Assiniboine Park unparalleled since the pre-1914 era. The zoo was greatly enlarged and many existing animal facilities remodelled. The sports facilities were upgraded and winter attendance greatly encouraged by opening the duck pond, putting in a better coffee shop and the planning of the new Tropical

House. In readiness for the field hockey event of the Pan-American games in 1967, the fields and buildings around the cricket grounds received a facelift. As part of this uplift, there were several important changes made to the pavilion, which reclaimed it from two decades of neglect.

In 1965, the parking lot to the south of the pavilion was replaced by a pond with a small fountain. Some renovations were made on the second floor. In 1968, major renovations to the second floor saw new washrooms installed, a tile floor laid and better lighting installed, and, for the first time in several decades, this large area had a definite use.<sup>14</sup> The following year, the refreshment facilities on the main floor were renovated and the rooms remodelled for the first time since the pavilion opened 40 years earlier. Provision was then made for a souvenir shop and a park museum.<sup>15</sup> In 1979, interlocking brick was used to repave the walkways around the pavilion.

Nearly two million people visit Assiniboine Park each year, which makes it the city's most popular park as well as its largest one.<sup>16</sup> The pavilion is a strong visual landmark of the park and the city has used it as a symbol of the parks system in its promotional literature. Eclectic though its style may be, this is an important building in the city.

FOOTNOTES--

1. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg: a Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914. McGill-Queen's University Press 1975 p. 268.
2. The History and Development of Assiniboine Park and Zoo in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The City of Winnipeg Parks and Recreation Department, December 1972, p. 5.
3. Kildonan Park opened in 1910, Sargent Park in 1911 and St. Vital Park in 1929.
4. "Pavilion of City Park Falls Victim to Early Morning Conflagration" Manitoba Free Press 27 May 1929.
5. "Parks Board to Provide New Pavilion at Park" Manitoba Free Press 28 May 1929.
6. "Consider Pavilion Tenders" Manitoba Free Press 11 July 1929.
7. "City Park Pavilion" Manitoba Free Press 19 October 1929.
8. The History and Development of Assiniboine Park, op. cit., p. 15.
9. "Architect and ID graduate look at park pavilion" Winnipeg Tribune 18 May 1968.
10. City of Winnipeg Permits No. 3775 17 August 1929.
11. City of Winnipeg Municipal Manual 1933.
12. "Building Conditions at Western Points" Western Canada Contractor July 1929 p. 10.
13. The History and Development of Assiniboine Park, op. cit., p. 25.
14. An article in the Tribune 18 May 1968 may well have sparked these changes. The pavilion's architect, Cyril Chivers, expressed regret that so little use was made of his building. Chivers noted that the pavilion could easily be made into a year-round facility. In a preface to her ideas for the building, an interior design student quoted in the same article stated that the building was in good structural condition and that it grieved her personally to see the landmark fall into disuse. Further, she advanced sketches for renovating all three floors of the structure to make the space vibrant.
15. The History and Development, op. cit., p. 31.
16. 1979 Annual Report, City of Winnipeg 1979 p. 107.

## ASSINIBOINE PARK PAVILION



Plate 1 – Assiniboine Park Pavilion, 1927 (designed by John D. Atchison and erected in 1908).  
(Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, P. McAdam Collection, #304.)

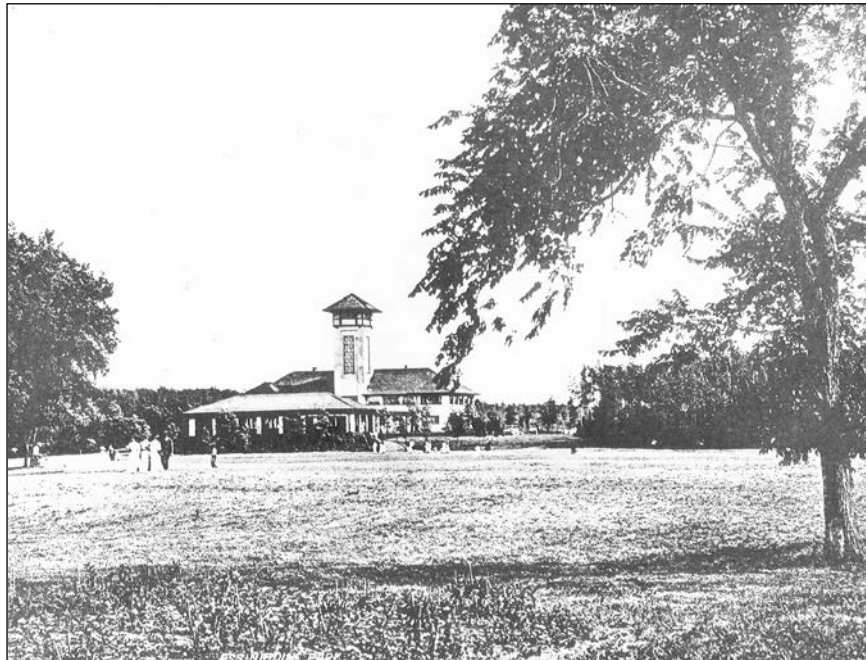


Plate 2 – Assiniboine Park Pavilion, ca. 1915. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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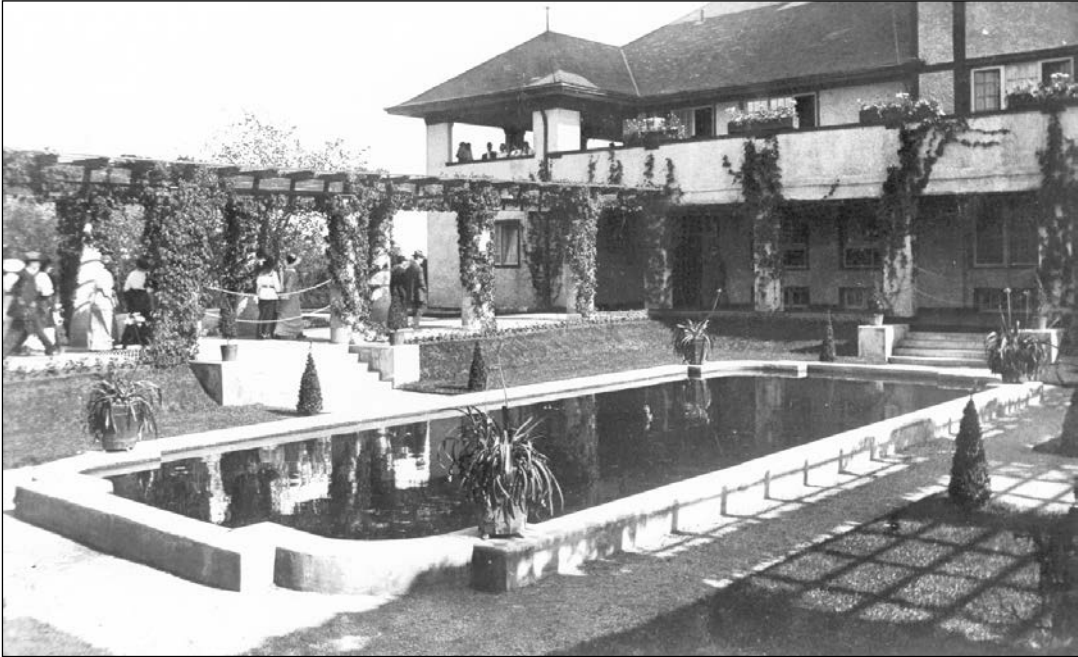


Plate 3 – Assiniboine Park Pavilion, lily pond and pergola (both survived the 1929 fire), ca.1914. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Assiniboine Park Pavilion, ca.1956. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4750.)