

THE SASKATOON CONVALESCENT HOSPITAL
AND
VOCATIONAL TRAINING SCHOOL

1916 – 1920

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From 1917-1920 the Dominion government operated a convalescent hospital and vocational training school in Saskatoon's old YMCA building. The building was offered rent-free to the government by the citizens of Saskatoon as a vocational school to help soldiers disabled by war to re-integrate into civilian society. The correspondence found on this subject in the City of Saskatoon Archives reveal a great deal about the way in which local and federal governments interacted. Although expressing their deepest appreciation to the City for making the property available, and acknowledging the "inestimable value" of the gift, the attitude of the federal government toward the City in negotiations with the City was one of complete arrogance. Civic officials were treated with near-disdain both by the local representatives of the various federal bureaucracies involved and – when they appealed for help to authorities in Ottawa – by them as well.

This paper will concentrate on the negotiations which led to establishment of the Convalescent Hospital / Vocational Training School in 1917, and how it was wound up three years later. A complicating factor to all this is the relationship between the City and the YMCA, which had appealed to Council in October of 1916 for protection from creditors who were about to foreclose.

It is not possible to say from the records available here how the day-do-day operations of the facility were carried out. Surprisingly, there appears to be very little in the local newspaper about it. Although the existence of the facility is well known it does not receive any more than the most passing of references in the various published sources. Information relating to the numbers of patients, identities of instructors, subjects studied, etc, do not appear to be available locally. Such information may be available elsewhere, however, and it is likely that the administration and activities of the facility here mirrored those of similar institutions in other parts of the country.¹

The old YMCA building was located at 500 Spadina Crescent, on the corner of Spadina and 20th Street East from 1913 - 1968. In 1969 the YMCA moved to its present location at 25 - 22nd St. East. The old building was demolished in the fall of 1971.²

Late in 1916 the YMCA was experiencing some financial difficulties. It had payments in arrears to both the Great West Life Assurance Company (to which it owed a \$40,000 mortgage and \$3,911.75 past due) and the Merchants Bank of Canada (to which it owed a second mortgage of 42,212.72). By October of that year Great West was in a position to commence foreclosure proceedings and the Merchants Bank had begun legal proceedings against "certain gentlemen" who had co-signed the loan.³

At a meeting on 23 October 1916 the YMCA Board of Directors (which almost certainly included some or all of the "certain gentlemen" referenced above) agreed to send a delegation to the City to propose that it purchase the land and building for a sum

¹ In some sources the date of 1915 is incorrectly given for the establishment of the hospital in Saskatoon.

² City of Saskatoon Building Standards Branch. Permit files.

³ Minutes of YMCA Board Meeting, 23 October 1916. City of Saskatoon Archives. D500-X-1000. 1916 Henderson Directory.

sufficient to pay off the loans. The YMCA would then be allowed to occupy the property under a yearly lease agreement.⁴

That the City would agree to this deal was almost a foregone conclusion. The Committee sent by the YMCA to make their proposal consisted of Donald MacLean (a lawyer, later judge, and leader of the Saskatchewan Conservative Party from 1917-1921); William J. Bell (a financier, he was City Alderman in 1906-1907 and was the General Secretary of the YMCA, a member of the University Board, the Public School Board and the High School Board); and James R. Wilson (Saskatoon pioneer, Mayor of Saskatoon, 1903-1904 and 1907-1908). The list of those standing up to speak in favour of the proposition at Council read like a “Who’s Who” of the City. In addition to the above named there were: J.F. Cairns (a wealthy businessman, he opened Saskatoon’s first flour mill in 1902 and later became an alderman); James Clinkskill (Saskatoon pioneer, Mayor of Saskatoon, 1911-1912); Malcolm Isbister (Saskatoon postmaster and Mayor of Saskatoon in 1905, one-time President of the Board of Trade, among other things); Dennis Shannon (owned a local construction company) and William Hopkins (real estate developer, alderman from 1906-1908 and Mayor from 1909-1910).⁵

The matter was passed to the Finance Committee which recommended that the City submit a bylaw (no. 1036) for the raising of \$100,000 through the issue of debentures for the purpose of taking over the property. (The debenture was to be repaid over 30 years. The difference between the actual debt - 86,124.47 - and the amount of the issue was to cover the associated costs). The debenture issue was to be placed before the burgesses of the City at the Municipal elections in December. If approved by the voters, the YMCA would then be able to lease the building from the City for \$4,000 per year.⁶

Given that the total value of the land and building was in the order of \$150,000, this was rather a good deal for the City.

The bylaw passed easily at the civic elections on December 11, and it received third reading at Council two days later. Before it could be acted upon, however, it had to be approved by the Provincial Legislature. Prior to that happening it was suggested that the property, rather than being leased back to the YMCA, should be offered to the federal Military Hospitals Commission in to be used “for the purposes of a vocational training school for returned soldiers or for any other purposes of said Commission”.⁷

This proposal seems to have come from the YMCA Board of Directors, although precisely how it came up in the first place is not clear from the available sources. A letter from the YMCA to the City makes reference to resolution passed by the Board at a meeting on 14 December:

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Duerkop, John, Saskatoon’s History in Street Names (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2000). It is no coincidence that every single one of these gentlemen has a street named after him in Saskatoon. They were the embodiment of Saskatoon’s social, economic and political elite.

⁶ COS Archives, D500-X-1000.

⁷ Ibid., Petition to Legislature, undated.

WHEREAS the directors having tentatively offered the use of the Y.M.C.A. building to the Military Hospitals Commission of Canada in the event of [Bylaw 1036] passing, WHEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that we inform the City Council that notwithstanding the provision in the By-law whereby the building is to be leased to the Y.M.C.A. we release the City from that obligation to the intent and end that the City may offer the Building to the Military Hospitals Commission of Canada as a Convalescent Home and Training School for returned soldiers taking vocational training in the province.⁸

This letter was presented to Council at its meeting on December 18. Council therefore resolved to offer the building to the Military Hospitals Commission “for the purpose of a *vocational training school*”. Negotiations between the City and the Military Hospitals Commission began immediately and were carried on by letter and telegram, and to a degree through the efforts of Frederick E. Harrison, one-time civic alderman and Mayor (1912-1913) but at that time serving with the federal Department of Labour. During these discussions an apparent mis-communication appears to have occurred which was to have an effect on the final outcome.

While the YMCA had originally mentioned a Convalescent Hospital be established in the building, the Council resolution addressing this specifically referred to a vocational training school. Similarly, in a telegram dated 22 January 1917, the City Commissioner states: “City has made unconditional offer of YMCA building for *vocational training centre* [italics added]. No rent, taxes or loan.”⁹ Officials in Ottawa apparently missed the part about the vocational school. Even Harrison, when he flogged the idea to the Military Hospitals Commission and to then-Prime Minister Arthur Meighen referred to the “offer [of a] hospital building.” This was clearly not the intent of Council when it offered the building. When the Mayor received the telegram from the Commission stating “Commissioner approves taking over YMCA building which will be used as a convalescent home”¹⁰. He lost no time in replying:

You will note by our official Resolution that this Building was offered to the Commission as a Vocational Training School. In my letter which was not exactly the same as the Resolution I mentioned the word Convalescent Hospital. The Council desire me to ask you... just in what capacity you intend to use the Building. They are anxious to see a Vocational School opened here...¹¹

The Commission, however, was adamant that a Convalescent hospital was what was required. The convalescent hospital in Regina was reported to be “overflowing” and the local hospitals were “congested” making it urgent that the YMCA building be turned over without delay. The City acquiesced in the face of this demand. Young wired back

⁸ Ibid., letter from W.J. Bell, YMCA, to Andrew Leslie, Saskatoon City Clerk, 16 December 1916.

⁹ Ibid., telegram from C.J. Yorath to F.E. Harrison, 22 January 1917

¹⁰ Ibid., telegram from E.H. Scammell to Mayor Young, 24 January 1917.

¹¹ Ibid., letter from Alexander Young to E.H. Scammell, 30 January 1917.

to E.H. Scammell, Secretary of the Commission offering it immediate possession.¹² As late as April, however, the City was still pushing for a Vocational Training School. A letter from the Commission dated 2 April addressed this clearly, stating that the facility was to be “primarily” a convalescent hospital with vocational classes being offered in connection with that function.

It is not immediately apparent from the records available here precisely when the Commission took over the hospital. The final agreement between the City and the YMCA regarding the purchase of the building, and between the City, the Commission and the YMCA for use as a hospital, were not actually signed until the summer of 1917 (despite which fact it was decided to date both agreement as March 12). The City was charging the Commission for water from February 23, but in later correspondence the lease agreement was considered to have begun on the March date. On the other hand, a letter dated 2 April 1917 detailed plans for alterations to the building (the addition of new sinks, added doors and other changes necessary to convert gymnasium space to hospital wards). In any case, the agreement between the City and the Military Hospitals Commission was to allow the latter use of the YMCA building for as long as necessary but for a period not exceeding 15 years.

The facility appears to have had two fairly distinct phases of use: first as a hospital for care of returned soldiers (1917-1918), then as a vocational school assisting said returned soldiers to return to civilian life (1918-1920). Although the latter use was what the City had been pushing for all along the changeover undoubtedly had little to do with the expressed wishes of City officials and more to do with an administrative re-organization at the federal level. Early in 1918 friction between the Military Hospitals Commission and the Department of Militia resulted in administration of the Military Hospital being transferred to the latter. The MHC was renamed the "Invalided Soldiers Commission" and was put in charge of vocational training of returned soldiers once they no longer required hospital treatment. No later than May of 1918 it was decided to make Saskatoon the headquarters for vocational training in Saskatchewan and to concentrate hospital activities to Moose Jaw and Regina.¹³

An article in the Saskatoon Star Phoenix dated 18 November 1918 mentions the possibility of a military hospital being established in Saskatoon, possibly in the Mohyla Institute (the old Empress Hotel) and that 200 beds were on their way to Saskatoon. No follow up article was found, however, and given the contents of official correspondence on the subject this seems unlikely.¹⁴

On 11 July 1918, City Council complained to the MP for Saskatoon (James R. Wilson) that the facility was being under-used. There were only "some 20 or 25 soldiers being boarded in the building while there is sufficient accommodation to take care of some hundreds". Mr. Leslie replied that this was due to the fact that the Vocational Training program was "only in its initiative stage" and that it was expected that "the present

¹² Ibid., telegram from Alexander Young to E.H. Scammell, 2 February 1917.

¹³ Letter of 18 July 1918. COS Archives D500-X-1001.

¹⁴ Saskatoon Star Phoenix, 18 November 1918.

accommodation in Saskatoon will not be sufficient to take care of the numbers that will be taking the Vocational Training." He added: "During the summer months, with wages so high and the need so great for farm help, the Invalided Soldiers Commission have, as I understand it, encouraged soliders who are physically fit to take employment for the summer months and to have their Vocational Training during the winter months. This accounts for very few being in training at the present time."¹⁵

F. M. Riches, Assistant Director of the Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment Board in Regina wrote to the Mayor on 20 April 1920 informing him that the establishment was to be closed at the end of August and suggesting that arrangements be made to restore the building to its previous condition. After touring the building and considering its options, the City suggested that in addition to re-decorating the building, the Department should give the equipment and furniture that was to be removed from it to the City. It was pointed out that the cost to the City during the lease period had been around \$20,000 "for interest and other charges". Wrote the Mayor:

We recognize of course that we gave the building free from rent, and we are not now asking that this be given as rental, but we would submit this proposition for your careful consideration: that perhaps one good turn deserves another."¹⁶

What seemed to Council to be a reasonable suggestion did not read that way to the local officials, who countered that if they were to hand over the furniture and equipment to the City then the City could pay for any and all necessary repairs and renovations itself. A trip to Ottawa by the Mayor to meet with the Minister (he only got as far as the Deputy Minister) failed to extract further concessions from the Department. The end result was that the City was given a list of furnishings and equipment to which it could help itself (valued \$13,000) and the federal government absolved itself of all further responsibility in the matter.

Even this was not without controversy. Hagglng continued through the summer about exactly what kitchen equipment was to be left behind and precisely how many six-foot rugs were involved. Mayor Young appears to have become impatient with the local office in Regina and started dealing directly with Ottawa. "I have taken this matter up with the Deputy Minister", he informed Riches brusquely, "and will communicate with you as soon as I hear from him."¹⁷

This did not help. The meeting with the Deputy Minister in Ottawa became itself a source of dissension as each appears to have come away with a somewhat different idea of what equipment was to be included in the transfer. The inventory that was sent to the City differed quite sharply from Mayor Young's recollection the discussion.¹⁸ It should come as no surprise that in the end the dispute was resolved in the Department's favour, ultimately by the Department simply informing the City of its pleasure in the matter and

¹⁵ Letter of 18 July 1918. COS Archives D500-X-1001.

¹⁶ Letter of 8 May 1920, D500- X-1003).

¹⁷ Letter of 19 August 1920. COS Archives D500-X-1003.

¹⁸ Various correspondence, April – August, 1920. COS Archives D500-X-1003.

declaring the case close. The Deputy Minister even went so far as to point out the generosity of the Department and to chide the Mayor for his apparent greed in demanding a better settlement from the federal government:

The equipment turned over to your city certainly has a value much in excess of the cost of any repairs that would have been necessary to the building. I can only assume that your disappointment is due to the fact that you had expected that more would have been done... I am quite sure that you appreciate the fact that living up to the letter of the agreement would have been a cheaper proposition for the Department.¹⁹

All of which misses the point completely: that the City felt it was due some sort of additional compensation for the \$20,000 expense – over and above the loss of rental income – that it had incurred in providing the property. Nevertheless, it was Mayor Young who got in the last word. “Our only disappointment,” he wrote to the Deputy Minister, “is that we had expected the agreement, as suggested between us verbally, would have been carried out.”²⁰

The YMCA re-occupied the building on 1 September 1920. The City agreed to lease it the furniture left behind for \$900 / year beginning November 1, and to defer collection of rent for the building until 1 January 1921 in order that the Association might begin collecting revenue again.

The correspondence suggests that the relationship between the two levels of government on this matter was politely acrimonious. Mayor Young unquestionably felt betrayed by the Deputy Minister in the matter of the furnishings, and (it would appear) justifiably so. There is no reason to believe that the Deputy Minister did not nod and smile politely during their meeting, then turn around and do exactly as he felt inclined to do so. As his letter makes abundantly clear, the Department felt itself well within its rights to be a great deal less generous, so perhaps he felt justified.

There may also have been personality conflicts involved. Then-Mayor Alexander Young was known to be argumentative. He had been in a long-running and very public battle with his City Commissioner, C.J. Yorath, over a variety of issues (including who got to use the City car), and his final letter to the Deputy Minister (q.v.) fairly drips with sarcasm. It is entirely possible that the officials with whom he dealt found him to be abrasive and were as a result less willing to co-operate than they might otherwise have been. As the saying goes, one gets more flies with honey than with vinegar.²¹ A more thorough investigation of the available records (particularly internal documents created by the federal departments involved) might provide interesting evidence regarding the affect of individual personalities in bureaucratic decision-making.

¹⁹ Ibid., Letter of 8 September 1920.

²⁰ Ibid., Letter of 11 September 1920.

²¹ What one then does with the flies is entirely one's own business.

