

Prince Arthur Hotel
17 Cumberland Street North



Year Built: 1911

Architect: J.D. Matheson

Added to Heritage Register: March 2, 2009

Description:

The Prince Arthur Hotel was built in 1911 during a time of great economic prosperity and optimism in the Northwest. There was much excitement in the area regarding the potential for Fort William and Port Arthur to generate profitable industry and to assert themselves as metropolises of the North. There was a general agreement that the Lakehead should be endorsed to the rest of Canada as a viable place to conduct business. Many of the buildings erected during this period reflected this optimistic attitude. Certainly, the Prince Arthur Hotel was able to be built due to the general adherence to the ‘booster philosophy’ of the time.

The idea for a new hotel in Port Arthur arose while a group of Railway executives were playing a game of cards en route to the city via train. The thought became a reality when the C. N. R. was granted permission to construct a hotel by public vote. Advertisements in local newspapers encouraged people to “Register their vote in favour of the big Canadian Northern Railway Hotel and a Greater Port Arthur.” An affirmative vote was viewed as an opportunity to “boost” Port Arthur. There was an understanding that although the hotel would cost an estimated \$250,000, the city’s economy would benefit greatly from the erection of the Prince Arthur: “while the proposition may not be

classed as industry, we should not forget that before we can attract big enterprises, we must first attract the men who are prepared to promote them.”

After a modest voter turn-out, (due perhaps to the “wind which was not such a balmy zephyr”) the decision was made to proceed with the construction. The building cost reached a whopping \$850,000, but the end result was “stately...the finest hotel from Toronto to Winnipeg.” The opening of the hotel was marked with great fanfare; an Epicurean luncheon was held (the menu boasted Caviar Canape a la Russo and Essence of Tomatoes en Tasse). The one hundred invited guests, including prominent railway men, city officials and citizens, toasted the new structure. The jubilant feeling was evident in the speeches made at this opening ceremony. Politicians from Port Arthur and Fort William cracked jokes and discussed a possible union of the towns. One reporter describes the atmosphere, stating that “every utterance was pregnant with optimistic meaning and promise for the future,” for it was believed that the hotel would attract “tourists and capital from Great Britain and the Orient.”

The Prince Arthur Hotel advertised itself as “one of the best furnished and appointed hotels on the North American continent.” The rooms were apparently well heated and lighted, each one fitted with hot and cold running water. One could acquire a room for the night for as low as \$1.00 per day. The location of the hotel was exceedingly convenient, as most early visitor to the Lakehead would arrive by steamship or by rail, and disembark at the stations near the Prince Arthur. Entrance to the hotel was a mere stroll through the terraced lawns to the lakeside entranceway.

In the early 1920’s, the Prince Arthur Hotel was the site of a nationally significant event. The story begins in 1915 in Flanders Fields, Belgium, with Canadian doctor and poet John McCrae. It was here that he noticed the blood-red poppies of the area flourished during war-time and, drawing upon the symbolism of the flower, he penned his now-famous ode to the deceased. The poem was printed in a British Journal and soon after became wide-spread and well-known. After Armistice, a French woman named Madam Guerin was working tirelessly to aid the plight of war widows and orphans. She began hand-making silk poppies and selling them in an effort to fundraise. Guerin was successful in her home country and decided to travel abroad in an attempt to encourage groups and organizations to adopt the poppy as a symbol of remembrance, as well as a means of raising funds for those affected by the war. Thunder Bay was her first stop in Canada. She held a meeting with a local Canadian Legion branch at the Prince Arthur Hotel. The legion approved of the poppy as an appropriate symbol. Within a year, all Legion branches across the country wore the poppy as a means of remembrance, a tradition that continues today.

Architecture:

The “stately” structure which is the Prince Arthur Hotel was constructed of brick and stone and adorned with a spacious two storey entranceway and a handsome marble staircase. The efforts of the contractors were highly praised, one reporter claiming it to be “a sermon in stones...every brick, cornice, lath and window frame preaches of good

workmanship.” The exterior architectural features of the Prince Arthur Hotel make this a prominent building in the streetscape of the area. Six stories high, the building boasts prominent lintels found above all upper floor windows, impressive massing, and decorative brick work on the top storey. There are slightly projecting pilasters on the stone portion of the building and a cut stone string-course between the fifth and sixth stories. The original lake side entrance had formal terraced gardens and lawns that cascaded down to the Canadian Pacific Railway Station.

The hotel underwent an expansion in 1912, and again in 1920. A dining room, barbershop, newsstand, washrooms, writing room, balcony and extra wings were added at this time. Today, the Prince Arthur Hotel is still able to retain it’s “century-old charm,” advertising itself as “the only hotel in Thunder Bay with a spectacular view of the Sleeping Giant.”



(View from Waterfront)