

Royal Edward Arms
114 May Street South



Year Built: 1929

Architect: *Dorr and Dorr* from Minneapolis

Style: Art Deco, stylization Gothic ornamentation

Notable Features: Slip-form technique used in construction of building

Designation Date: August 29th, 1988

By-Law No.: 176 – 1988

Legal Description: Plan W96 Blk B S Pt Lot 23 Pt Lot 24 Lot 25 to 37 Part Lane Adj Lot 29 Inc Row Over Lane Lot 38 Less NE Corner

Current Owner: City of Thunder Bay

Description:

Unique in its construction, design and ownership, the Royal Arms Hotel is an excellent example of the zeitgeist of Fort William in the 1920's. Discussion arose in 1927 regarding the need for hotel accommodation in the city. It was generally agreed upon that Fort William was in need of a large and luxurious hotel, as the "tide of tourist traffic" was growing, as was transient trade in the area. The railway companies at the time had been building hotels at other points and this fact raised the hopes of many community members who assumed the company would erect one in Fort William. Unfortunately the railway companies were "slow and tentative" to propose a hotel, so the community took matters into their own hands.

It was decided that Fort William needed a space which provided services not only to visiting persons, but also members of the community. Plans were drawn for a structure which would house hotel rooms, a ball room and a space to accommodate the service clubs of the city. The operation would cost an estimated half million dollars and without

the aid of the railway companies, the burden of cost fell to the citizens of Fort William. Norman M. Paterson, a local businessman, took on the cause and rallied support for the building by selling stocks for the hotel. The Fort William young men's board of trade was also instrumental in endorsing the plan.

The community responded enthusiastically, with over 800 people financially involved in the construction of the Royal Edward and a full \$419,000 raised within a few months. Construction on the hotel began approximately one year after discussion of it was initially mentioned. Seventy-five percent of the building was publicly owned, and as such a name for the building was chosen from hundreds of suggestions. The 'Royal Edward Arms' won out over 'The People's Hotel,' the 'Royal Welcome' and the 'Reliance.'

The architectural firm Dorr and Dorr, from Minneapolis was contracted to design the building. The contractor was the local architect Mr. R. E. Mason. The method employed in constructing the hotel was cutting edge. Concrete was used in the slip form technique, which meant that the structure would "follow no historic style slavishly, trying to imitate brick or stone, but would express the continuity of a homogeneous mass." Using concrete to create the eight-storey building ensured sturdiness and apparently kept the indoors significantly warmer. The end result was "one of the finest and most modern hotels operating in any centre equal to Fort William."

Upon completion in 1929, the hotel had 105 rooms, each furnished with a bath and there were an addition 21 sample rooms, which were available for day rental. The dining room seated 150 people and the kitchen was well equipped to deal with busy dinner hours, with a dishwasher capable of washing 7,000 dishes per hour, a 40 gallon soup kettle and an 8 gallon coffee urn. A large ball room, a convention hall and a banquet hall were also features of the lavish hotel.

The Royal Edward Arms was a successfully run hotel for many years. Many notable people spent nights at the hotel, including Gene Autry, Governor-General Roland Michener, John Diefenbaker, George Hees and several international hockey teams. Perhaps the most memorable visit to the Royal Edward Arms was from the Royal Family; Queen Elizabeth II visited with Prince Charles in the 1950's and although they didn't spend the night they did rent a day room. One employee remembered that the Queen was served lake trout but she didn't eat very much of it.

No longer a feasible business, the Royal Edward Arms Hotel closed its' doors in the early 1980s. The building stood vacant for three years during which time ideas of what should be done with the site were hotly debated. In the end, the Non Profit Housing Corporation succeeded in gaining substantial grant money and it was decided to convert the luxury hotel into rental units.

The conversion was overseen by Ranta and Tett Architectural Firm and virtually all of the renovation work took place indoors; "we waterblasted the exterior, to remove any scale on the building, loose concrete and loose paint...but structurally, it was very,

very sound.” One year and \$2,478,305 was needed for the transformation to occur. The 105 hotel rooms became 64 rental units with 27 bachelor, 22 one bedroom and 15 two bedroom apartments. Commercial businesses occupied much of the ground floor. Local, provincial and federal levels of government helped to support the project, which opened in 1986.

The public response to the reopening of the Royal Edward Arms was enthusiastic, many people in the city were pleased to have been provided with an alternative option to tearing down the magnificent building. Certainly, the erection and conversion of the Royal Edward Arms has offered insight into the spirit of the city. Heralded in 1929 as “civic patriotism,” citizens of Fort William proved their loyalty to the city and the area, even during a time of near economic depression. In the 1980’s upon the conversion of the hotel to apartments, the community rallied around the building once more.



Recent Photo of Royal Edward Arms

Architecture:

The aim of the directors and architect was to “secure a building of out-standing interest and beauty, consistent with the economy.” Its’ monolithic construction of concrete columns, beams, floors and walls, all reinforced together is one of the strongest construction known. The mechanistic and abstract quality of the design are in keeping with the reinforced concrete construction. The Royal Edward Arms was made with the slip-form method, a technique usually associated with grain elevators. Although the exterior has a stucco or plaster look to it, especially with the decorative work, the entire building is concrete.

Slipform Construction techniques, as this name suggests, is a sliding-form construction method of pouring vertical concrete structures. It begins with the

construction of a fixed-diameter form on top of a foundation, with a back-up support and bracing system to ensure that the form maintains its shape during movement.

Inside and outside forms create the cavity of the wall, and inside this cavity, reinforcing steel is tied together vertically and horizontally to reinforce the concrete wall. The form is then connected to jack rods with hydraulic jacks, which automatically move the form vertically in minute increments as the concrete is being poured.

Once pouring begins, it continues until the top of the structure is reached, allowing for a monolithic poured concrete structure. This method of construction is typically used on large-scale storage silos and other vertical concrete structures, such as elevator cores and batch houses.¹

R.E. Mason; Local Contractor

Mason arrived in Fort William in 1905, at the age of twenty-two in connection with the survey of the Grand Trunk railway. He became quite prominent in the area as an architect, and “many of the larger buildings stand as a monument to his skill.” He was observed as possessing a “cheery disposition” and was “always ready to say a genial word.”

R.E. Mason designed St. Paul’s Anglican Church, the Fort William Vocational Institution, the Donald Street Police Station, many of the other public schools in the area, the Kamden apartments, the Masonic temple and a wing of the McKellar hospital.

Norman Paterson (1883-1983)

Norman M. Paterson is a familiar name to many residents of Thunder Bay and students of Lakehead University. He arrived in Fort William in at a fairly young age and entered into the grain business with his father. We worked variously for the Great Northern Railway of Canada as a telegrapher and began the Paterson Steamships Limited company in 1908. Norman Paterson was the driving force behind the funding for the Royal Edward Arms. Paterson himself was the largest shareholder and his cunning business skills helped him rally support in the community, raising enough funds for the project in a few months.

Norman Paterson’s abilities and achievements were nationally recognised by Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who appointed him to the Senate in 1940; and internationally when King George VI appointed him Knight of the Order of St. John in 1945. When he retired from the Senate in 1981, he held the record for oldest active senator.

¹ Marietta Silos. *SlipForm Construction* < <http://www.mariettasilos.com/slipformconcretesilos.htm> > 2008

Mr. Paterson also served as a member of Carleton University's Board of Governors for many years, and became the first chancellor of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The university library is named in honour of him. Beyond the academic sphere he was President of the Victorian Order of Nurses. He died in 1983, a few days after his 100th birthday.

Paterson died in 1983, just after his 100th birthday. His legacy is one of generosity, the Paterson Foundation, which he established during his life focuses on offering support to community organizations in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, in the areas of education, health care, religion, social welfare and the arts.



Norman M. Paterson