

Polish Hall
818 Spring Street



Polish Pilsudski Mutual Benefit Society

Year Established: 1928

Founders: Maciej Skipinski and Jacob Skibinski

Designation Date: February 16th, 2004

By-Law No.: 28 - 2004

Legal Description: Plan 57 Blk 23 Lot 40 to 41

Current Owner: Pilsudski Polish Mutual Benefit Society of Fort William

The Polish Hall on Spring Street may be an unassuming building, but it has great historical and cultural significance. The building began its' life on land purchased by St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, located on Pruden and McMurray Streets in Fort William. The Church anticipated their congregation would grow, and therefore bought the property planning to relocate their small Brodie Street church to the Pruden site in order to construct a larger church on Brodie Street. While these plans were underway, a small, white-frame building was constructed on Pruden Street and used as a Sunday school hall and place of worship. In 1913, Knox Presbyterian Church (now Knox United) was horse-drawn to its' new Pruden Street location and the white-frame building, which St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church no longer needed, was donated to the Ruthenian Presbyterian congregation.

The Ruthenian Presbyterian Church began in 1913 when Reverend Walter Pyndykowski arrived in Fort William to minister the Ruthenian Protestant population. The Reverend conducted sermons from the homes of members of the community, which was made possible by the fact that the congregation was very small; Pyndykowski's first sermon was attended by a half dozen people. The church soon outgrew the private houses of its' members and so the decision by St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church to donate the building on Pruden Street to the Ruthenian Church was welcomed.

Although the growing Ruthenian Presbyterian was content with their new accommodation, the location was inconvenient for many members. It was therefore decided, in 1914, that the building would be moved to St. Paul Street (now Spring Street) to better serve the congregation. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church was instrumental in financially funding the relocation of the building, and so it was that St. Stephan's Ruthenian Presbyterian Church was able to officially open, debt-free, on July 5th, 1914 from their new location.

The Ruthenian Church survived for 17 years, until 1930, when a dwindling membership forced the church to close. It was at this time that the Polish Pilsudski Mutual Benefit Society would purchase the building for \$1000 and renovate the site to accommodate members of the Polish-Canadian community.

The Society was named after the 'First Marshal' of Poland, Jozef Pilsudski, who is widely regarded as responsible for regaining Poland's independence after one hundred and twenty-three years of partitions. It was founded in 1928 and meetings were held at the homes of its' members. The role of the Society was to promote community, to aid the ill and also to establish a death benefit. An integral aim of the Mutual Benefit Society was also to welcome Polish immigrants (many of whom arrived after World War One) and to teach and celebrate Polish culture.

Numerous groups and organizations have since utilized the Polish Hall as a meeting space, including the Polish Women's Club, who, during WWII knit socks and scarves for the soldiers overseas. The Polish Millennium Choir makes use of the Hall, as does the Polish Language School Committee, the Canadian Polish Congress, and the Polish Radio Program Committee. The Polish Hall is available free of charge to these organizations.

Architecture:

This building was specifically designated as a Heritage Site because of its' historical and cultural significance, not because of its architectural importance. The buildings design is reminiscent of many meeting or community halls in the early 1900s. It is a brick building with a front façade of wood-coloured siding.

'Ruthenian':

The term 'Ruthenian' denotes peoples from the area now referred to as Western Ukraine. 'Rus' was a powerful and large East Slavic principedom during the Middle Ages which would eventually disintegrate into small feudal states. The most powerful state was Moscow, and upon reunification, the territory was named 'Russia;' an allusion to the formerly powerful principedom. The peoples occupying the territory between Poland and Russia were referred to as Ruthenian, but the emerging Russian powers felt uncomfortable with the title connection to Rus. The name 'Ukraine' was therefore adopted, which translates to 'on the borderland.'

Brief History of Polish Immigration to the Lakehead:

Although the first Polish immigrant arrived in Canada in 1752, the majority of Polish immigration history to the country begins at the turn of the twentieth century, before which less than 6,000 people of Polish descent lived in the country. The first wave of immigration began in the early 1900s, with many Polish immigrants settling in the Prairie Provinces or Renfrew County, Ontario to establish an agricultural livelihood. At the Lakehead, most of the Polish immigrants were young, single men who planned on labouring in the grain elevators, or on the railroad. Many hoped to make some money and then return to Poland, although sometimes the ticket price back to Europe was so astronomical, they were forced to stay.

The second wave of Polish immigration occurred after the First World War. One scholar speculated that the reason for this movement was due to both “push and pull:”

The ‘push’ in our case was provided by the generally depressed conditions in Polish villages due mainly to gross overpopulation and lack of economic opportunities in the cities. This precluded any possibility of the rural-urban type of migration in Poland which would help to alleviate the situation of the surplus rural labor-force. The industrial base was too narrow to accommodate the vast numbers of landless peasants. Immigration abroad provided the only opportunity for improvement to the more industrious and resourceful young men and women of the Polish countryside. The main routes of immigration lead to Western Europe (France), South America (Brazil and Argentina) and the North American Continent (mainly U.S.A.). Canada exercised the ‘pull’ through the easy availability of land and other opportunities in a fast developing economy. It should be noted, however, that Canada obtained only a trickle of this large Polish migration.¹

The first Polish church appeared in Fort William in 1921, but the parish alone was not sufficient enough to meet the needs of the Polish-Canadian community. For this reason, the Polish Pilsudski Mutual Benefit Society was created. By 1930, the Society had 140 members.

¹ Kogler, Rudolf. *Democratic Profile of the Polish Community in Canada*. Polish-American History Association. < http://www.polishroots.org/paha/poles_in_canada.htm > 1968