
The 75th Anniversary of

Alberta 's Legislative Building

Moragh Macauley

For seventy-five years, from 1912 to 1987, Alberta's Legislature has been the center of political activity in the province. The optimism of the early legislators and their belief that Alberta was facing a happy and prosperous future is evident in their building project. During the early days of the province and the dark depression years, this must have been a difficult vision to maintain, and what had seemed to reflect optimism appeared to be mere pretension. Seventy-five years later however, Alberta has grown into its Legislature Building. The celebration of its anniversary provides an opportunity to applaud the foresight of the province's first political leaders and to enjoy the elegant beauty of its 'number one building'.

On September 3rd, 1912 the Alberta Legislature Building was officially opened by then Governor General of Canada, the Duke of Connaught. At that time, Edmonton was still very much a frontier city with many inhabitants living in the roughest of shelters, in tents and wooden shacks. The population of the province was, for the main part, made up of homesteaders, recent immigrants who had come to settle the land and make new lives for themselves.

The Legislature Building, conspicuous by its size and classically inspired design spoke of an optimism about the future of Alberta on the part of its designers and builders. That vision proved an accurate one. The simple grace and beauty of the building has withstood the test of time. From within its walls, much of the history of Alberta, a story of remarkable progress, has been shaped and since its opening

it has been recognized as the most important of Alberta's historical buildings.

Alberta's first legislative session in 1906 opened in Thistle Rink, an arena used for skating and curling. It was



Alberta's Legislative Building

the largest building in the city and the opening drew a crowd of four thousand guests and well-wishers. At the time, Edmonton was only the provisional capital; no permanent selection had been made as the federal government had elected to allow the province to choose the

Moragh Macauley was employed by the Office of the Speaker under the Priority Employment Program. During her six-month term she did research for an upcoming book on the Legislative Building.

site. The choice between Edmonton and Calgary was a contentious one. The two cities, then as now, were serious rivals and selection as capital city was not only an honour but financially beneficial as civic growth would be assured. While Albertans waited to find out which would be chosen, the Legislative Assembly met in Edmonton at the MacKay Avenue School from 1906 to 1908 and then in a hall annexed to the government-owned Terrace Building until 1911.

Plans for a permanent Legislature Building commenced as soon as Edmonton was chosen as the permanent capital. The choice of a site did not take much deliberation as there was one spot in the city that combined availability, a fine view of the river valley, and historic connections of some distinction. This was the area where the old Fort Edmonton had been located. Edmonton had been a large trading center for the Hudson's Bay Company. The post had flourished under the dynamic leadership of John Rowand, Chief Factor of the Fort, one of the early West's more colourful characters and administrator of much of the area that would later be Alberta. No longer in use, the old Fort still stood. It was decided that the Alberta Legislature be constructed directly to the north of the old fort. One government official stated that: "While it is with a degree of pride and pleasure that we note the changed conditions from the fur traders' life to a prosperous civilization, we must admit the feeling that we are, after all, only aiming to establish for our people the most important and imposing structure in the Province upon a site in our judgement well suited for the purpose, and in doing so following in the footsteps of the officers of the historic trading company who established themselves upon the same ground two generations before."

On October 12, 1906 the final sale of 21 acres at \$4,000 an acre by the Hudson's Bay Company to agents of the Alberta government was made in London, England.

Concentration on design and construction of the building soon began. The task of design was given to the Public Works Department. In May, 1906 and early 1907, plans presented by Public Works were rejected because they did not appeal to the minister, W. H. Cushing. He thought they were modelled too closely on the design of British Columbia's Legislature Building.

Cushing and then Premier Alexander Rutherford had a different style in mind. They were both acquainted with and impressed by the popular Beaux-Arts school of architecture, and sought someone who could provide them with a design in that style. During 1906 and 1907, Cushing and Rutherford travelled to the United States to view various capital buildings. St. Paul, Minnesota particularly impressed them. In September 1907, Allan Merrick Jeffers, an American from Rhode Island, was appointed Provincial Architect. He remained in the position until 1911 when he was replaced by Richard Palin Blakey, an Englishman, who was to be Provincial Architect until 1923. Jeffers was responsible for the substance of the building, the exterior and basic interior layout, while Blakey exerted an influence on many details of the interior.

Though an approved design was not presented to the government until September, 1907 excavation of the building site had begun in August, 1907, and changes were made to the exterior design into 1908. It was expected that the project would cost 1.25 million dollars and be finished by 1910. This was not to be the case. Delays in construction pushed the final cost over two million dollars and the work was not completed until early 1913.

The first and greatest setback occurred during the summer of 1908. As construction of the foundation continued patches of quicksand were discovered underneath the site. This necessitated the costly and time-consuming process of driving-in concrete piles before the footings, which were embedded in channel beams, could be set into the ground.

The steelwork on the building was started in 1909, and, on October 1st of that year, Earl Grey, Governor General of Canada, laid the cornerstone. Situated at the northeast corner of the building, it measures four feet by five feet and is marked by a brass plaque. Underneath it are copies of each of the three Edmonton newspapers of the day, coins and currency, a copy of the pay sheet, a list of officials who had supervised construction and a complete set of building plans. These plans are the only existing originals. All others were destroyed in a fire in the Public Works offices in 1922.

Materials used in construction were brought into Edmonton from a variety of places. The basement, first storey exterior and front steps are of a granite shipped from Vancouver Island. The rest of the Legislature Building's exterior, with the exception of the massive columns of the front portico, is constructed of yellowish-brown Paskapoo sandstone obtained from Calgary's Glenbow Quarry. The hue of the stone is unusual and was unobtainable elsewhere in the province.

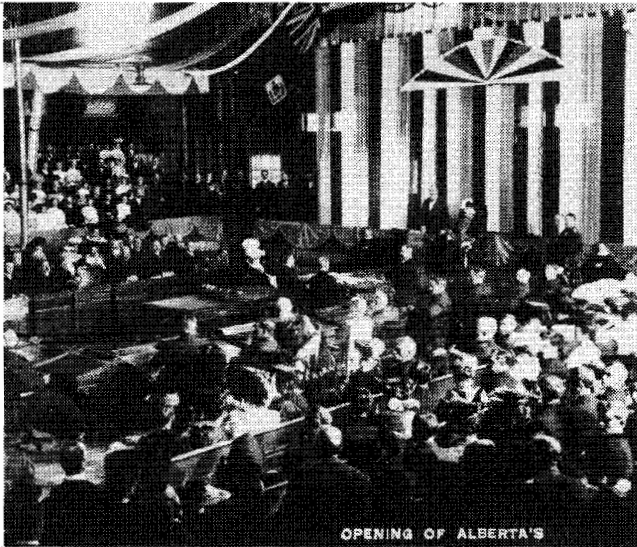
In order to accommodate the demand for the sandstone, the government purchased the quarry. Excavation of the stone and its transportation to Edmonton was carried out under government supervision. The quarry is now exhausted and covered by the waters of the Glenbow Reservoir.

During the summer of 1911 much of the exterior of the building was completed. By November members of the Assembly could meet in the Chamber, though the interior was incomplete. In fact, the interior was not completely finished until early 1913, some months after the official opening.

The Legislature Building is in the form of a cross, with the central part extending north and south. This central area contains the Rotunda, Library, Grand Staircase, and Assembly Chamber. The center is flanked by long east and west wings which contain offices for ministers, members of the Assembly, and administrative staff. Until the early 1970s, much of the building was used by civil servants while ministers and members had their offices in other locations. That pattern has since been changed, although

the building is too small to allow all members office space and many use the nearby Legislature Annex.

At the center of the cross is the large dome which, with the Rotunda, is one of the more striking architectural features of the building. The dome is covered with terracotta tiles that have been treated with a mixture of cement and linseed oil to compensate for expansion and contraction caused by temperature changes which can be extreme. The drum of the dome is encircled by eight high-arched windows and surrounds a gallery slightly



Opening of Alberta's First Legislature in 1906

above the main roof level. At the top of the dome is a lantern or 'lookout' tower which is a small room, now closed to the public. It offers a fine view of both the North Saskatchewan River Valley and central Edmonton.

Visitors to the building view the rotunda immediately upon entrance. In the center is a fountain surrounded by seasonal flowers grown in the Legislature greenhouses. This structure was installed to honour Queen Elizabeth's 1959 visit to the province. Regimental colours of Edmonton Battalions hang from the second storey railing.

Beyond the fountain is the grand staircase leading to the Assembly Chamber. Ringing the rotunda are massive marble columns, each made up of fifteen and three quarter tons of marble. Artisans were brought from Italy to cut and lay the three types of marble used in finishing the building's interior: green from Pennsylvania for the base of the Chamber; light grey from Quebec for the pillars, the base of the rotunda, the halls and the main section of the staircase; and a dark grey marble from Italy for the railings of the staircase and the fountain.

The Assembly Chamber is on the third floor of the Legislature Building. It is a high domed room of late Victorian design, lit by hundreds of light bulbs, ringed with galleries and topped with stained glass skylights.

The Chamber and the Rotunda have both undergone renovations. The Rotunda was painted in its original colour, a grey white which complements the marble, and the Chamber was changed substantially. New green carpeting, chairs, and mahogany panelling improve the look of the room, particularly when it is seen on television. Coverage of Question Period is broadcast to many Alberta communities and an updating of the sound and video systems was long overdue.

New electronic equipment means the Chamber is less cluttered with electronic paraphernalia and future improvements can be integrated easily. Changes were also made to the public and members' galleries. More seating was added, as was room for a greater number of wheelchairs. Loudspeakers were installed in each gallery as the Chamber's acoustics have always been poor. The architectural integrity of the room was maintained throughout the changes, and these have met with approval from the public and especially from those who work in the Chamber.

Future improvements are planned when it becomes financially possible. These include aids for the hearing-impaired, television monitors for the galleries, automated cameras mounted in the walls and digital timers for each member.

While the Legislature Building itself has changed little since it was built, such is not the case for the grounds. In 1912, the Legislature overlooked the ruins of Fort Edmonton, the river valley to the south and a residential district to the north. In 1915, Fort Edmonton was torn down and a bowling green set up in its place. A cairn now marks the site of its northeast bastion. Great effort has been put into landscaping the area to the south of the building and it has long been one of Edmonton's best kept and popular parks.

Various plans to create a park-like setting on the grounds themselves were either shelved or financially impossible, and legislators and visitors looked out on to a busy street and other government buildings. During the 1970s, plans for change were made and, this time, carried out. Buildings were levelled, a street diverted, and tunnels connecting the various government buildings in the area dug. Aboveground an enormous reflecting pool, a fountain, flower beds and lawns make up the new grounds. It is an area where many city residents enjoy summer lunch hours or afternoons.