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## THE TEMPLE BUILDING 1890-2000 AND BEYOND

### H. David Vuckson

The Temple Building, a landmark 3-storey structure on the west side of Hurontario St. between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets stood from 1890 to 2000 when it was destroyed by fire. Constructed by Collingwood's Wilson Brothers who were famous for their fine woodworking skills, the Temple was designed by local architect Thomas Kieswetter (1851-1891). In his short life, Kieswetter, after coming to Collingwood following the Great Fire of 1881, designed a number of residences for prominent citizens in town (Charles Telfer, John Wright, James Lindsay) and commercial blocks for Hall Telfer, the *Enterprise-Messenger* Newspaper and Bernard Callary among others. He also collaborated with another Collingwood architect, Fred T. Hodgson, on the rebuilding of the Town Hall/Grand Opera House after it was destroyed by fire in August 1890 after being open for only two months. When my great-granduncle Fred O'Brien enumerated Thomas Kieswetter and his family on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1891 for the Canadian Census, the architect had only six weeks left to live. He left behind a wife and six children ranging in age from 3 to 19. He was age 40.

One of Kieswetter's grandest legacies was the Temple Building commissioned by two fraternal organizations, the Masonic Lodge and the Oddfellows Lodge. My predecessor at the *Enterprise-Bulletin*, Isabel Griffin, stated that the site of the Temple Building was purchased by the Oddfellows Lodge No. 54 in 1889 for

\$2500.00 from James Brydon who had operated a livery stable there. By November of that year the foundation was in place [note that the Town Hall/Grand Opera House and the Temple Building were under construction at the same time]. The corner stone was laid on May 24, 1890 and the building was nearing completion in October. On the ground floor were four stores. The second floor had four offices, one of which was taken by Henry Robertson L.L.B., Q.C. Another office was occupied by John Wilson, famed Collingwood architect (see my April 2022 story *Doors, Sash, Hardwood Flooring & Architecture—The Journey of the Wilson Brothers*). The building was, and still is, jointly managed by a Board of Trustees drawn from the Oddfellows and the Masons.

Inside the front entrance a very steep stairway led to the second floor where the south side contained a large assembly hall running the full length of the building from front to back, along with kitchen facilities. The north side of the second floor had washrooms and the offices. In one of those offices, my mother, before her marriage to my father in late 1941, worked as a legal secretary to Barrister Malcolm McLean. It was in this office that major events of a slick confidence scheme played out (see my February 2017 story *The Pretty River Valley Oil Scam*) in the early 1940's. Another long stairwell continued up to the top floor where the lodge halls were located. Here, the Oddfellows occupied the south side of the building, while the Masons occupied the north side. High on the façade, a masonry plaque proclaimed,

### **THE TEMPLE ERECTED 1890**

I was familiar with the Oddfellows lodge hall when I had a tour with my father (I never saw inside the Masonic side) in my younger days. It was here on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor that the Wilson Brothers really went to town with their woodworking skills and there was a lot of beautiful woodwork in the lodge room. Hanging outside the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor windows high above the sidewalk was an electric sign with the letters I. O. O. F. (Independent Order of Odd Fellows) lined with incandescent light bulbs. I used to pronounce those letters as “eye-oof”. When I once asked my father what they did up there, he replied, “We eye-oof!”. His certificate of membership from the 1950's hanging over his dresser in the bedroom contained, among other

things, these admonishments: “We command you to visit the sick, relieve the distressed, bury the dead, and educate the orphan”. Their symbol was three links of a chain with the letters F-L-T standing for Friendship, Love and Truth enclosed in the links.

There was no central heating in the Temple Building. When I knew it in the 1960’s, the Assembly Hall, the site of countless meetings, banquets, dances and “At Homes” was heated by two oil stoves, one near the front and one near the rear along the south wall. The chimney openings for these were some distance away and, as was common in those days, the stoves connected to the chimneys via quite long horizontal runs of stove pipe. This was a practical way, devised by our ancestors, to help heat the space with the heat radiating from the stove pipes rather than have them run straight into the chimney from the stoves. Before a major upgrade, the Assembly Hall’s kitchen had ancient coal burning stoves. One of the coal dealers in town would have carried sacks of coal up the back stairs on their shoulders to the second floor coal room in the back hallway. The kitchen upgrade happened around the time that the gas pipeline reached Collingwood circa 1959-1960 when coal as a fuel began to be phased out. The offices on the north side of the second floor were heated originally with coal burning stoves but with those high ceilings, I suspect the law office where my mother worked during the war may have been chilly in a Collingwood winter especially with the original single pane windows. In some ways, the Temple Building was a time warp, largely unchanged on the second floor from its earliest days. As a young person I was aware that there was a degree of inertia against change or upgrading the facilities because one of the Trustees was reluctant to spend money (that was 65 years ago).

On the stage in the Assembly Hall there was a battered old Heintzman Model “A” upright piano made in 1909 that was long past its “best before date” as I discovered when I tuned it a few times in the 1970’s before I moved west. Also on the stage in the mid 1970’s was a Newcombe upright piano made in 1910 belonging to the Order of the Easter Star Lodge, another Masonic body. There were musical instruments in the lodge halls on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor as well. If they were all still in place at the time of the fire, they would all have been destroyed.

A highlight each year was the “At Home” banquet and dance put on by the Oddfellows Lodge. The Assembly Hall was filled with trestle tables for the dinner. This was followed by speeches, entertainment and then a dance. Lodge members and their wives and children attended.

Monday night Bingo was held in the Assembly Hall. Through this event the Oddfellows raised funds for their C. P. T. fund (Cancer, Polio and Tuberculosis). The proceeds funded hospital beds, wheel chairs, crutches, canes, etc. for people who were sick. I used to go with my father on a Sunday afternoon to help set up the tables and chairs for the bingo. The old wooden chairs had vast amounts of chewing gum stuck to the underside of the seats. One of the lodge members joked that they could peel off all the gum, sterilize it and sell it as a fund raiser. These bingos were held at a time when smoking was still ubiquitous/glamorous and, despite a powerful exhaust fan in a window at each end of the hall, my father who had given up tobacco in the late 1940’s, reeked of cigarette smoke (to my mother’s dismay) when he came home late Monday night.

Another major use of the Assembly Hall was when the Oddfellows started up a Teen Town in the early 1960’s. A display advertisement in the *Enterprise-Bulletin* proclaimed:

**COLLINGWOOD TEEN TOWN—Sponsored by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. Serving the Teenagers of the Community and Surrounding District. Every Sat. Night-9-12 p.m. in the Temple Building. Every Dance is Adult & Police Supervised.**

Anyone who had thoughts of acting out or stirring up trouble at Teen Town had second thoughts when, after the long climb up the stairs from street level, the first person they saw at the top of the stairs was Dorsey Beckett, the Chief of Police in uniform. Some people turned around and went back down. I recall only one incident from the Teen Town years and never did learn if it was accidental or deliberately caused by someone. The toilet in the men’s washroom broke and the water flooded downstairs through the ceiling of the Spring Garden Restaurant. The owner of the restaurant came running up the stairs with a few choice words

for the Temple Trustees. As a result of this, the men's washroom got a complete makeover including the installation of a urinal.

The Oddfellows had a large plot at the Presbyterian Cemetery on the Poplar Sideroad. In the grass were three large chain links formed in concrete. Once a year, the lodge held a "Decoration Day" ceremony at the Cemetery to commemorate departed lodge members. Years later, with the plot unused, it was sold to my father and to my uncle Howard Hewson. My parents, aunt, uncle and cousin are buried there.

The middle block of Collingwood's downtown between 2<sup>nd</sup>/Simcoe St. and 3<sup>rd</sup>/Ontario St. has been the scene of several disastrous fires over the years. In August 1890, the brand new Town Hall/Grand Opera House, open for only two months, was gutted by a fire that left just the walls and the tower standing. The 3-storey C. Stephens building immediately south of the Town Hall was destroyed by fire on July 18, 1983. The next building south of that, the Arlington Hotel, was destroyed by fire on August 20, 1987. The Town Hall was rebuilt, the Stephens Building and the Arlington Hotel were not, their place taken by newer buildings.

Around 4 p.m. on the afternoon of Saturday, September 8, 2000, passersby saw smoke coming from between the first and second floors of the Temple Building. The huge tinder dry 110-year-old building with acres of plaster lath in its walls and ceilings was doomed. It was, in effect, a massive pile of kindling. 55 firefighters from Collingwood, Wasaga Beach and Clearview Township battled this blaze for approximately 7 hours to bring the fire under control but the battle continued through the night into the early morning hours of Sunday and even on Sunday afternoon smoke was still rising from the wreckage. Neighbouring buildings on either side were evacuated. One firefighter, while rescuing cats from an apartment in an adjacent building was scratched by a terrified cat.

The ground floor held four stores: sporting goods, a cigar store, an insurance office and a formal wear store. The 2<sup>nd</sup> floor offices were home to a landscape architect and two charities: United Way and Big Brothers.

The *Enterprise-Bulletin* of Tuesday, September 12, 2000 gave extensive coverage under the heading, **LOSS OF A LANDMARK** with multiple photos. It was stated that more than three million gallons of water were used to fight the fire. How fortunate that Collingwood has an inexhaustible supply of water from Georgian Bay! Fire Chief Sandy Cunningham said that the origin of the fire was “not suspicious”.

The Temple Trustees said, “We will rebuild”. My father was Chairman of the Trustees at the time of the 2000 fire and rebuilding, his name appearing on a plaque at the main entrance. Two new cornerstones were added to the façade of the rebuilt building. On the Oddfellows side, the stone reads,

**COLLINGWOOD LODGE #54 I. O. O. F. 2001 A.D.**

On the Masonic side, the stone reads,

**MANITO LODGE #90 A.F. & A.M. A.L. 6001**

The letters “A.L.” stand for “In the Year of Light” (from the Latin: *Anno Lucis*). The date 6001 refers to the year 2001 + 4000 according to Masonic dating tradition.

The two cornerstones illustrate the “marriage” of cooperation between the two fraternities going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when each lodge helped out the other in times of loss. High up on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the reconstructed building’s façade a masonry plaque updates the history of the building:

**THE TEMPLE ERECTED 1890 A.D. DESTROYED BY FIRE 2000 A.D. REBUILT 2001 A.D.**

Below this signage another plaque illustrates the co-operation of the two lodges in the form of a handshake with the hands reaching from each side of the building.

During a visit to Collingwood in September 2006, my father, then in his 92<sup>nd</sup> year and with just three months left to live, took me on a tour of the rebuilt building. The convenience of a HYTRAC elevator at the rear of the building was quite a change from the old steep, breath-stealing stairwells especially for elderly lodge

members like my father. Much of the regalia and furniture of the lodge rooms was lost when the roof collapsed into the third floor during the fire although some items such as special chairs were salvaged using the Fire Department's skylift. My father told me that the piano of the Oddfellows lodge room, a large Ennis upright, fell all the way down through the building to ground level during the fire. He said that, in the rebuilding, to make more efficient use of the space, the two lodges decided on one shared lodge room in the new building. The rebuilt building still has stores at street level, various offices on the second floor, and the Lodge Hall and Banquet Hall are together on the third floor.

The "new" Temple Building continues the legacy of the original and remains a landmark on Hurontario St.

*David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.*