

BUILDING CONSTRUCTION IN THE R.M. OF GIMLI AN INTRODUCTION



Prepared by Andy Blicq

2011



**A Project of the Gimli Municipal Heritage
Advisory Committee**

The Gimli Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee acknowledges the financial support and assistance of The Government of Manitoba through its Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage, Tourism and Sport

On the Cover:

Construction of Pam Pollard's cottage – 1928 or 1929.

INTRODUCTION:

In the fall of 2008, The Rural Municipality of Gimli's municipal heritage advisory committee was awarded a research grant by the Manitoba Government's Historic Resources Branch. The grant was given to finance research into the construction history of some of the community's heritage buildings – with special attention to be paid to summer cottages and homes. In addition, there was funding allocated to do some development work around identifying some of Gimli's best heritage sites – specifically, to find 10 properties that, based on a rigorous evaluation process, qualify as significant historic sites, and to supply research and written material in support of those selections.

What follows is the final report on the construction history, as required by the research contract between Andy Blicq and the Rural Municipality of Gimli. This final report will be amended before July 1st with additional research material to be collected once summer residents return to their properties in the spring. Work on the selection of significant properties continues with a final report expected in the next few months.

It is said that “journalism is the first draft of history.” This report is more journalism than scholarly research. It is an assembly of the best available information, drawn from memory, oral history, photographs, written reports and the archives. Wherever possible I have noted sources, but in some cases where there is little or no documentation, I have included some ‘best guesses’ and these should not be taken as hard facts.

The purpose of this report is to fill in some of the blanks in the community's memory - to create a picture of elements of life in the district that have, for the most part, faded from human memory, or are not well documented. From the beginning, it was clear that while Gimli has grown and changed dramatically, the things that drew people to vacation in the community almost a century ago have stayed the same.

BACKGROUND:

The Icelandic settlers who first landed on the sandy shores of Willow Island in 1875 and those who followed paid dearly for their courage and determination to find a new life. The hardships of those first winters spent in simple log buildings are almost unimaginable. And the sorrow and suffering of the smallpox epidemic that claimed 100 lives in the new colony must have severely tested their resolve to stay. But stay they did and by the first decade of the 20th century, the first crude log shacks and simple shanties were being replaced by more substantial homes and businesses in the young community.



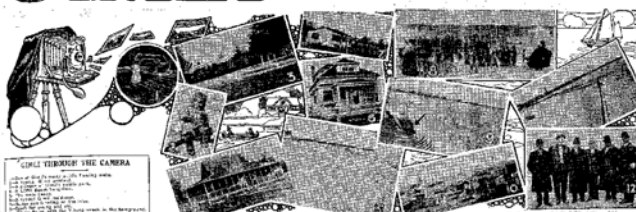
View of Gimli from the end of the dock – 1910. (Archives of Manitoba)

The arrival of the Canadian Pacific rail line in November, 1906 cemented the town's future and established Gimli and the other communities on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg's south basin as summer destinations for recreation. Developing land and providing goods and services to those newcomers provided a welcome additional source of income for those who relied on fishing and farming to get by. The railway offered Winnipeggers quick and easy access to Lake Winnipeg's sandy beaches and cooling breezes. A day trip to Gimli (about two hours each way) must have been a welcome relief from the crushing heat of homes and offices in the city of Winnipeg, in the days before air-conditioning. Just as it is today, many of those who came for a day visit, or a vacation, decided that they would like to find a permanent place of their own in the community.

A full-page 'advertorial' in the May 24, 1913 edition of the Winnipeg Free Press describes Gimli as 'The Campers' Paradise.'

MANITOBA FREE PRESS WEDNESDAY, MAY 22, 1913

GIMLI THE CAMPERS' PARADISE




GIMLI THROUGH THE CAMERA

... ..

WHERE CAMPING GROUND IS FREE

... ..

FIRST WHITE MAN IN CIRCULAR PRISONER STRUGGLE



... ..

PROBUDENT WINDSUFER BUSINESS MEN SCUMBER AT GIMLI AND SUDBER

... ..

FEDERAL OF A FIRING TO TAKE PLACE HERE ANCIENT CEREMONIES

... ..

BIG IDEAS IN GIMLI Big Future in View

... ..

A STROLL THROUGH GIMLI Notes of Interest

... ..

GIMLI'S ADVANTAGES Record and Outlook

... ..

GIMLI TRAINS AND FARES

From	To	First Class	Second Class	Third Class
Winnipeg	Gimli	1.00	.75	.50
Winnipeg	Sudbury	1.50	1.00	.75
Winnipeg	Brandon	2.00	1.50	1.00
Winnipeg	Regina	2.50	1.75	1.25
Winnipeg	Saskatoon	3.00	2.00	1.50
Winnipeg	Yorkton	3.50	2.25	1.75
Winnipeg	Northey	4.00	2.50	2.00
Winnipeg	St. Walburg	4.50	2.75	2.25
Winnipeg	St. Laurent	5.00	3.00	2.50
Winnipeg	St. George	5.50	3.25	2.75
Winnipeg	St. John	6.00	3.50	3.00
Winnipeg	St. James	6.50	3.75	3.25
Winnipeg	St. Paul	7.00	4.00	3.50
Winnipeg	St. Anthony	7.50	4.25	3.75
Winnipeg	St. Charles	8.00	4.50	4.00
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	8.50	4.75	4.25
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	9.00	5.00	4.50
Winnipeg	St. Michael	9.50	5.25	4.75
Winnipeg	St. Peter	10.00	5.50	5.00
Winnipeg	St. Rose	10.50	5.75	5.25
Winnipeg	St. Thome	11.00	6.00	5.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	11.50	6.25	5.75
Winnipeg	St. Francis	12.00	6.50	6.00
Winnipeg	St. Clare	12.50	6.75	6.25
Winnipeg	St. Ann	13.00	7.00	6.50
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	13.50	7.25	6.75
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	14.00	7.50	7.00
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	14.50	7.75	7.25
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	15.00	8.00	7.50
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	15.50	8.25	7.75
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	16.00	8.50	8.00
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	16.50	8.75	8.25
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	17.00	9.00	8.50
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	17.50	9.25	8.75
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	18.00	9.50	9.00
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	18.50	9.75	9.25
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	19.00	10.00	9.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	19.50	10.25	9.75
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	20.00	10.50	10.00
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	20.50	10.75	10.25
Winnipeg	St. Charles	21.00	11.00	10.50
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	21.50	11.25	10.75
Winnipeg	St. Ann	22.00	11.50	11.00
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	22.50	11.75	11.25
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	23.00	12.00	11.50
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	23.50	12.25	11.75
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	24.00	12.50	12.00
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	24.50	12.75	12.25
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	25.00	13.00	12.50
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	25.50	13.25	12.75
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	26.00	13.50	13.00
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	26.50	13.75	13.25
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	27.00	14.00	13.50
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	27.50	14.25	13.75
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	28.00	14.50	14.00
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	28.50	14.75	14.25
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	29.00	15.00	14.50
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	29.50	15.25	14.75
Winnipeg	St. Charles	30.00	15.50	15.00
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	30.50	15.75	15.25
Winnipeg	St. Ann	31.00	16.00	15.50
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	31.50	16.25	15.75
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	32.00	16.50	16.00
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	32.50	16.75	16.25
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	33.00	17.00	16.50
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	33.50	17.25	16.75
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	34.00	17.50	17.00
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	34.50	17.75	17.25
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	35.00	18.00	17.50
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	35.50	18.25	17.75
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	36.00	18.50	18.00
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	36.50	18.75	18.25
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	37.00	19.00	18.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	37.50	19.25	18.75
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	38.00	19.50	19.00
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	38.50	19.75	19.25
Winnipeg	St. Charles	39.00	20.00	19.50
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	39.50	20.25	19.75
Winnipeg	St. Ann	40.00	20.50	20.00
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	40.50	20.75	20.25
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	41.00	21.00	20.50
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	41.50	21.25	20.75
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	42.00	21.50	21.00
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	42.50	21.75	21.25
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	43.00	22.00	21.50
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	43.50	22.25	21.75
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	44.00	22.50	22.00
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	44.50	22.75	22.25
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	45.00	23.00	22.50
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	45.50	23.25	22.75
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	46.00	23.50	23.00
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	46.50	23.75	23.25
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	47.00	24.00	23.50
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	47.50	24.25	23.75
Winnipeg	St. Charles	48.00	24.50	24.00
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	48.50	24.75	24.25
Winnipeg	St. Ann	49.00	25.00	24.50
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	49.50	25.25	24.75
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	50.00	25.50	25.00
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	50.50	25.75	25.25
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	51.00	26.00	25.50
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	51.50	26.25	25.75
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	52.00	26.50	26.00
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	52.50	26.75	26.25
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	53.00	27.00	26.50
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	53.50	27.25	26.75
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	54.00	27.50	27.00
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	54.50	27.75	27.25
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	55.00	28.00	27.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	55.50	28.25	27.75
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	56.00	28.50	28.00
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	56.50	28.75	28.25
Winnipeg	St. Charles	57.00	29.00	28.50
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	57.50	29.25	28.75
Winnipeg	St. Ann	58.00	29.50	29.00
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	58.50	29.75	29.25
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	59.00	30.00	29.50
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	59.50	30.25	29.75
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	60.00	30.50	30.00
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	60.50	30.75	30.25
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	61.00	31.00	30.50
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	61.50	31.25	30.75
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	62.00	31.50	31.00
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	62.50	31.75	31.25
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	63.00	32.00	31.50
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	63.50	32.25	31.75
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	64.00	32.50	32.00
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	64.50	32.75	32.25
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	65.00	33.00	32.50
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	65.50	33.25	32.75
Winnipeg	St. Charles	66.00	33.50	33.00
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	66.50	33.75	33.25
Winnipeg	St. Ann	67.00	34.00	33.50
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	67.50	34.25	33.75
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	68.00	34.50	34.00
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	68.50	34.75	34.25
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	69.00	35.00	34.50
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	69.50	35.25	34.75
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	70.00	35.50	35.00
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	70.50	35.75	35.25
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	71.00	36.00	35.50
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	71.50	36.25	35.75
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	72.00	36.50	36.00
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	72.50	36.75	36.25
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	73.00	37.00	36.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	73.50	37.25	36.75
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	74.00	37.50	37.00
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	74.50	37.75	37.25
Winnipeg	St. Charles	75.00	38.00	37.50
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	75.50	38.25	37.75
Winnipeg	St. Ann	76.00	38.50	38.00
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	76.50	38.75	38.25
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	77.00	39.00	38.50
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	77.50	39.25	38.75
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	78.00	39.50	39.00
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	78.50	39.75	39.25
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	79.00	40.00	39.50
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	79.50	40.25	39.75
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	80.00	40.50	40.00
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	80.50	40.75	40.25
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	81.00	41.00	40.50
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	81.50	41.25	40.75
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	82.00	41.50	41.00
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	82.50	41.75	41.25
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	83.00	42.00	41.50
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	83.50	42.25	41.75
Winnipeg	St. Charles	84.00	42.50	42.00
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	84.50	42.75	42.25
Winnipeg	St. Ann	85.00	43.00	42.50
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	85.50	43.25	42.75
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	86.00	43.50	43.00
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	86.50	43.75	43.25
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	87.00	44.00	43.50
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	87.50	44.25	43.75
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	88.00	44.50	44.00
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	88.50	44.75	44.25
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	89.00	45.00	44.50
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	89.50	45.25	44.75
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	90.00	45.50	45.00
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	90.50	45.75	45.25
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	91.00	46.00	45.50
Winnipeg	St. Ignace	91.50	46.25	45.75
Winnipeg	St. Raphael	92.00	46.50	46.00
Winnipeg	St. Joseph	92.50	46.75	46.25
Winnipeg	St. Charles	93.00	47.00	46.50
Winnipeg	St. Elizabeth	93.50	47.25	46.75
Winnipeg	St. Ann	94.00	47.50	47.00
Winnipeg	St. Agnes	94.50	47.75	47.25
Winnipeg	St. Cecilia	95.00	48.00	47.50
Winnipeg	St. Dorothea	95.50	48.25	47.75
Winnipeg	St. Gertrude	96.00	48.50	48.00
Winnipeg	St. Margaretha	96.50	48.75	48.25
Winnipeg	St. Katharine	97.00	49.00	48.50
Winnipeg	St. Barbara	97.50	49.25	48.75
Winnipeg	St. Katerina	98.00	49.50	49.00
Winnipeg	St. Agatha	98.50	49.75	49.25
Winnipeg	St. Lucia	99.00	50.00	49.50
Winnipeg	St. Theresia	99.50	50.25	49.75
Winnipeg	St. Adolph	100.00	50.50	50.00

SEE GIMLI TODAY

... ..

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Bathers at Gimli Beach - 1910 (Archives of Manitoba)

The tone is upbeat, promising that the town has ‘a big future in view.’ In the May 25, 1912, edition of the Manitoba Free Press, a list of prominent Winnipeggers, many of whom had become rich in the boom years that accompanied the settlement of the Canadian West, are listed as summer residents of the town and a new cottage development just north of the community called Loni Beach. Among them are prominent members of the Icelandic-Canadian community, now residing in Winnipeg, but still wishing to have a stake in the town their elders worked so hard to establish. The unknown Free Press writer said the following:

The most beautiful cottage of the number is owned by E.W. Derby, of Winnipeg, who opened it for the season last week. His summer residence is situated close to the town park. This park is a beautifully wooded area of closely growing spruce trees.....Building operations have commenced on a cottage for W.J. Osborne of the Winnipeg Electric Street Railway Company. A number of cottages, the lumber for which is on the ground, will be built shortly. Among those who have already located their summer homes in Gimli, on Loni Beach, are A.F. Andrews of the Ogilvie Flour Mills company, D. Ernest of the R. J. Whittla Company Staff, Henry Downing the well-known real estate dealer, Albert Johnson, A.S. Bardal, undertaker, J. Vopni real estate dealer and building contractor, P.D. Harris of the teaching staff of Central Collegiate, Dr. Stephanson M.D, J. Hiebert of Altona and others.

It is interesting to note that a keystone article in the May, 1913 edition of the Free Press tells Winnipeggers that along with the summer cottages that were springing up around town and in

Loni Beach, the community offered free camping on the beach. For many, this would be their first summer residence in Gimli. And it's not difficult to imagine that a blissful summer week spent in a tent (completed by a soaking from a prairie thunderstorm) might entice a visitor to buy a lot and build something more permanent. In interviews, more than one cottage owner reported that their grandparents first rented a summer cottage, before building one of their own.

It's also important to note that these visitors were not the first people to set up camp on the lakeshore. Lorna Tergesen, a descendant of one of Gimli's founding Icelandic families, remembers her grandfather telling her that in the early years of the community, from time to time, aboriginal people would camp on the beach – a piece of oral history that finds some corroboration in pictures among the 500 extraordinary images in the Manitoba Archives New Iceland Collection of photographs.



Native Indian tepee and Indian Children. (Archives of Manitoba)

The attractions of the lake are simple and enduring. Today, on summer weekends, it's common to find children playing where the Government Ditch spills into the lake on the old northern boundary of the town of Gimli, just as they did in 1920, when the following picture was taken.



North Government Ditch – 1920 (Archives of Manitoba)

The far left side of the picture offers a glimpse of tepee-style tents on the south bank of the ditch. Whether their occupants are campers or aboriginal people is not known.



North Government Ditch – 1920 (Archives of Manitoba)

Early summer tourism on the lake included day-trippers who arrived by train, travellers on the large boats that carried freight and people up and down the lake, and those ‘campers’ who saw an investment opportunity and limitless fun in buying a lot and building a summer getaway. The unknown writer of the 1913 Manitoba Free Press expresses the boosterism of the time:

Such a campers’ paradise, you say, exists only in dreams, for if it was real it would have been discovered years ago....Such a campers’ paradise exists, it is at Gimli. And now’s the chance to get in on the ground floor...or to speak literally, to get in on the choicest parts of the beach. While you are reading this hundreds of others are doing the same. Take the next train and investigate.

The railway was the key and just as it did across the prairies, its arrival set off a brisk trade and speculation in lots and building materials. According to the May 25, 1912, Manitoba Free Press article:

Since it’s incorporation as a village, Gimli has seen steadily increasing land values. Recently the sale was made of 80 acres of land, immediately adjoining the town on the North, for \$5000. Two years ago this property was value at \$1,500.

This property was almost certainly in what is now Loni Beach. The town was also selling lots.

...about 50 or 60 lots are for sale by the town at prices from \$200 to \$225. These lots are 124 by 66 feet and sold under restriction.

The following classified advertisement appeared in the June 26, 1913 edition of the Manitoba Free Press under the Summer Resorts section:

LONI BEACH – Take beach train daily 5:20 and after June 28, at 2:05 p.m. returning the same evening and have this beautiful summer resort. We have for sale one choice beach lot 50 X 200 on terms or \$450 cash. Also a few lots immediately behind the beach for \$250 each and also two new summer cottages; a gentleman who bought in Loni Beach says “it was the best investment he ever made for the health of his family.” Lots of pure air, water from running wells, wide sandy beaches perfectly safe for children. Beauty of open spaces, no dampness. Downing & Miller. 348 Somerset Blk. Phone Main 670.

It is interesting to note that the property seller is Downing and Miller. Henry Downing, a Winnipeg real estate developer, is listed among some of Gimli’s prominent summer residents, in the May, 1912, Manitoba Free Press story. So is J. Vopni. According to the Manitoba Historical Society, John Vopni was a builder, a Winnipeg real estate businessman and a city alderman who emigrated from Iceland in 1887. It is not hard to imagine that these men would have dabbled in real estate speculation in Gimli, along with others who lived in the community.

The value of those lots and buildings has continued to grow steadily over the last century. The lake was and is a proven provider for those who make a living on it, and a salve for those who want a place where they can leave their work behind during the short, sweet summer season on the prairies.



Early Scene looking North – Loni Beach. (Gimli Saga)

Paul Olson, age 90, is a retired commercial fisherman. He remembers the ‘campers’ arriving by train from Winnipeg. He recalls skipping school to earn money carrying their bags from the station to their cottages in town and in Loni Beach. Elias Geir Johannson operated a horse drawn wagon that also transported visitors from the station on the edge of town, to their summer homes. He is described as follows in the *Gimli Saga*:

Elli was a most reliable dray man. A watch was something he never possessed, yet he was never late in meeting the trains that arrived in Gimli in those years, to pick up the mail, passengers, express and freight. For many summers he drove a long high wagon with seats on either side. (they called it a bus) and took the train passengers to their destination – to the Lakeview Hotel, where the Betel home now stands, to town, or the campers to Loni Beach.



Arriving at the train station. (Archives of Manitoba)



A 'bus' picks up passenger. (Archives of Manitoba)

CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS:

While there was plenty of native timber around the town of Gimli, most of the houses and buildings in town were constructed from lumber shipped by rail from British Columbia. After 1900, millions of board feet of fir, cedar, spruce, hemlock and pine were brought to the prairies by rail, to meet the demand for quality timber from the 250,000 farmers who settled The West between 1880 and 1920. That lumber also found its way to cities and towns like Gimli. A sample of prices in the 1913 Okanogan Saw Mills price list booklet and a 1916 Mountain Lumber Manufacturers' Association (Nelson, B.C.) freight rate book (with the rate for Gimli) are included in the research appendix of this report. Both were found in the Manitoba Archives. Most of the cottages and substantial homes in Gimli built before and after World War I, are constructed with sturdy, high-quality B.C. lumber. A board found during demolition of one of the early cottages offers a good example. The back of a piece of clear fir tongue and groove siding bears the following stamp:



Stamp on fir lumber found during renovation material salvage. (Andy Blicq)



Stamp on inside of board salvaged from Pollard cottage – Loni Beach. (Andy Blicq)



Stamp on cedar roofing shingle from Pollard cottage – Loni Beach.

While the train was ferrying tourists to town, at the same time the settlers from Eastern Europe were carving homesteads out of the mostly marginal lands west of Gimli and the lake. They couldn't afford, or get the beautiful, knot-free BC lumber. So with little money and barely more than their bare hands to do the job, they constructed homes out of locally cut spruce, poplar and birch logs. A few of these buildings have survived and they are a treasured part of the community's architectural heritage and its inventory of buildings. Although the materials are simple, the knowledge and skills required to design and build a home or barn with indigenous materials are not, and this must be acknowledged in any accounting of the district's architectural heritage. Research and the collection of an inventory of buildings continues into this part of the community's architectural history.



A 'Polish' Farm House near Gimli, 1910 (Archives of Manitoba)



A ‘survivor’ west of Gimli – 2007 (Andy Blicq)

In town, in the early part of the century, Larry Kristjanson’s family operated the Lakeside Trading Company store and lumber yard at Centre Street and First Avenue, across the street from Tergesen’s Store. Douglas Fir was among the lumber and materials that would have been sold on site.

“We sold lumber for cottages there before I was working there,” he says, adding that that took place in the ‘20s and ‘30s. “We used to buy it by the car load from B.C.”



Lakeside trading company's lumber yard was at the corner of Centre and Main. The lumber yard was between the white building with three windows in the foreground and the church (see spire) behind it. – 1915. (Archives of Manitoba)

Larry Kristjanson's recollections carry back to the 1930s and 1940s. He remembers that there was no fence around the lumber yard and that customers would often come after hours to select lumber, returning the next day to pay for it. The physical appearance of the town has changed greatly since then and so have public attitudes about honesty. It is hard to imagine this arrangement taking place today.

BUILDING PLANS:

Between 1900 and the Second World War thousands of mail order catalogue' homes were built around North American and Gimli was no exception. There are good examples of catalogue and kit homes and cottages around town, and on farms and communities along the lakeshore.

In the first three decades of the 20th century, thousands took up homesteads on the Canadian prairie and after a few good crop years had the cash to move their families out of a traditional 'soddie' or log shack into a proper house. Prospective buyers would receive a catalogue through the mail, select a plan and then sign a contract with the company to deliver the necessary lumber to the closest railway station, along with blueprints and a construction manual. The lumber would then be hauled by horse and wagon, or sleigh to the building site. The best known supplier of catalogue homes was Eaton's, but there are many others. The Canadian Aladdin Company, with offices in Winnipeg, is another big player. The B.C. Mills Timber and Trading Company of Vancouver supplied pre-fabricated homes, commercial buildings, even banks. The United Grain

Growers, and the Universities of Saskatchewan and Manitoba had their own plan books. Challenged by the success of the Eaton's catalogue of home plans, lumber suppliers got into the game. The Western Retail Lumberman's Association, North American Lumber, Monarch Lumber, Beaver Lumber, and others all released house plan books. Examples of these plan books are in the research appendix.

Les Henry, of Saskatoon, is the author of the best-selling *Catalogue Houses: Eaton's and Others*. He is an acknowledged expert on catalogue house plans and construction. He has examined photographs in the R.M. of Gimli's inventory of historic buildings in an attempt to match some of the buildings to those in his collection of rare early catalogues. He found no obvious matches.

Mr Henry says that's not all that surprising. The provenance of a house cannot be absolutely proven "unless you have an invoice. Because they've got blueprints doesn't mean anything either." In his hometown of Saskatoon he has seen "a whole lot of 'just abouts' when it comes to making a match to a plan book design.

Often buyers purchased the lumber and the blueprints separately. Or, a house may not match the catalogue of house plans, because the owner requested changes to the design, or paid for specific, individualized architectural features. Mr. Henry said Eaton's would pretty much design and add anything you wanted into one of its plans.

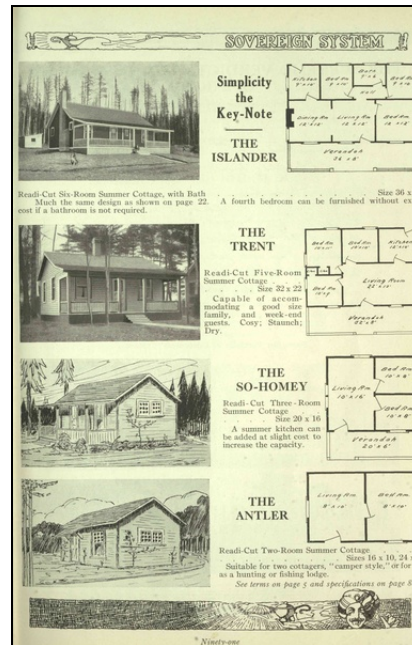
Mr. Henry says many homeowners who think they have an Eaton's House are often mistaken and there is quite a bit of local mythology about where some houses came from. When he's trying to determine a house's origins "if it fits the catalogue page exactly and locals say it is, I'll take that as proof... Eaton's is the generic term. A lot of Eaton's houses turn out to be Aladdin."

According to Mr. Henry, Eaton's houses were shipped as bulk lumber and the builder was responsible for cutting the boards to size. Others, like the Canadian Aladdin Company, pre-cut all the lumber, and the builder assembled the home like a model kit. (A 1920 Aladdin plan book is in the appendix.)

Mr. Henry says in many cases doors, windows and trim were milled in Winnipeg and elsewhere for these kits. Local suppliers may have produced these products for catalogue houses and cottage packages.

"Winnipeg was the hub of lumber in Western Canada for a long time," he says. Several Winnipeg businesses were key suppliers of that millwork. A search in the provincial archives produced a period catalogue from the Empire Sash and Door Co. of Winnipeg which produced windows, doors and screens and screen doors. And there were others. Portions of that catalogue are included in the research appendix.

Research into Gimli's built heritage continues and at this writing, no exact matches have been found in any catalogue. The summer homes are the big mystery. While the Canadian Aladdin plan book offers several designs for cottages, none seem to match Gimli's collection.



Summer Cottages. 1920 Canadian Aladdin Catalogue (Toronto Library)

It is only speculation, but it seems likely that the plans were locally produced, possibly by North American lumber, or one of the other local lumber companies that were supplying building materials. An oral history link to the Brown and Rutherford lumber company is listed below. A copy of a 'Better Buildings' North American Lumber's 1920 house plan book can be found on microfilm in the University of Manitoba's Elizabeth Dafoe Library. (Sample pages are in the appendix.) The catalogue is local. It contains no cottage plans, but it does have advertisements from Winnipeg companies offering heating, electrical and other equipment to homeowners and farmers. However, it looks like the company was producing kit cottages in the 1930s. We have located two photographs in the Western Canada Pictorial Index that indicate this.



Complete Summer Cottage Or Shooting Lodge Built By North American Lumber And Supply Company in Transcona, Manitoba. It Was Sold For \$395.00 (Knocked Down). - 1934. (Western Canada Pictorial Index)



A Summer Cottage, Built By W.A.Girling, Transcona Building Contractor, Being Used As An Office. – 1934 (Western Canada Pictorial Index)

Neither of these buildings is a close match for the cottages in town, but further research in South Beach is required as examples may exist there, or in some of the other beach communities south of Gimli.

So far no definitive plans or documented evidence of where the materials were purchased have been located. Most of the living memory is gone. Businesses that continue to exist today have no records, or recollections. But oral history indicates that both houses and cottages were likely purchased and built using plan books and B.C. lumber.

- 1) Pam Pollard's family has owned a lot in Loni Beach since the early part of the century and until recently an historic cottage. The cottage has been torn down to make way for a four season home. But materials from the original cottage have been carefully integrated in to her family's new retirement home on the property. She says her father told her that materials for the cottage were purchased from the Brown and Rutherford lumber

company in Winnipeg, shipped to Gimli by rail, and then skidded across the ice in the winter, in preparation for construction. It is believed that another cottage, the nearby 'Finnbogason' property at 78 North Lake Street, Loni Beach, is a matching plan. The original owners of that cottage were family friends. However, there are no copies of the plans to corroborate any of this, but Pam Pollard's story is one of a few that enjoys a clear link back to the cottage's beginnings. She says her late father told her that, as a teenager, he remembers building it with his father, on the May long weekend, in either 1928 or 1929. They camped in tents and endured a late spring snowstorm.



Construction of Pam Pollard's cottage – 1928 or 1929

- 2) Construction of The Tergesen House at 38, 4th Avenue, Gimli, one of the cornerstones of Gimli's inventory of historic buildings, began in 1908. According to Lorna Tergesen, the story has always been that the plans came from Chicago. Sears stores launched their catalogue of house plans in 1908 and had offices in Chicago. That is a possible scenario for this house. However, many house plans were very similar, as illustrated in a comparison of plans that are similar to the Tergesen house. The comparison can be found in the appendix.
- 3) Ralph 'Red' Magnusson's family home is located on the west side of highway eight, just North of Minerva Road. The story has always been that the materials for the house were shipped from Vancouver by train to Winnipeg Beach and then hauled by horse to its present site where it was assembled.



The Magnusson home north of Minvera Hall – 2009 (Andy Blicq)

- 4) Larry Kristjanson recalls that a CP Rail station manager had four identical cottages built on the beach, just north of where the concession stand is now and north of the Kristjanson family home. He remembers that the station master turned developer was named 'Lawton'.



The 'Josephson House' on the top left hand corner of frame – 1920 (Archives of Manitoba)

- 5) Jacqueline Thorkelson owns the ‘Josephson House’ at 23, 3rd avenue. She is pretty certain that it is either an Eaton’s Home or a Canadian Aladdin Home. (There are plans for a closer inspection this spring to determine this.) The family story is that the lumber for two houses of the same design was shipped by rail car to Gimli. A matching house is still standing on a farm south of Gimli.

It is possible that private individuals could also have been contracted to draw up ‘one-off’ cottage or house plans. A small, classified ad in the March 1, 1911 edition of the Manitoba Free Press suggests that and reads as follows:

Look At This

**I make a specialty of cottage plans at \$10 less than anyone in the city. Ask for particulars.
Atkinson, P.O. Box 62, City**

According to Les Henry, the theory that local individuals and lumber companies may have been designing and selling plans is quite plausible. He also says that in that period skilled carpenters were able to build simple buildings like cottages without any plans at all.

“Their world didn’t turn on paper,” he says.

However, the uniform nature of Gimli’s cottages, many of which look the same and share very similar designs and material, would indicate that they came from the same handful of sources and designs. Who drew up those plans and sold them remains a mystery and we have plans to approach the media and to make a public appeal for information. Meanwhile, oral history research is continuing with both property owners and elders in the community who have recollections of early construction history.

CONSTRUCTION LABOUR:

Again, little information is available about who built these cottages and houses. But oral history provides what is probably a fairly accurate picture. When it comes to building a cottage, little has changed over the last century. Then and now, those who have the skill, the time and the motivation (and often no choice if funds are in short supply) will often round up the material and build their summer home themselves. Others hire a carpenter, or contractor. That was the case in the early part of the century, with good examples of both instances.

- 1) Richard Johnson owns a spectacular, original cottage at 21, 3rd Avenue. The family has no plans or any other documentation about its construction. However, the family story is that his grandfather bought two lots where there used to be a fisherman's shanty and had the cottage built in 1919. Two were built that year by a carpenter named 'Kyle', using materials from a rail car load of kiln dried lumber. The other identical cottage was located at 26-5th avenue Gimli, but was later moved to an unknown location. Johnson says "it was the same design as our cottage except the front door was in the corner." A year prior to building, his family rented a place across the street from the existing cottage.
- 2) Margaret Wolstencroft owns an authentic and original cottage at 13, 2nd Avenue. It was one of four built in Gimli by Carl Goodman, a successful electrical contractor, of Icelandic descent who lived on Victor Street, in Winnipeg. He is mentioned in a 1913 Manitoba Free Press article as one of the prominent Winnipeegers with summer homes in Gimli and Ms. Wolstencroft says he used the cottage as an office in the summer. She says it is likely Carl Goodman did the work on the family cottage himself, or directed others to do it. He built the four cottages for his four children and they are all very similar. Three of them remain in Gimli today. Margaret's cottage is in the most original condition. She says there are markings on some of the boards and when the weather breaks we will examine those markings for clues to their origins. She says little documentation exists for the cottage, although she will encourage her relatives to make a search. She believes that it is likely that they are kit cottages.
- 3) Ralph "Red" Magnusson kindly prepared a list of carpenters who would likely have been involved in home building during the early part of the 20th century. Were they alive today, every one would be more than 100 years old. This and oral history with other community elders, paints in some of the details about these skilled craftsmen and their life and times. The following is a partial list of some of those who were working in the community as carpenters during that time.

Hjalmar Thorsteinson: Lorna Tergesen believes he may have built the Thorson cottage at 50 – 4th Avenue. Hjalmar Thorsteinson was a lifelong bachelor. According to Paul Olson, the Thorsteinsons were a family of carpenters, although Peter Thorsteinson lost his arm and had to leave the trade and take a job as a fish inspector.



Simbi Josephson, master carpenter. (Gimli Saga)

Simbi Josephson: Paul Olson remembers that Josephson had a job weighing all the fish at a fishing station in Lake Winnipeg's north basin. But he also was an excellent dock builder who also constructed bunkhouses. The *Gimli Saga* says the following:

Sigmundur (Simbi) Josephson was a carpenter by trade who worked on many Gimli buildings. He gave many hundreds of hours of voluntary work to the Lutheran church, both at the time it was built and afterwards, when repairs were needed.

Svani Valgardson: Remembered by Paul Olson as one of the top carpenters in the community, he built the stone fence that still surrounds Camp Morton, north of Gimli.

Villi Arnason: Another top carpenter, he also had a job looking after Gimli's historic dance pavilion. According to community elder Oli Narfason, Villi Arnason was a quiet unassuming man who always got the job done.

Helgi Stevens: Was a Gimli carpenter who worked on docks at Northern fishing stations.



Mike Magnusson's boat building shop in Gimli (Paul Olson)

Mike Magnusson: According to Paul Olson, Mike Magnusson was a master boat builder, carpenter and fisherman. He had a boat shop across from what is now the Rotary Towers apartment complex. In 1941, Magnusson built a Whitefish Boat for Mr. Olson, who used it for fishing in the Lake Winnipeg's north basin. Materials for the boat (in foreground of picture) came from trees on land owned by the Olsons, just west of town. The lumber was prepared for use at a mill in Arnes, Manitoba and then turned over to Magnusson. Total cost of the boat was \$500.

Pete Magnusson: Paul Olson remembers Pete Magnusson as the community's 'cement man'. This was confirmed by elders Dilla and Oli Narfason.

Helgi 'Highway' Helgason: According to Paul Olson, Helgason was a carpenter and an excellent mechanic who operated a garage in the community. Dilla and Oli Narfason recall that he owned a 'steam box' used by boat builders for bending planks. He was a giant of a man – six-foot five, or six, and 250 pounds of muscle. In his spare time he built coffins.



Oli Thorsteinson – carpenter and builder. (Gimli Saga)

Oli Thorsteinson: A well-known Gimli violin maker and teacher, carpenter, contractor and the builder of Gimli’s historic dance pavilion. According to the *Gimli Saga* he learned the carpentry trade in Winnipeg. He used special materials and plans from Stradivarius violins to create his own high quality instruments. Many are still in use today.

Oli Narfason recalls that his grandfather, **Magnus Narfason**, came from Iceland with good carpentry skills. He reinforced the evidence that it was common for kits and lumber to be shipped to Gimli. The family built a state of the art, hip roof barn with Douglas Fir in 1928. Unfortunately the barn was destroyed by fire in 1940.

“You could buy a package and get the plans and stuff for it. It came by train from B.C.,” Mr. Narfason said. “That’s the way a lot of the buildings were bought in those days.”

Mr. Narfason also recalled that a carpenter name **Halldor (Dori) Peterson**, a fisherman by trade, built three similar cottages on 3rd Avenue directly across from the park.



Cottages on 3rd Avenue constructed by Dori Peterson. (Andy Blicq)



A fishing boat on the beach – 1910 (Archives of Manitoba)

Ralph “Red” Magnusson points out that many fishermen were excellent carpenters. They often had to build their own wooden boats – projects that would require very high-end skills. “My uncle and another fella built boats in Loni Beach,” he says.

Building a simple cottage would have been easy, by comparison. He said these carpenters would likely have done the work on cottages and homes themselves, or directed a team of less-skilled men to do the work. Carpentry would have been a welcome source of additional income and they would have had time to do it between fishing seasons.

‘Red’ Magnusson also says it was not uncommon for buildings to be moved from community to community with a team of horses, often over the ice.

Community elders interviewed all pointed out the importance of acknowledging how hard these men worked, using only a saw, hammer, plane and other simple hand tools. Dilla Narfason said that her grandfather, Magnus, made some of his own tools.

CONCLUSION:

This report is indeed a ‘first draft of history.’ Further archival research and interviews are needed to fully paint in the construction history from Gimli’s early years. Meanwhile, work on the Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee’s inventory continues, with additional buildings being added. The construction history of those new additions, particularly those in the agricultural areas west of town, will require research. This report is the foundation for that work. In addition to this written analysis and summary, attached for future reference is a source list, copies of archival material and samples of plan books from the period. So far, the single most important outcome from this research is evidence that among summer and permanent residents there is a great deal of interest and enthusiasm in the municipality’s architectural heritage and the will to explore it further.

SOURCES:

Archives of Manitoba

Western Canada Pictorial Index

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Larry Kristjanson

Ralph "Red" Magnusson

Oli Narfason

Dilla Narfason

Paul and Margaret Olson

Pam Pollard