

## **Edmonton's First Boom**

The history of Edmonton has long been one of booms and busts, beginning with the boom in the early 1900's. So many people moved to the West that by 1911 Edmonton's population had swollen to nearly 25,000. Houses sprang up in the "West End" between 109 and 124 Streets.

## **West End Methodist community**

In response to all the families moving in to the "West End," Mrs. James Ching started a Sunday School in her home in the spring of 1907. The group outgrew the accommodations so Mrs. Ching appealed to McDougall Methodist Church to open a regular Sunday School in the area. A large tent was erected on an empty lot across from Le Marchand Mansion. Attendance steadily increased and after three months the tent proved to be too small. In July, Mr. A.J. Law, an Alberta College Divinity student, was appointed to the newly established preaching charge. It was decided to build a small frame church on the east side of 114 Street, just north of Jasper Avenue when winter came. Mainly built through the voluntary labour of members, *West End Methodist Church* was dedicated on November 24, 1907.

## **A New Presbyterian Church**

In the same time period, Edmonton's Presbyterian community was growing. In 1902, First Presbyterian Church had moved into a new building at 103 St. and Jasper Ave. but the 500 seat building quickly became too small. On December 17, 1908, a special congregational meeting was called to discuss church extension to the growing West End. After canvassing Presbyterian residents living

there, the committee reported enthusiastic support for a new congregation. In October 1909 lots were purchased on the corner of Jasper and 116 Street as the site for the new church. It would be a temporary structure, seating 400.

## **New names & a new denomination**

The formal opening of the new **Presbyterian** church took place on **February 20, 1910** with interim minister Rev. J. Duclos of Erskine. Opening with the name Knox, on March 10, 1910 it became **Robertson** in memory of the Superintendent of Missions of the Presbyterian Churches in the West and Northwest. Dr. James Robertson's mission field included all of Manitoba and all the way to the Pacific coast, with the Arctic Ocean as its northern boundary. Meanwhile, the **Methodist** congregation grew rapidly and the Sunday School soon became too large for the building. In 1911, property for an extension was purchased on 117 St. and 102 Ave. In July 1912, construction commenced on a fine brick Sunday School building that would seat 600 people. The building opened on January 26, 1913. The congregation named itself in memory of John **Wesley**, founder of the Methodist movement, sometime in **early 1909**. In the early 1900's formal union discussions began and **The United Church of Canada** (UCC) was inaugurated in June, 1925. The Methodists and the Congregational Union along with the western Union Churches and 70 per cent of the Presbyterian Church voted to join together, including Robertson and Wesley congregations.

## **The First Economic "bust"**

Plans were under way in 1912 to accommodate the growing Robertson congregation, with purchase that fall of two lots (23 Street and Athabasca Avenue, now 123 St. & 102 Ave). Construction was to begin in 1913, but all was not well in Edmonton. The real estate market was in a steep decline and money markets all over the world had collapsed, making the borrowing of money very difficult. The congregation had no choice but look for a less grand building design and chose the First Baptist Church in Calgary model.

## **Construction Begins**

The minister Rev. Rupert Gregg Stewart and his assistant George B. McKean laid the cornerstone of the new building on July 1, 1913. It contains copies of the daily papers (Edmonton Bulletin, Edmonton Journal and Edmonton Capital), the local church paper "The Westland" and "Presbyterian Record," the annual reports of the church for the years 1910 to 1912, and coins of the day.

## **Grand Architecture**

The opening service was held on January 24, 1914 and people came each evening during that week. Everyone was impressed by the new church. Built of Redcliff pressed brick and faced with Chicago limestone, architectural style of the church is an adaptation of the High Victorian Gothic Revival, typical of the churches built in the early 1900's in Western Canada. The interior was designed in the congregational style, with curved pews and balconies.

## *The Impact of Two World Wars*

The new **Robertson** church building's expansion was halted by World War I. The city's population decreased, leaving people and organizations with huge debts. The Depression of the 1930's and then the Second World War delayed any new construction until the 1950's, when the Memorial Hall and Chapel were erected. **Wesley** faced similar issues. Also built of Redcliff brick with a wooden shingle roof, the Sunday School building served as both church and Sunday School until 1958 when the Christian Education building was opened. The original building met the needs of the congregation, with meeting rooms of various sizes on the lower level, and on the main floor an auditorium with balconies.

## *A New Congregation Is Born*

When church denomination union was discussed in the 1920's, both congregations were in favour and conversations were occasionally held to discern union considering their close proximity. In **1971**, the churches amalgamated to become **Robertson-Wesley United Church**. Proceeds from the sale of the Wesley property were invested for community outreach and the fund still is used today. The congregation also helped begin several United congregations including Jasper Place (now St. Andrews), Ebenezer and Westminster (now closed), and Gilchrist Memorial (now Spirit West).

## *Historic Building*

Robertson-Wesley was declared a Historic Heritage building in 1989 (in 2004 it received city designation). The 100-foot steeple of the church is a landmark and an important symbol of the congregation. Combined with stylized wind representing the Spirit, it was incorporated into a new church logo in 2008.

## *Responding to Community Needs*

The members of Robertson-Wesley United Church responded to the needs of the people they served such as responding to the Spanish Flu pandemic or struggling for women's suffrage. In the 1970's the congregation responded to the plight of boat people, beginning an ongoing commitment to refugees. It also helped found a chapter of Project Ploughshares, became food bank depot in the 1980's and in 1998 began serving monthly dinners for all.

In the first decade of the new century, the congregation formally chose to embrace all people, and marry all couples, including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. In 2009, we became a UCC Affirming Ministry. Robertson-Wesley also has an historic commitment to faith formation and learning. The church helped found the *Pathways* Centre educational center and the *Spirit Arts Movement* began to help all seek healing and justice.

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## *History*

