

# 100 Years of municipal leadership

## A Union of Manitoba Municipalities

by Gordon Goldsborough

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In early March 1905, the Council of the RM of Macdonald met for its monthly meeting. One of the items it considered was an invitation from the Mayor of Brandon, to attend a meeting 10 days hence, the object of which would be to consider a proposal for a new organization for municipal governments. The Council chose two members to attend.<sup>1</sup> To encourage attendance by delegates from remote parts of the province, the organizing committee arranged round-trip train fares at one-and-a-third times the one-way rate. Fifty participants arrived in Brandon from 31 municipalities for the opening session in the afternoon of Tuesday, March 14. Several other municipalities that were unable to send representatives instead sent telegrams of support. The mood was unanimously favourable, for the assembled group promptly passed a motion creating a Union of Manitoba Municipalities. Several delegates were sent off to hash out a constitution and bylaws. The advantages of the new Union were thought to include the encouragement of mutually profitable communications between various municipalities and the increased influence that would result from this union, the fostering of a 'patriotic spirit,' a centralized Bureau of Information, and of course, the saving by Union members of "enormous sums of money."<sup>2</sup>

The delegates elected an executive, had further discussion, then adjourned for a banquet at Brandon's Shore House, HOSTED BY THE CITY COUNCIL AND MAYOR.<sup>3</sup> The delegates went back to an evening session, where they approved the draft constitution. With its foundation now firmly established, the group passed its first resolution to the effect that, "Municipalities should have full and exclusive control of their streets and roads, and that no legislation should be passed [by provincial and federal governments] infringing on such control" without prior input from the affected municipality. The resolution's intent had less

to do with the control of roadways, although concern for road improvement would lead in 1909 to the formation of a separate Good Roads Association, than with the telephone lines that generally followed roadways:

"One of the objects of this resolution was to stop the governments from giving blanket charters to telephone companies, as they had in the case of the Bell Telephone Company, who are asking excessive prices, and not being even satisfied with what they have got in their charter, are trying to persuade Courts to pass bylaws allowing them to reduce the height of their poles in the country districts."<sup>4</sup>

On the second day, other resolutions were considered that collectively illustrate the nature of municipal governance issues of the day. Among the resolutions passed was one urging Ottawa to compel railways to assume all costs of road crossings whenever such were required to maintain public safety. The Union was also understandably concerned about procuring tax revenue for public works. For example, it worried that land which had been set aside throughout the Province as an endowment for the University of Manitoba – sale of which would generate revenue for the institution – was not generating tax revenue for the constituent municipality, so a system of grants in lieu of taxes was advocated. The councillors from Macdonald drew the group's attention to another tax problem. In their municipality, as in others, large areas of land had been originally assessed as "swampland" unfit for agriculture, but which drainage had rendered highly productive. Yet, the municipality was unable to change the assessed value and, thereby, raise needed funds for road improvement.

The Union was also concerned about jurisdictional matters. It requested that any provincial or federal bills affecting railways as well as telegraph, telephone and electric power lines be vetted by the municipalities that may

be affected by them. It requested the right to exempt companies providing work to 15 or more local employees from paying taxes for up to 12 years, to entice companies to build facilities in Manitoba communities. The Union proposed that all trees and shrubs planted along highways should become the property of the municipality in which they were situated.

The meeting ended with a hearty vote of thanks to the Brandon organizers, after which delegates dispersed around the city. Some went on a tour of the Dominion Experimental Farm<sup>5</sup> to learn about its latest innovations. The Macdonald councillors, both farmers, likely attended that tour. Then, everyone went their separate ways, happy for having played a role in founding an organization that was to become a major force on behalf of municipal governments in the coming century.

UMM membership grew rapidly in its first half dozen years, leveling off at just over 100 by 1910. The Union organized an AGM and by the early 1920s, these meetings were attended by around 300 people. Their purpose was to highlight common problems, develop collective responses to matters of mutual concern, and pass along useful information. Later, the Union published a magazine, *The Western Municipal News*, in collaboration with its counterparts in Saskatchewan and Alberta.<sup>6</sup> The Union faltered during the early years of the Depression; membership fell for a few years, but as the economy recovered, so too did membership numbers. Over time, the urban municipalities drifted away to form their own association. The divorce was temporary, however, for in 1999, the Union of Manitoba Municipalities merged with the Manitoba Association of Urban Municipalities to become the Association of Manitoba Municipalities. The AMM thrives to the present day, having celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005. (see sidebar on page 11)

The men who attended the Union's found-

ing meeting in Brandon came from diverse backgrounds, and went on to play various roles in municipal, provincial, and federal governments. One of the two Macdonald delegates would continue for a few more years as a councilor, attending the UMM's 1907 meeting in Winnipeg, and would later serve as Reeve for three years. While he would remain interested in local affairs for the rest of his life, he did so as a citizen, and held no further municipal office. But he was clearly proud of his role in the founding of the Union of Manitoba Municipalities, as shown by the fact that he kept the group photo that had been taken outside the Brandon City Hall in 1905. He passed it on to his grandson who, in turn, gave it to his son. That delegate was my great-grandfather, John Fletcher Goldsbrough.<sup>7</sup> ♣

**Notes**

1. *Manitoba Free Press*, 10 March 1905, page 8.
2. *First Annual Report of the Union of Manitoba Municipalities*, 1905. Archives of Manitoba.
3. *Brandon Weekly Sun*, 23 March 1905, page 3.
4. *First Annual Report of the Union of Manitoba Municipalities*, 1905. Archives of Manitoba.
5. *Brandon Weekly Sun*, 16 March 1905, page 1.
6. I am grateful to Tom Mitchell at Brandon University's McKee Archives for drawing my attention to this magazine, and for allowing me to peruse his wonderful collection of the *Brandon Daily Sun* – the only copies of this paper in existence.
7. Some of the delegates to the founding meeting missed the 'photo op' and we are not certain whether J. F. Goldsbrough (the spelling of our surname changed after 1911) was among them. I am inclined to think the fellow in the buffalo coat and peasant cap on the right side is J.F., but my dad is not so sure.

**AMM reaches milestone**



AMM Executive Director Joe Masi, The Honourable John Harvard, Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, and AMM Rural Vice-President Garry Wasylowski

The AMM recently had the honour of receiving a *Centennial Organization Award* from the Manitoba Historical Society. The Awards Ceremony took place on April 23, 2006. The **Hon. John Harvard**, Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, presented the award to AMM Rural Vice-President **Garry Wasylowski**, and AMM Executive Director **Joe Masi**.

The AMM has a long history of lobbying for the betterment of municipal governments in Manitoba. We believe that following the template laid out by the original Union of Manitoba Municipalities (UMM) and Manitoba Association of Urban Municipalities (MAUM), in which rural and urban municipalities work hand in hand for the betterment of all, has allowed us to reach this milestone.

The AMM is delighted to receive this prestigious award, and we sincerely thank the Manitoba Historical Society for honouring our association.

**MHS devoted to preserving the past**

The Manitoba Historical Society (MHS), founded in 1879, is the oldest organization in Western Canada dedicated to preserving our past for future generations. For over 127 years, the MHS has collected books and artifacts that became the basis of today's Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg Public Library, and Manitoba Museum. The MHS continues its legacy of preservation, promotion, research, and education via a range of publications, educational programs, and web site. It operates two museums: Dalnavert, the magnificent 1895 home of Sir Hugh John Macdonald, and Ross House, the West's first post office.

The Centennial Organization Awards were initiated in celebration of the MHS's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004. Their purpose is to recognize non-profit groups that have operated continuously in Manitoba for over 100 years in the areas of culture, economic development, education, health, heritage, labour, politics, recreation and sport, religion, and social reform. Histories of organizations that have received the award to date are available on the MHS web site at [www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/organization/index.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/organization/index.shtml).



**Dr. Gordon Goldsbrough**

Dr. Gordon Goldsbrough is an Associate Professor at the U of M, and Director of its Delta Marsh Field Station on Lake Manitoba. He is actively involved in the heritage community, being President and webmaster of the Manitoba Historical Society.

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