



Fulfilling the Vision

by Doug Panting

As 1999 marks the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Richardson Building, *JR News* continues its series on the history of the Richardson companies at the corner of Portage and Main. In this issue, historian Doug Panting looks at how the Richardsons immortalized Winnipeg's most famous intersection.

As recounted in the last issue of *JR News*, the plans and early stages of construction of the original Richardson Building were reluctantly abandoned with the start of the Great Depression in 1929. But that did little to delay the fascinating events that unfolded in the building at Portage and Main.

Initially, local government officials requested that construction activity continue on the property, making it appear the building was proceeding, even though it wasn't. In light of hardships of the depression, the motivation behind this idea was

understandable. The appearance of economic activity could provide people with the hope that things were going to get better. But the idea was never pursued. The deception, however well

It may, in fact, have been the most beautiful gas station the world has ever seen.

intended, was not congruent with the philosophy of the Richardson Companies. Instead, the firm's management came up with a better idea.

In 1934, James Richardson & Sons, Limited announced another project for the corner of

Portage and Main. On March 24th, the public learned about designs for an elegant, yet practical service station – the first Lombard Garage. The building, designed by McCoil-Frontenac

Oil Company Ltd., was to measure 28 by 64 feet with brick and stucco construction to resemble an old English-style building. There were provisions for parking space and heater plugs for about 80 cars. A large sign was erected atop the sta-

tion and the whole area was illuminated by powerful floodlights. A decision was made to plant a sizable flowerbed to grace the front station. George Richardson says he remembers helping with the flowerbed when he was a young boy. It may, in fact, have been the most beautiful gas station the world has ever seen.

The thinking of the firm's management was that this project was honest and practical, yet it would stand as a hopeful reminder to people of what the world would be like when the Depression finally ended.

Richardson Building Construction Facts

- Excavation began October 19th, 1967.
- During the erection of the multi-floor building, construction proceeded at a rate of approximately one floor every two weeks.
- The Plaza level was completed on March 4th, 1968 and the building was topped off during the same year, on November 4th.
- During construction, 3,900 tons of reinforcing steel were used – amounting to 660 miles of steel rods plus over 10 acres of steel mesh.
- The building was covered by 185,400 square feet of pre-cut Manitoba granite and 2,856 panes of solar bronze double glazed glass.
- Over 36,000 yards of concrete were poured at the site.



L-R: Norman Alexander, Fred Fulcher, Don Leaney, Kathleen M. Richardson, Gordon Lawson, Jack MacDonald, The Honourable James A. Richardson, George T. Richardson

The next period of construction for the Richardson companies on the corner of Portage and Main began in 1965. In this year, JRSL announced plans to build an office complex on the famous corner. The announcement ended speculation about the firm's intentions for its properties in the area. At this point, the plans called for an office complex occupying a two-and-a-half acre site. The buildings to be demolished to make way for the project included the Manitoba Wheat Pool Building, the Sanford Evans Building, the Broke Bond Building and the old Bank of Canada Building.

In February 1967, a more developed set of plans for the complex were announced by the Honourable James A. Richardson, Chairman of James Richardson & Sons, Limited. In a press conference, he revealed grand plans for an office tower skyscraper over 30 stories high, a large hotel, an all-weather concourse and a new Bank of Canada building. Speaking for the company he said:

"We hope this will have the

same effect on Winnipeg as the centres in Toronto and Montreal. We hope a new urban area will grow around us."

Referring to the original building plans in 1929 and their sudden suspension, he also noted, "My father started this project nearly 40 years ago... he made the right decision at the time... so are we this time."

"It has taken time, patience and foresight to transform the hopes of 1929 into the reality of 1969..." – Muriel Sprague Richardson

The architects of the project would be Winnipeg's own Smith Carter Searle & Associates, with the New York firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill acting as consulting architects. The general contractor would be Poole Construction Ltd. of Edmonton, and the initial leasing agents for the building would be McKeag Harris Realty and Development Company Ltd.

Stories about the office complex appeared in newspapers across Canada. With the growing anticipation of Manitoba res-

idents evident throughout the construction phases, regular progress reports were part of both the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *The Tribune*. The Manitoba Department of Trade and Commerce used pictures of the project in full-page advertisements in issues of *Time Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal* to promote business and

industry in the province. In the ad, they boasted that the Lombard Place development had few rivals in all of Canada, and pinpointed its central location by the infamous winds of Portage & Main. The ad was playfully titled, "World's Only Forty-Million Dollar Windbreak."

While the Richardson building progressed on schedule, George T. Richardson, president of James Richardson & Sons, Limited and Edward E. Carlson, President of Western International Hotel, worked on further developments,

including the blueprint for an 18-story hotel.

A special ceremony was held when the Richardson Building was completed, with a balloon release marking the presentation of the finished project on November 14th, 1969. It was a proud moment when Muriel Sprague Richardson, president of the firm from 1939 to 1966, pressed the button that officially opened the Richardson Building. Speaking of her late husband's plans to build in 1929 she said:

"It has taken time, patience and foresight to transform the hopes of 1929 into the reality of 1969... I have sincere admiration for all the fine work that has been done on this building and it is my very pleasant assignment to press the button to officially open it."

The parting of a ceremonial curtain unveiled the bronzed title *Richardson Building* christened on the granite face of the building's south wall. After the ceremony, guests were ushered inside for a tour of the new facilities that were decades in the making. *Jrn*