Prairie Charity:
Masonic benevolence in late nineteenth century Manitoba

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SETTING THE STAGE

From early times the charity purse reminded a Freemason that the Craft patiently ministers “to the relief of want and sorrow,” and that it calls upon its members to “exercise that virtue” which they "profess to admire," that is to say, Charity. Freemasonry also instructs its members to extend “charity and consolation to their fellow creatures in the hour of their affliction.”

As a result, Freemasons have been providing assistance to those less fortunate than themselves for many years. It is recorded that the Freemasons of Dublin, Ireland, in 1688, presented a “well-stuffed” purse of charity to a destitute brother.

EARLY MANITOBA

However, my focus is on Manitoba so we should know where it is. Manitoba is in the centre of Canada, and its capital city of Winnipeg is sometimes called the heart of the North American continent.

The Red River Colony was organized by Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk, beginning in 1811. They were given a large tract of the country for their colony and eventually they built at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, the location of present-day Winnipeg.

One newcomer describes the Manitoba countryside in 1874--

“About that time things were pretty much in the raw, or just about as nature left them... Nearly two-thirds of (our route) was through swamps with water two or three feet deep... What a delightful time we greenhorns had up to the waist in water with millions of mosquitoes adding their cheerful note (and bite) to the proceedings... The distance we had to travel was 30 miles, a dead level plain, without a tree, shrub or twig, no house of any description, not a drop of water to drink. So we had to start on foot ... walking with blistered feet on a hot day in the month of June, 1874.”
This man settled at the growing town of Nelson which had, by 1881, a population of 1,000. Nelson was the site of the land registry office for the district as well as a courthouse, one hotel, three churches, stores and other services.

Overland road travel, or even river travel, worked well; however, some of the area residents began to recognize the benefits of a railroad, and, especially, of having that railroad go through their town.

THE RAILWAY

There was a rail line through southern Manitoba at this time. Completed in 1878, that line ran south from Winnipeg to the international boundary at Emerson and was a way of connecting Manitoba to eastern Canada by rail through the United States.

In 1874 Alvey Baker Morden brought his wife and children to Manitoba from Ontario. They arrived in Fort Garry (now part of Winnipeg) where a friend mentioned the available land to the south. Alvey and his two eldest sons checked it out and returned to fetch the rest of the family to settle down on property that was 100 km south-west of Winnipeg and just 19 km north of the border with the United States.

In the 1880s great interest surrounded the building of a railroad across Canada. Residents of Nelson promoted the community as a potential train stop, but a nearby creek offered a needed water supply. A water tower was built there and the Canadian Pacific Railway purchased some of Alvey Morden’s land nearby. Eventually, the new community was named Morden.
Health Care

Health care in those early days was limited. Every community’s cemetery would give mute testimony to the effects of serious illnesses. No one was immune although infants and young mothers were quite susceptible to these diseases.

Pioneers might learn healing from the local Aboriginal peoples, and they might have some family cures, but doctors and nurses were few and far between. Nelson, Manitoba was fortunate to have the services of three doctors who would serve the community from their offices, make house calls, and travel long distances to reach people in need.

Rural doctors did not always have the expertise or the facilities to treat complex cases, or be able to provide long term care. A patient could be sent to the closest hospital, Winnipeg, but that was over 100 km. away and a very difficult journey even for healthy people.

In 1859 the first cottage hospital was established in England. The Reverend J. H. Sapter observed the dilemma doctors faced when accident victims could not be transported to a distant hospital. As a result, Mr. Sapter “made a cottage available, rent-free, which after being whitewashed and simply furnished opened after a few weeks as the first cottage hospital.”

Having a local hospital meant that long journeys to city hospitals were not always necessary. It meant that there were facilities to deal more immediately with emergencies, and that physicians knew their patients and the treatments they needed. No matter how long a patient was in the hospital, it meant that family and friends were able to visit so that the patient would not feel isolated and cut off from them.
Belmont Lodge, No. 13, A.F. & A.M., under the Grand Lodge of Manitoba., was established in Nelson, Manitoba in 1880 and moved to Morden in 1885.

At the November 20, 1890 meeting of Belmont Lodge, the Worshipful Master, Corbet Locke, presented a scheme to erect a Cottage Hospital in their town. The motion to donate “$100.00 towards establishing a fund for the erection of a Hospital in the town of Morden” was duly passed.

A letter went out to all the lodges in Manitoba with information about their plan, which read, in part:

“The Officers and Members of Morden Lodge, … feeling that they should not be drones in this world’s hive, … have resolved to make a united effort to do a lasting good to the community, by erecting a hospital to be known as “The Freemason’s Hospital”, at Morden… to be open to the sick and languishing no matter whence they come, so long as we have beds to lay them on.”

An article in the *Manitoba Daily Free Press* for September 10, 1891 records an appeal to the wider public for funds to build the hospital.

The hope was to have the “foundation stone laid by the Grand Master of the province, with full Masonic ceremonial” in October 1891 but it did not take place until July 1, 1892. At the special meeting held for this purpose recognition was given of the efforts of the members of Belmont Lodge and the hope expressed that “success would crown their efforts.”

The first Annual Meeting of the Freemasons’ Hospital Committee was held in Dufferin Hall in Morden on April 19th, 1893. At a Directors’ meeting that followed immediately, W. Bro. Corbet Locke, a local Judge, was elected President.

In 1897 that same Corbet Locke, now the Most Worshipful the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Manitoba, gave a review of the Freemasons’ Hospital up to that time. In part, he said…
“I doubt not that I will be expected to refer to the Hospital and I gladly embrace this opportunity to let you know something of what has been done... I am also glad to refer to the work in the hope that...what has been done in this sparsely populated jurisdiction to furnish means of relief to the sick, may be a spur to other jurisdictions...

... When the work was taken in hand many expressed the fear that though the erection of the building might be accomplished that it could not be maintained, and that the maintenance of it would be a constant drag on the Craft—such however has not been the event.

It is important to note that the only money available to the Hospital for maintenance and operations, other than from revenue, was the Hospital Committee membership fees: even these were at the will of the donors, and the totals varied from year to year. During the years of the Hospital's existence it became a common practice for Directors and supporters to be out canvassing for members during the few days before the Annual Meeting, in order to be assured of enough members to fill the Board of Directors.

The 17 men of the Board of Directors were elected annually from among those individuals or corporation representatives who had made financial contributions. Provision was made, however, to increase this Board by allowing the town councils of Morden and Stanley and nearby Municipalities to each appoint a Director in any year that they made a donation toward the maintenance of the Hospital. Belmont Lodge No. 13 was allowed to appoint one additional Director.

No yearly grants were available from Municipal and Government sources in the earlier years of the Hospital's operation. It was therefore dependent upon generous donations from the residents of Southern Manitoba, from the Grand Lodge, and from fundraising activities as well as sales of such items as commemorative paperweights and china bowls.

From almost the beginning there was a Women's Hospital Aid Society, as well as a Nurses' Home Aid Society, that conducted fundraising. There were also
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a variety of community events held where the collections or donations were passed on to the hospital. One such event was

### The World’s Fair for a Quarter

Rev. Alfred Andrews will give his lecture on the World’s Fair in Minnedosa on Thursday, Oct. 19th. After the lecture he will present a dozen fine magic lantern views of the principal objects of interest.

*Minnedosa Tribune*

12 October 1893

One of the problems faced by rural physicians was collecting fees. Many people sickened and died without medical care because they could not pay for it. Often, medical care was provided but the doctor was not paid.

Sometimes the doctor was paid in kind rather than cash. In December 1935 a girl was born at home in Crandall, Manitoba and the cost of the nursing care was $32.00. The bill was paid over a four-month period with loads of wood and ice, chickens and milk. That $32.00 cost would be $544.88 in 2014 currency. (€23.64 in 1932 becomes €402.45 today.)

Patients were responsible for payment of fees resulting from their care. Sometimes the hospital had to wait for payment. In 1920 the Directors’ minutes make a special note: “Mr. H. Williams, a patient in the hospital in 1901, who was unable to pay his hospital bill, felt that he was now in a position to do so, sent his cheque for the sum of one hundred dollars as a donation.”

These are only a few examples that demonstrate the credit that is due to those who loyally supported the Freemasons’ Hospital in many ways to maintain a service so important to the people of the region.
The Freemasons’ Hospital in Morden was a reality. The new 22-bed hospital was officially opened on March 10, 1893. There were public wards for men and for women and four private wards—accommodation for twenty-two patients, though as many as twenty-six had been housed at one time. [MB Morning FP, 13 June 1900 page 10]

This Freemasons’ Hospital was a unique venture in all of Canada— the Manitoba Morning Free Press said as much in its June 13, 1900 issue:

"Upwards of twenty-five thousand days of treatment have been had by over fifteen hundred patients, with an annual death rate of a small fraction over three per cent, which is said to be the best showing of any hospital in Canada… It is understood that this is the only hospital built exclusively by the craft on this continent. “

No doubt recurring outbreaks of typhoid fever and other dangerous diseases are what led to the construction of a separate isolation ward for the care of those patients. A motion to build the ward was passed at the 1903 annual meeting and the isolation ward was built by the end of the year.

Modern improvements were always added to the hospital building. Sometimes they involved a lot of exercise:

There was great excitement when the elevator was installed in the hospital. One of the Masons reported he had gone for a ride. He said the elevator was going to make life easier for the nurses and doctors. Instead of carrying their patients up the twenty steps from the operating room to the ward, they could use the elevator.

There was enough room for the patient on the stretcher and the nurse. She put on the gloves supplied and then hauled away on the ropes. Away you went as slick as anything up to the next floor!

To meet the demands made upon the hospital, a new wing was added and opened in 1928. It was named “The Locke Wing” in honour of Judge Corbet
Locke to recognize his long and valuable services to the institution. He was annually elected the president of the Board of Directors for over thirty years.

THE NURSING PROGRAM

Soon after the Hospital opened a Nursing School was developed and the Nurses’ Home built in 1898.

The Lady Superintendent, as well as the local doctors, were in charge of the lectures given to the student nurses over a two-year, and later a three-year, training period.

Graduate nurses were given caps inspired by the Shriners’ fez, and certificates. The first pin that would identify the Freemason’s Hospital Nursing Program, shown by this 1914 example, was later replaced by ones such as this one given in 1933.

The training of registered nurses continued until the end of 1942, when provincial regulations limited the availability of instructors. From 1946 the hospital took on the training of practical nurses which ended with the closure of the hospital in 1952.
END OF AN ERA

The Freemasons’ Hospital was renovated over the years but with the changes made in the provincial regional health organization the construction of a new hospital and nurses’ residence could be financed through the issue of municipal debentures.

When the new hospital was completed, and officially opened on July 4, 1952, the Winnipeg Free Press reported on the event:

Present on the platform were Donald Buchanan, an old-timer of the Morden area, who witnessed the cornerstone laying of the Freemasons’ hospital here July 1, 1892.

In 1951 the Freemasons’ Hospital of Morden was converted into a 32-bed personal care home, opening in October 1952. When a newer personal care home was built in 1969, the Freemasons’ Hospital building was demolished and the cornerstone along with items placed with it in 1892 were returned to Morden Lodge No. 13. Some stayed with the Lodge records and are now in the Grand Lodge of Manitoba Archives.

The Freemasons’ Hospital cornerstone, however, went to the new Boundary Trails hospital which is serving a large portion of southern Manitoba. The cornerstone was re-dedicated by the Grand Lodge of Manitoba on July 14, 2001.
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CONCLUSION

In 1986 a Manitoba Past Grand Master wrote that

“Masonry in Manitoba has always been in the forefront of community endeavours…”

Fred Robertson, P.G.M.

The Freemasons’ Hospital may have closed in 1952, but the Masons of Manitoba continue in charitable service.

- **Masons Care Program** – for over 30 years Manitoba Masons have been providing cars and passenger vans, as well as drivers, in partnership with the Canadian Cancer Society to take cancer patients to and from their appointments.
- **Relay for Life** – a fundraising project with the Canadian Cancer Society.
- **Partners for Life** – working with Canadian Blood Services to advocate for blood donations.
- The *Masonic Foundation of Manitoba, Inc.* is a separate charitable entity to which all may contribute, and, of course,
- Individual Lodges have their own organizations to which they contribute for the benefit of the community.

In 1901, M. W. Bro. Corbet Locke expressed his desire that, since the hospital opened in 1893, “the Masons of Manitoba thereby became in time universally serviceable to mankind.”

Over one hundred years later, Manitoba Masons demonstrate in a variety of ways that Charity is important and remains a key concept in the Masonic Way of Life. Our conclusion is that we can return, with a slight alteration, to the beginning and the theme of our story: *Prairie Charity: Masonic benevolence continues in 21st century Manitoba.*

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