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Number 3-74, February 1975

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019658ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019658ar>

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Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Klassen, H. C. (1975). Social Troubles in Calgary in the Mid-1890's. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (3-74), 8–16.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019658ar>

SOCIAL TROUBLES IN CALGARY IN THE MID-1890'S

Recently the social troubles of urban centres have become a major concern of numerous writers. Little attention has been paid, however, to such phenomena in the frontier urban community, whose story has most after been related in terms of glowing progress. I am currently investigation the human problems and attempted remedies in the mid-1890's. During this period, irregular employment inadequate housing, poverty, crime, imperfect sanitation, and disease all played a part in giving Calgary society a dark and harsh side. Some preliminary thoughts and findings on this side of Calgary's society are outlined below.

Between 1894 and 1896 the youthful city struggled in the grip of a business depression. The city's efforts to attract new industries in order to create more jobs met with little success in these years. More successful was its campaign to bring settlers to the surrounding area.¹ The coming of hundreds of farmers and ranchers to Calgary's hinterland meant a somewhat larger demand for urban services, though the gradual spread of settlement did not as yet significantly stimulate the city.² During the period from the mid-1880's to the early 1890's, the Saskatchewan Rebellion, the local building boom, the ranchers' and homesteaders' need for building materials and equipment, and the construction of the Calgary and Edmonton Railway had combined to draw to the city a great deal of capital and many people.³ By 1891 it had 3,876 inhabitants. In the next decade, however, its population grew very little, rising only to about 4,000 in the mid-1890's and to 4,152 in 1901.⁴ A real renewal of city growth would have to await the further development of the farming and ranching hinterland and the expansion of industry. In the mid-1890's the stagnant economy cast gloom over Calgary and heightened especially the economic and social insecurity of the working class.

Irregular employment, an element that had operated against Calgary workmen since the early 1880's, now imposed even greater hardships. For many unskilled and skilled labourers there was now less work available, especially during the winter season, urban incomes dwindled.⁵ Hardest hit were the unskilled workers, ordinarily earning about \$1.30 a day.⁶ Those who remained jobless for weeks and months at a time quickly ran out of money and were forced to purchase the necessities of life on credit. Yet such customers found it almost impossible to obtain credit over long periods because hardpressed businessmen -- like John Sharples, a wholesale and retail grocer, and A. Allan, a dry goods merchant -- felt compelled to adopt a system based strictly on cash or short-term credit.⁷

Under such conditions a large proportion of Calgary's working class population was completely unable to cope with the problem of poverty, and during the first half of 1895 some thirty-five heads of household, consisting mainly of widows, destitute immigrants, and fathers afflicted with ill-health or recovering from accidents in lumber camps or on railways, obtained relief for their families from the city and private sources.⁸ A general relief committee, representing the city's relief committee, the Women's Christian Union, all the churches, and individual citizens and business firms, distributed coal, groceries and clothing to these poor families. While the city as such made a significant contribution, well over seventy-five per cent of the assistance came from private sources, with clothing for forty-three boys from the Women's Christian Union, over a ton of beef and mutton from ranchers, three cars of coal from the Galt Coal Company and the H.W. McNeill Coal Company, and free transportation for the coal from the Canadian Pacific Railway.

These make-shift measures to relieve destitution did not disguise a fundamental belief of the men and women involved

in providing poor relief that action by both public authorities and private organizations was needed to deal effectively with urban poverty.⁹ They likewise held the traditional view that the task of assisting the poor should for the most part remain a private responsibility, especially at a time when the financial resources of the city were being strained to the limit.¹⁰ Their practice of giving aid primarily to the hard-luck cases -- widows, orphans, and physically disabled men and women -- was rooted in the idea that a person's social welfare was essentially his own responsibility. Although they gave some assistance to poor immigrants, they did so unwillingly, as they felt that the federal government was making a mistake in allowing paupers to enter the country.¹¹ To discourage the growth of pauperism at the local level, Calgary's relief agencies exercised close control over the distribution of aid. Each claim for relief was carefully investigated by a city policeman before any action was taken, and a request for help did not necessarily guarantee a positive response.¹² The city council's policy of requiring able-bodied men on relief to break stones and repair streets probably served to deter others from applying for assistance.¹³ Even the most needy people could not take relief for granted. In the final analysis, they, too, were expected to be resourceful and make it largely on their own.

Such resourcefulness in the face of inadequate and irregular incomes of the working-class families usually meant, among other things, inadequate living quarters.¹⁴ Although there were no congested districts, like in bigger eastern cities, crowded, cold and cheaply built dwellings often characterized the housing accommodation of the working poor. Cheap rental dwellings, the typical housing of most unskilled workingmen, were a product of the boom mentality of the eighties, when building contractors, real estate agents and landlords sought large profits and cared nothing about the well-being of tenants.

With very few building regulations to guide it, the city acquired an assortment of low quality housing facilities including flimsy shacks and small frame houses. Fortunately for the poor rent-paying citizens, the departure of hundreds of people from Calgary between 1894 and 1896 left many houses vacant and drove down the rents considerably.¹⁵ In April of 1896 about one hundred dwellings in the city were unoccupied, some homes were renting for as low as \$3.50 a month, and a number of families were receiving rent-free accommodation in houses for looking after them.¹⁶

But low rents and rent-free living, based as they were upon a temporary surplus in housing, offered the occupants of these homes only limited relief from the stern realities of life. Landlords were not inclined to improve the living conditions of their tenants. Moreover, these conditions never really became a matter of public interest during the 'nineties, largely because the local authorities tended to look upon housing problems -- like those of indigency -- as a private responsibility.

Poverty coupled with the uncertainties of frontier life generated social tensions and criminal activity. Twenty-four cases of theft were tried in the Calgary police court in 1895, a particularly hard year that left many citizens badly off.¹⁷ Poverty could not excuse crime. Possibly in the minds of many there was no good to be served in curing crime through curing poverty. Control of a social ill was in a sense a matter for the courts.

Vagrancy, endemic in Calgary, increased in these troubled times of the 'nineties. As Calgary's rail connections with Vancouver, Fort MacLeod, and eastern Canada became tramp routes in this period, scores of vagabonds from other parts of Canada and especially the United States found their way into the city and frequently resorted to begging in order to survive.

In August 1893, the Mounted Police barracks, which had sleeping accommodation for about twenty prisoners, were beginning to run short of room.¹⁸ The small city jail, with only a few cells, was likewise inadequate. But in 1895 some one hundred and sixty-one individuals, mostly men, were arrested by the city police and convicted of vagrancy in the police court.¹⁹ Some of these offenders were let off with a warning; not a few were confined at the Mounted Police barracks with hard labour for periods ranging from seven days to six months.

The citizens of Calgary had surprisingly mixed feelings about the vagabonds.²⁰ Given the tendency of some tramps to steal rather than go without food, a number of shopkeepers and housewives tried to get rid of them whenever they set foot on their premises. The Calgary Tribune saw the vagrants in the Mounted Police barracks as freeloaders; parasitic individuals receiving a bed and three meals a day at public expense while doing relatively easy work such as scrubbing floors and sawing wood instead of strenuous labour like breaking stones.²¹

Other citizens, however, priding themselves in never turning strangers away from their doors, gave more than one vagrant a warm meal. Among the social "evils" afflicting Calgary in the 1890's, prostitution too was encouraged by difficulties. For example, concern for the moral and physical health and the social well-being of the teen-age girls engaged in prostitution in a brothel known as the Mascot in 1895 prompted Judge D.L. Scott of the Supreme Court to call upon the citizens of Calgary to take a greater interest in the protection of these girls.²² More specifically, he urged them to seek ways of removing the economic pressures that had driven the girls to prostitution. While one of the girls prior to her association with the Mascot had been offered a job for \$2 a week, at the brothel her net income, after paying \$10 a week for her room, was considerably higher. Besides the girls, other persons

derived financial gain from their connection with the Mascot. The madam collected \$40 a week from the girls occupying the four bedrooms. Her livery man earned only about \$20 a month. Thus, although many Calgarians regarded prostitution as a social and moral evil, the economic difficulties of working-class women and girls no less than the male interest in brothels kept prostitution alive in the city.

Depression also contributed to problems of public health, particularly in the working-class world. Because of the high cost of the pure water supplied by the privately owned waterworks, over half of the city's residents, including a large portion of the working-class population, were drinking partially polluted water from their own wells, some of which were located no farther than fifteen feet from their outdoor privies.²³ The majority of these people were dependent on privies and cesspools, as they could not afford to have their homes connected to the city's sewerage system. Water and sewer pipes had, of course, not been extended to all the inhabited parts of the city. Nor were the existing facilities being fully utilized. In 1895, for instance, in the downtown area, where sewers were available, several laundries, boarding houses, and hotels were not making use of them.²⁴ To counteract the unsanitary conditions, the civic authorities hired scavengers and instructed them to clean out the privies and cesspools and collect the garbage at least twice a month.²⁵ The scavengers, however, paid irregular visits to the homes and business establishments that required their services, and neglected some areas of the city altogether while they were earning a few extra dollars by doing odd jobs for well-to-do citizens and businessmen.²⁶ The failure of some residents to co-operate with the scavengers further contributed to the uncleanness of the city.²⁷

Intimately related to the imperfect sanitation was the periodic outbreak of disease. Between September 1894 and May 1895, the cases of diphtheria rose to thirty-three.²⁸ A considerable number of typhoid fever cases occurred in the fall

of 1895.²⁹ Dr. J.D. Lafferty, the city's health officer, brought the outbreak of diphtheria and typhoid fever, as well as the outbreak of measles and scarlet fever in the same period, under control by strictly enforcing quarantine. Families wishing to avoid quarantine sometimes made his task more difficult and endangered their own lives, especially those of their children, by trying to conceal these infectious diseases. The association of these diseases with dirty yards, neglected privies, and impure drinking water and milk lay behind Dr. Lafferty's plea for an improvement in the scavenger work, and his strong recommendation that the city continue its inspection of the milk sold in the city and of the premises of the men who furnished it.³⁰ Though Dr. Lafferty in his public statements made no reference to the connection between disease and the poor living conditions of the most unfortunate working-class families, he was likely very much aware of it.

Life for Calgary's working class was not easy in the mid-1890's. The city fought its way through the depression of these years at considerable social cost to the workingman and his family. Like the labourers in other prairie towns and cities and in the industrial centres of eastern Canada and the United States, Calgary workers found themselves enmeshed in a web of social troubles which all but a few of the business and professional leaders of the community tended to ignore.³¹ Economically disabled by irregular employment and low wages, many of them were reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence. Some fell prey to disease and others became involved in crime. The hard times hurt the ordinary labourer more than the established businessman.³² The gap between the small, relatively prosperous middle-class element and the working class in the city was thus widened during the depression of the nineties.

In a sense, this significant change in the social order came to the workingman as a shock, as he had been conditioned by the good times of the eighties and the frontier environment

to expect opportunity and success. For those workingmen who remained in Calgary through the depression, the mid-1890's became a period of reassessment, a process from which some emerged with a more realistic outlook of the West.

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FOOTNOTES

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2. Orr Letter Book, I, October 23, 1888, Orr to W.C. Schreiber; ibid., I, February 10, 1889, Orr to Schreiber; Calgary Herald, July 12, 1895.
3. Orr Letter Book, I, March 10, 1889, Orr to Schreiber; Calgary Herald, October 8, 1896.
4. Census of Canada, 1901, p.341.
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6. Orr Letter Book, IV, June 23, 1895, W.F. Orr to Thomas L. Orr, ibid., IV, June 10, 1895, W.F. Orr to A.M. Burgess.
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11. Orr Letter Book, IV, June 10, 1895, Orr to Burgess; City of Calgary Minutes, March 23, 1897, p.47.
12. Calgary Herald, January 15, 1895.
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14. Orr Letter Book, III, March 13, 1894, Orr to William Barker; ibid., IV, October 21, 1894, Orr to Rogers.
15. Orr Letter Book, III, March 13, 1894, Orr to Barker; ibid., IV, November 24, 1895, Orr to Charles I. Evans.
16. Orr Letter Book, V, April 7, 1896, Orr to Barker.
17. Calgary Herald, January 15, 1896.
18. Calgary Tribune, August 16, 1896.
19. Calgary Herald, January 15, 1896.
20. Calgary Herald, July 12, 1895.
21. Calgary Herald, August 16, 23, 1893.
22. Alberta Tribune, November 16, 1895.
23. Calgary Herald, April 5, 1893; ibid., October 23, 1897.
24. City of Calgary Minutes, June 4, 1895, p.356.
25. City of Calgary Minutes, August 22, 1894, pp.153-54; ibid., September 24, 1895, p.424.
26. Calgary Herald, July 13, 1897; ibid., May 1, 1901.
27. Ibid., August 3, 1895.
28. Ibid., September 18, 1895.
29. Ibid., October 21, 1895.
30. City of Calgary Minutes, September 24, 1895, p.424; Calgary Herald, October 21, 1895; ibid., January 7, 1896; For a discussion of the attitude of city council toward sanitation see M.L. Foran, "The Calgary Town Council, 1884-1895: A Study of Local Government in a Frontier Environment", (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1970), pp.69-73.
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32. Alberta Tribune, June 18, 1895.