

Halifax Explosion - The Manitoba Story

By Michael Dupuis © 2012

News of those saved and lost in the Halifax disaster arrived slowly in Manitoba. One of the first to receive information was Winnipegger J.R. Crawford whose son was on *Niobe*. "All Right." read the December 8 telegram. Another relieved city resident was Mr. R. Munro who received word that his son, Lieut. J.C. Munro was safe. However, on the same day, Mr. J.A. Davidson learned that his father-in-law Isaac Creighton and likely his entire family had perished.

Due to the demand on Halifax's damaged telegraph facilities, wires sent by survivors were necessarily brief. On December 10 Alderman William Bourke of Brandon was informed that the building in which his son, Sergeant E.R. Bourke was housed was demolished, but his son was safe. "O.K. *physically. Lost all effects. Broke,*" was the message. The following day, Winnipegger Mrs. Helen Wood received an even shorter telegram from her 16 year-old son on *Niobe*. "*Safe-Henry.*"

Between December 10 and 12 both the *Manitoba Free Press* and *Winnipeg Tribune* published the names of lost and saved with a Winnipeg connection:

- J.R. Boutiller's learned his father William Boutiller, his sister Mrs. John Hills, as well as her husband and three children had perished
- Mrs. Carter's brother, Arthur Hickey died in the disaster, but another brother, Captain W. Hickey survived
- Clara Rice of Dartmouth, wife of Lieutenant F.D. Rice, oldest son of Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Rice, was killed instantly
- Winnipeg Salvation Army officer Mrs. Minnie Cranwell perished
- Able Seaman Albert Saunders, 18, crewman on *Niobe's* 6-man boat party, son of Annie McPhail died instantly
- Mrs. Fletcher Bowser received news that her sister, Mr. George Bowser, and two children, Clara, aged 11 and Alfred aged 5 were fatalities
- Mrs. T. Zwicker learned that her brother Gordon, 25, was killed at the North Street railway station
- Among city naval men from whom word of safety has come were Walter McKean, Bob Martin, Iven McBride, and J.R. Barden
- Mrs. Macky, Helen and Mr. and Mrs. Campbell are safe. They have many friends in Winnipeg
- Mrs. C.A. Taylor received a wire from her son Harry who is on a minesweeper *St. Eloi* which was within 200 yards of the explosion. The upper deck of the sweeper

was destroyed by the force of the blast and a number of the crew injured by the debris, although no one was killed

- Mr. Godwin received word from his brother Alderman J.E. Godwin, Halifax that his father, mother and four children and Alderman Godwin's wife are all safe
- Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie learned their son R.J. Mackenzie RCN escaped uninjured
- Mrs. W.R. Carter – son Captain Arthur Hickey alive but his wife dead
- Mr. A. M Wright – son Lieut. Frank D. Wright alive but wife perished
- Don Taylor – brother Harry on *St. Eloi* minesweeper, safe

Naval Cadets Miraculously Safe

Perhaps the most anxious for news among Manitobans were mothers of the 14 to 16 year-old naval cadets in training at Halifax and the East coast. According to a December 11 *Free Press* front-page story, these mothers “have kept ceaseless vigil since the disaster hoping each minute to receive a reply to numerous wires sent. It has been impossible to get word through by telegraph to Halifax but some have secured information through Sydney or Ottawa.” Fortunately, by December 13 they were relieved to learn their sons were safe.

The escape of the 36 cadets in the Halifax Royal Naval College was nothing short of miraculous. When the blast occurred, the young men watching the fire on *Mont Blanc* were less than 500 yards from Pier 6. There was a deafening roar and then the red sandstone building collapsed around them leaving only the walls standing. One young man was flung across the room by the concussion and most were hit by flying plaster, metal, and shattered glass. Luckily, most were able to escape through a large broken window. An officer soon arrived to find most injured but none dead.

Manitoba Reacts to the Disaster

On December 7, both the *Free Press* and *Winnipeg Tribune* reported that Winnipeg's Mayor Frederick Davidson had wired Halifax's Mayor Peter Martin with the following message: “Winnipeg stands ready to offer any aid we possibly can. I am waiting for full particulars, and if relief is needed, as it most certainly looks as if it will be, I am confident we will demonstrate our sympathy in a very practical manner.”

The next day Brandon city council voted \$3,000 to a disaster relief fund. In addition, local citizens, and local organizations eventually subscribed \$1,000 more, while pupils of the three public schools contributed 3,800 pennies collected as a penny drive.

Newspapers Start Relief Funds

Within 48 hours of the event the *Free Press* and *Winnipeg Tribune* announced the formation of separate Halifax relief funds.

The *Free Press* printed a front-page notice headlined **Halifax Relief Fund**. Reminding readers that the “calamity was a national one”, the paper offered to open its columns for donations “to facilitate sending to the sufferers in Halifax the assistance of which they stand in such dire and pressing need.”

Below the notice was a list of the first subscriptions already received and the amount given. Some of the larger donors included:

Manitoba Free Press Co. Ltd....\$200.00
Sir Augustus Nanton and Lady Nanton...\$500.00
James A. Richardson...\$500.00
R.J. Whitis Co., Ltd...\$250.00
Mr. and Mrs. Edward Parnell...\$250.00
His Grace Archbishop Sinnet...\$100.00
Mr. and Mrs. G.R. Crowe...\$500.00
His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor and Lady Aikins...\$200.00

On the same day the *Tribune* also used its front page to announce the **Help Halifax** fund. The paper provided a blank form for readers to complete and send in with a cheque to the **Tribune-Halifax Fund Editor**. The next day the paper published the names of several contributors and the amounts donated. Among the larger donors were

Mr. and Mrs. Macdonald \$350.00
Robinson & Co. Ltd \$200.00
Mr. and Mrs. G.H. Connolly \$500.00
Macdonald-Chapman Ltd. \$200.00
J.J. McLean & Co. 100.00

Also on December 8 the *Tribune* ran a story headlined *Halifax Men In Winnipeg Go To Seek Their Families*. Readers were told that after waiting 48 hours for news from Halifax about the fate of their families, three Halifax men had left Winnipeg for the stricken city. According to the story, Thomas Hessian, A.C. Mitchell, and A.R. Webster would not reach Halifax until midnight on December 10.

Several Organizations Offer Support

On the same day as the newspapers' relief funds were announced, the Manitoba Red Cross sent \$5,000 to the organization's representative in Halifax, and official messages of sympathy and support were despatched from Winnipeg by representatives of the provincial and municipal governments, the Canadian Club, Board of Trade, and Independent Order of the Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.).

Typical of the telegrams of support to Halifax was that sent by Minnie J.B. Campbell, regent of I.O.D.E.'s Manitoba Chapter, to the Halifax municipal regent. "On behalf of the Manitoba provincial chapter I.O.D.E and Children of the Empire, please accept our deepest sympathy in your tragic disaster, sorrow and suffering. Would we could aid in the ministering to you. Opening a fund."

Also on December 8 the *Free Press* reminded readers that "A fund to be subscribed by the motion picture theatres of Winnipeg and its environs for the relief of the sufferers of the Halifax disaster was started last evening." The story reported that the "Motion Picture editor of the *Free Press*" was named as trustee of the fund, and "so far cheques have already been received as follows: *Province* \$100, *Bijou* \$50 and *Gaiety* \$50."

More Fund Raising Efforts

On December 10 the *Free Press* announced additional fund raising efforts:

"At all the churches in the city yesterday [December 9] some reference to the great disaster was made...In Westminster and St. Paul's Presbyterian churches the sums of \$800 and \$148 respective was collected."

"Yesterday the Garland Girls gave two concerts...and the amount raised by these two efforts was \$217.68...the Roma society at its meeting yesterday voted \$50 toward the relief fund."

"The management of the *Orpheum* theatre has decided to put on a concert next Sunday night in the aid of the *Free Press* fund....Also next Sunday the Army and Navy Veterans association will put on a concert in the *Pantages* theatre, while during January the whole of the proceeds of the sales throughout the Dominion of the *Pictorial Review* will be devoted to the relief fund."

Nellie Stebbings Sets Patriotic Example

Not to be outdone the *Tribune* published an account of the fund raising efforts of Nellie Stebbings a 12 year-old Grade 6 student at Winnipeg's Alexander school. According to the story, which included her picture, Nellie announced to her parents that "I must do my bit to help these poor people." After they contributed \$5.00, Nellie called on her neighbours and collected more money. On December 8 she walked into the *Tribune* office with \$14.90 and a list of 33 contributors. Two days later she returned with an additional \$17.10.

Manitoba Relief Funds Total \$100,000

Nine days after the Explosion, the *Free Press* announced the Relief Fund had raised \$34,182.19 “from all parts of the country”, including Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Grand Forks, North Dakota (USA), and 25 Manitoba communities.

Manitoba’s various Halifax relief funds would eventually raise \$100,000. Meanwhile, substantial funds were being raised elsewhere for both relief and reconstruction. The Canadian government voted nearly \$20 million and the British government added \$5 million, and other large donations came from Chicago, New York, Massachusetts, and even Australia. Altogether the money that flowed into Halifax ran close to \$30 million.

Mr. Robson’s Donation

Perhaps the most heartfelt donation to the suffering citizens of Halifax was made by Winnipegger W.W. Robson.

According to the *Free Press*, Mr. Robson brought a cheque to the newspaper “for invaluable help received from Halifax twenty years ago.” Mr. Robson was then living in Windsor, Nova Scotia, which was destroyed by fire. “On that occasion,” he stated, “Halifax had a trainload of supplies in the stricken town the day after the fire and did everything humanly possible to help the fire sufferers.” In paying back his old debt, Mr. Robson declared “it was only a slight token of his gratitude.”