

Memories of Sport

By T. Kent Morgan

Courtesy of Canstar News

On Dec. 8, 1906, the Winnipeg daily newspapers published stories about a man falling through the canvas roof of a Winnipeg rink. While searching for information on hockey logos, Jeff Nelson, who lives in Reading, England, found the stories, which piqued his interest in finding out more about the rink. After several years of research, he has published a book about a long-forgotten piece of Winnipeg sports history, the Wesley skating rink. The rink was located at the corner of Ellice Avenue and Balmoral Street. Recently, Nelson donated a copy of *The Wesley (College) Skating Rink 1897-1913* to the Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame.

On the evening of Dec. 7, a hockey game was in progress while employee Aleck Thomas, who lived on nearby Furby Street, was clearing snow off the canvas roof with an iron shovel., which was prohibited for use by rink management. The shovel pierced the canvas and Thomas followed it swiftly through the hole and landed on the ice surface. The unconscious Thomas was taken to St. Boniface Hospital, but had regained consciousness by the next morning

In his research, Nelson discovered that ice first was made at the Wesley site in the winter of 1897. In December 1900, a roof was constructed over the hockey rink and a practice hockey game was held between the Montreal-Molsons and the Dominion Bank. Nelson found the first reference to the Wesley College Rink in a *Winnipeg Free Press* advertisement on Dec. 29. A band would play Tuesday and Friday evening and on New Year's afternoon. Admission 10c and 15c. Arrangements for hockey practicing were to be made with the manager Jas. Bell. In a different section of the paper, a ladies hockey match was advertised to be played at the rink that afternoon.

The rink was 213 feet in length by 103 feet wide. Pleasure skaters skated around the outside with the centre of the sheet, 180' x 75', reserved for hockey. In the winter of 1903, a new building was constructed with a canvas roof covering the 200' x 80' hockey sheet. The outside skating area was 20' wide. Lighting was improved. Season tickets cost \$8 for gentlemen, \$5 for ladies and boys under 12 and \$3 for girls under 12.

While the City had several rinks, the Wesley traditionally was the first to open its doors each winter for the skating season. In 1906, a reported 1,300 people were on the ice for opening night and an estimated 400-500 were turned away. In his extensive research, Nelson determined that more that 30 leagues and series were played at the Wesley rink. He described the skill of the players from the highly talented young stars of the Winnipeg Maple Leafs to the Pie Eaters and Soup Swallowers of the boarding house teams. Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame inducted members Dan Bain, Billy Breen, Tom Dunderdale, Barney Holden, and Steamer Maxwell were among the best. From 1903 to

1910, teams that played at the rink had the opportunity to compete in a series for the Wesley Cup.

The Wesley College Athletic Association took over the operation of the rink for the 1910-11 season. Hockey began to take a back seat to skating events and carnivals and leagues moved to other facilities. The last report of a game that Nelson found took place on Feb. 21, 1913 when the Wesleys beat the Agricultural College 4-2.

The end for the Wesley Rink came on July 12, 1913 when a fire destroyed the eastern part of the building. Both daily papers suggested the fire may have been set by someone who wanted to get rid of what the *Free Press* called an "eyesore" and the *Winnipeg Tribune* described as "a rotten old building." A few days later the provincial fire commissioner issued a demolition order for the Wesley rink.