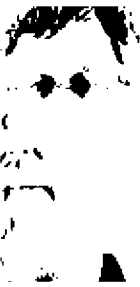


# Walking through time

## Sparks Street has colourful stories to tell



PHIL JENKINS

Standing at the east end of the Sparks Street Mall, with the War Memorial and Confusion Square at my back, I'm fishing in my memory for the day in 1961 when, as a 10 year old, I walked with my family along the then exciting experiment that the National Capital Commission was, well, test-walking — a pedestrian mall, a street unavailable to cars. This was two years after the town's street cars had ceased running down Sparks, and the street experienced its first, but not last, slump.

I see on the memory screen a sunny day and happy, strolling Ottawans in no hurry to get anywhere. They must have remained happy because, after trying the experiment several more times over the next five years, the NCC went ahead and made the Mall a permanent fixture of downtown Ottawa, in 1966.

It was fanfared several times on opening day and even more times subsequently that this was "North America's First Pedestrian Mall," although surely malls were all the natives had in the village

over by Lac Leamy that they dwelt in for over a millennium.

Looking westward down the Mall on a mid-week afternoon, the first thing one notices is that one can't look westward down the Mall on any day. An informational, metal and concrete rotunda, plus a very good life-size statue of a rearing bear, block the view, as do several more rotundas down the walkway all the way to Bank Street, artfully impeding the flow at each corner. The floor of this initial rotunda is dangerously iced up, rendering it useless.

Across the ice one glimpses a welcoming poster and an index of shopping and dining opportunities.

The index reveals that there are five souvenir stores on the Mall, and, apart from an up-market bar offering a lounge singer, not the slightest hint of any cultural goings on.

Irish music is tinkling out of small speakers from above the doorway of the D'Arcy McGee's pub on the southern corner at Elgin. There has pretty well always been a hostelry on this corner since Ottawa was a dirt road in the woods. A century or so ago, give or take a few years, one might have seen Wilfrid Laurier, Oscar Wilde and Anna Pavlova on the sidewalk outside the Russell Hotel, though

not all at the same time. And one night, at a dinner in the Russell, a certain Lord Stanley offered to stump up for a cup for the nation's top hockey team. In fact, Sir Wilfrid

lived in the hotel for 10 years. It was Ottawa's Château Laurier before the Château Laurier arrived in 1912, which is what killed the Russell. (As many an abandoned building in Ottawa is wont to do, it burnt down in 1927, at the age of 62.)

The workers are putting out new benches, and the alfresco cafés that eat up the centre of the Mall are not yet out, so strolling westward 48 years after I did it as a boy is pleasant, and there is no danger of having to negotiate tourist crowds.

My eye is drawn to the buildings that were here in my childhood and before. The first my eye falls on is No. 62, which is now a philatelist's and sports an art-deco front, art-deco being the period in which I wish to be reborn. The wonderful honey-coloured limestone that fronts the building above the black granite sheeting is the only example of this glorious stone left in the city. It sits next to the Ottawa Electric Building, which is where Ahearn and Soper, Ottawa's first utilities millionaires and streetcar owners, had their offices. Ahearn was born in Ottawa, in 1855, the year it graduated to a city.

The helpful gentleman inside explains that Kimmerly Stamps has been here only 18 months, having fled a building further along the street that was declining, and has since given up to the point of its roof collapsing, a warning sign about the general state of the Mall, and of which more

later.

The first occupant of this site, in 1869, was a jeweller, John Leslie. (The Leslie family home eventually became Laurier House, after Laurier moved out of the Russell.) Then it was an Imperial bank with a high ceiling; the ceiling and the bank manager's polished metal framed office are still here, as is the vault, at the owner's insistence when Kimmerly moved in. That insistence, which is to be ap-

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plauded, was also the reason the building sat empty for many a year.

On the other side of the street is the Hope Building, named not after the human sentiment but the man who had it built in 1910, James Hope, bookseller. It was one of Ottawa's first highrises, erected to the very tip of the height restriction put in place that year, an edict similar to the one in Paris that limits buildings to seven stories. The words "Bible House" at



the top were added by a later occupant, when the Christian Science Monitor reading room was ensconced within.

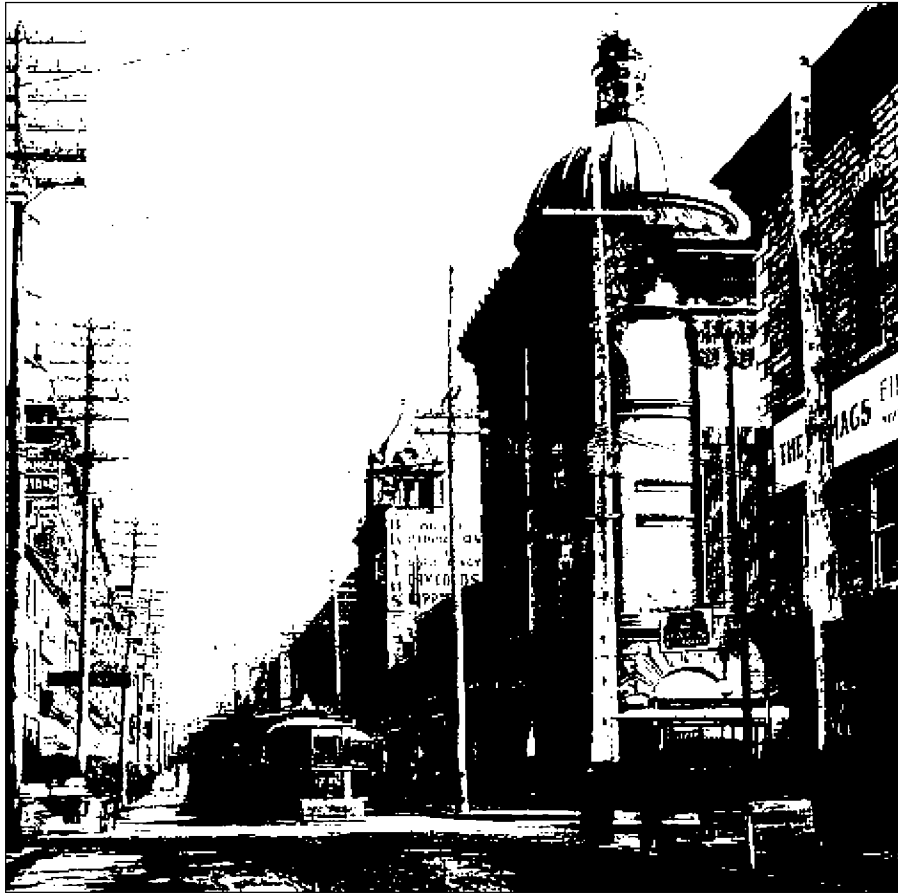
Back on the even-numbered side of the street, however, at No. 90, is a building that stands out in its awfulness, like a belch in the midst of a chamber orchestra, like an ogre at the ballet.

It is everything the Hope Building is not, and the dead hand of government and modern commerce is detectable in the banal glass and steel and right-angles and complete lack of ornamentation. (Murphy's department store once stood here.) This is the Royal Bank Plaza, roughly 20 years old, now designated the Thomas **D'Arcy McGee** building by its shared occupants, the federal government.

The touristy usefulness of Thomas **D'Arcy McGee**, Father of Confederation, haunts the Mall, since he was assassinated just about at this spot April 6th, 1868. An orator with a love of language, **D'Arcy McGee** would have appreciated that buildings too have something to say, and that this building named after him is essentially mute, and if it could speak, it would be only to offer numbers and percentages.

And now, I'll sit here on this bench and assess the street's gazability, until next Monday, when there will be much more to say.

**Phil Jenkins'** column appears Mondays. This is the first of two parts on the Sparks Street Mall.



Sparks Street in the early 1900s — long before the decision was made to turn the street into North America's first pedestrian mall