

The Ravages of 1912

Excerpt from Biographies Regina - Warehouse & District Book
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Warehouse District did not escape cyclone!



(City of Regina Archives – CORA - H - 11)

On Sunday, 30 June 1912, Mayor Peter McAra Jr. was showing off his thriving young city to dignitaries from the Grand Trunk Railway. In the years since the city's incorporation in 1903, Regina had been declared the provincial capital and construction was almost complete on the extravagant new Legislative Building. Trees had been planted, a municipal railway system was established and a water and sewer system had been installed.

In step with other areas, the Warehouse District was steadily expanding residentially and commercially, showcasing the modern expansion of the city.

Prior to the appointed time for McAra's meeting with the Grand Trunk delegates, the city had been blanketed in high temperatures and humidity for weeks. Though the air was heavy, there had been no signs of wind or rain. On that day the streets were already decorated in preparation for the parade and celebration for Canada's 45th birthday the next day.

About 4:00 p.m. that Sunday afternoon, the oppressive heat finally began to lift as the barometer steadily dropped. Heavy, dark thunderheads, reported to be sickly greenish black in colour, gathered in the southeast and southwest skies and lightning tore the sky between them. Boaters on Wascana Lake began to row back to shore and those out for a stroll turned toward their homes.

In the meantime, two menacing twisters formed about 11 kilometres south of the city's edge. The two funnels met and became a writhing fury of darkness and destruction, headed straight for Regina, at speeds well above 100 kilometres an hour. The swirling, lightning-torn pillar snatched at everything in its path, leaving a trail of ruin in its wake. At 4:45 p.m. the storm, spanning three blocks wide, hit Regina.

Hal Leiren, reporter for the *Leader-Post*, writing in 1962, on the 50th anniversary of the storm, recalled:

“The awful cornucopia spilled its vial of wrath and the grimy finger of death jabbed at the heart of the city. The tempest hit between Lorne and Smith streets, at about 16th (later College) avenue, and began its orgy of devastation by sucking up an enormous column of water from Wascana Lake, where terrified oarsmen rowed frantically for shore. Boats were lifted from the water and tossed about like paper toys before they were thrown down randomly.

“Some of the recently built homes on Lorne and Smith streets, with their flimsy, unbraced joints, collapsed at the force of the unmerciful wind. Others exploded as the pressure built up inside when the cyclone passed over them. Pressing relentlessly onward, the flailing monstrosity bent its fury on the affluent homes between Wascana Park and Victoria Avenue. Showing its capricious nature, the storm decimated some houses, while others escaped relatively unscathed.

“Rushing onward, the cyclone narrowed slightly and took on Regina’s downtown. There, many of the buildings, such as the new public library, the Presbyterian Church, the YMCA and the YWCA, were utterly destroyed. Victoria Park was also left a barren ruin. Leaves had been sucked off the branches of some trees and others (trees) had been torn up from the roots like so many toothpicks. The violent tempest cared for nothing and no one as it journeyed ever farther north toward the far side of the CPR tracks.”

That would be the Warehouse District into which the raging funnel raced, widening again. At the CPR yards, cars were flung from their rails and 50 horses were seemingly plucked from Mulligan’s Livery Stable and deposited, still alive, on the twisted tracks. Massive warehouses were reduced to rubble alongside demolished homes.

On Monday, 1 July 1912, the *Saskatoon Daily Star* published an account of the storm, stating: “On the north side, where many of the labouring classes live, the scene is heartrending. Outside the ruined houses are to be seen families grouped looking at what was left of their happy homes. The children are crying to their parents who are stunned by the catastrophe.”

In addition to the devastation of the landscape, was the devastating loss of life. The official count of those killed in the storm is 28, but that number’s accuracy was questioned from the beginning. The *Saskatoon Daily Star*, as well as subsequent writers for the *Leader-Post*, calculated the number between 30 and 32.

The Warehouse District lost six of its residents that day.

The CPR roundhouse was regarded as one of the district’s substantial stone and brick buildings, but it wasn’t sturdy enough to match the storm. George B. Craven was found dead near this wreckage, “crushed by a hurtling boxcar,” wrote Frank Anderson in *Regina’s Terrible Tornado*. Craven, a dairy instructor, was about 35 years of age and a former resident of New Zealand.

Laura McDonald, 1438 Lorne Street, had just gone into her backyard to make sure the chicken coop door was securely fastened when the storm hit. She was killed instantly when she was struck by a piece of flying wood.

At 1435 Lorne Street, the family of James McDougall was celebrating earlier that afternoon. McDougall, 46, had just been hired as a mechanic for the Cockshutt Plow Company after a period of unemployment. Sitting out on the home's veranda he looked to the south and became alarmed at the sight of the cyclone hurtling toward them. He grabbed for his youngest daughter, four-year-old Ida, and attempted to run away from the house, but the veranda roof collapsed, pinning them both beneath the fallen timbers. They were found in critical condition by rescue workers and taken to Grey Nuns Hospital, where they died of their injuries later that evening. Though four McDougall boys escaped with minor injuries, McDougall's wife and her three other daughters, Gibra, Marvel and Barbara, were critically injured. Mrs. McDougall had been running through a doorway, trying to get outside, when the side of the house fell on her. She, Gibra and Marvel survived, but eight-year old Barbara died from her injuries in December 1912.

Anderson also recalled the fate of George Appleby, who was a scoutmaster for the Second Troop of the Regina Boy Scouts. He had immigrated to Canada about three years earlier, and had homesteaded in the Swift Current area. When the storm struck the Warehouse District, Appleby was in a tent behind a house on Cornwall Street, between Seventh and Eighth avenues. Knowing that his tent would offer no protection against the raging storm, Appleby made for the house, but the storm overtook him before he could get inside. A wall of the home fell on Appleby, killing him.

Appleby had been popular with the scouts he led, and they paid their leader the greatest tribute they could by joining the volunteer efforts to clean up and rescue the survivors. In the 10 March 1961 issue of the *Leader-Post*, J. W. Beckman, a travelling agent for the Chicago AA Portland Cement Company, recalled the hard work of the scouts in the aftermath of the cyclone. In 1912, Rifleman Beckman was a Bugler with the local Militia unit, the 95th Saskatchewan Rifles. On June 30, he and his fellow company members had left Regina for Militia training and were settled in at Camp Sewell, east of Brandon, when word came about the storm. Following orders to immediately return to Regina, the 95th joined other military and mounted police units in keeping watch over the damaged city. It was from this vantage that Beckman was able to watch the Scouts at work, and report:

“With their leader Captain Appleby lying dead in a tent, and without direction, the Scouts organized as if by magic and rendered the most valuable service of any organization,” he wrote. “Scouts quickly scattered throughout the ruined district and established a system of communication which proved effective and brought rescue to many victims pinned beneath the wreckage. Without food or rest the lads worked for hours . . . The value of the scout organization was so ably demonstrated in Regina that the people of that city will never be able to do enough for the Scout movement.”

Beckman would later play the "Last Post" at the funeral of Scoutmaster Appleby.

The twister had lasted only three minutes before leaving the stunned city as quickly as it had come, blowing out on the bald prairie northeast of Regina.

In those three minutes, the cyclone of 1912 had done the most damage that Canada had ever seen from such a storm. The property damage of the day totalled \$1.2 million. There were 500 buildings destroyed or damaged and at least 28 people killed. Hundreds more were injured and some 2,500 people were left homeless.

With the Warehouse District being the major distributing centre for goods throughout the region, it was essential that repairs be done quickly to avoid further economic devastation. Despite the great catastrophe, the trains kept coming, loaded as always with fresh merchandise.

It would appear that the iron will of the Warehouse District residents was not broken. They began to pick up the pieces of their storm-tossed lives immediately. Before military and police help arrived, men began digging for survivors with their bare hands, guided by the faint moans they could hear through the piles of rubble. Others began sorting through heaps of debris. In the days that followed, warehouses were reconstructed, and homes repaired. Men worked feverishly, clearing away the mess.

The entire city rallied to the aid of those in need. Special benefits were held to raise much needed money for families who had lost everything. One such event included the yet unknown actor, Boris Karloff. He was touring Western Canada with a theatrical group in 1912 when the company went bankrupt in Regina, the day before the cyclone. He earned some money clearing away storm debris, then loaded baggage for the Dominion Express Company before heading to Prince Albert to perform with the Harry St. Clair repertory group. From proceeds received at their first performance, the group sent a portion of the money back to Regina to assist cyclone victims.

The 4 July 1912 *Leader-Post* reported: "No more reported dead. No more reported missing . . . lawlessness is being sternly checked. The railways have been affected not in the slightest degree."

The cost of repairs plunged the city into debt for a decade, in 1922 completing repayment of a \$500,000 reconstruction loan from the provincial government. In turn, it was not until 1958 that the provincial government repaid its lender.

Many residents in the Warehouse District affected by the cyclone simply didn't have the heart to rebuild, and moved to other areas of the city. Others, whose homes were spared, carried on with their lives and still others decided to rebuild. The Warehouse District would forever be changed by the events of 30 June 1912, but on the heels of the disaster came the redevelopment of one of the largest and busiest distribution points in the country.

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