

Athabasca Hall: A Very Brief History

The University of Alberta was founded in 1906. The first classes were held in September 1908 in Duggan Street School, now Queen Alexandra School, with forty-five students and four faculty. The following January the University moved to the upper floor of Strathcona Collegiate Institute, now Old Strathcona Academic High School, with all of the equipment being transported in one small truck. As accommodation for staff and students was almost unobtainable in the newly incorporated, but very small City of Strathcona, the Government agreed to build three residences with temporary classrooms on the future campus which consisted of 258 acres of poplar and willow bush known as River Lot 5 on the south side of the North Saskatchewan River about a mile to the west of Strathcona. Athabasca Hall was completed in time for the beginning of classes in September 1911, and the remaining two, Assiniboia Hall, and Pembina Hall, were completed in 1913 and 1914, respectively.

Athabasca Hall stood by itself in the bush. There were neither sidewalks nor roads, only trails between it and 112th Street. All supplies and provisions had to be brought in by horse-drawn wagons which in wet weather could become stuck up to their axles in mud. Athabasca Hall provided space for all of the University's academic and administrative facilities, as well as accommodation for thirty-five men and seven women students, most of the single faculty, and some domestic staff. (Dr. Tory lived in the President's house which was completed at about the same time as Athabasca Hall, as were three of the Ring Houses which were occupied by married faculty.) There were five laboratories in the basement as well as what was termed a "pressing room for ladies," a dining room for students in residence, a kitchen on the first floor, a library on the top floor, and seven classrooms "cunningly distributed here and there in the most elusive places."

In 1914 an Annex was added behind Athabasca Hall to provide space for a larger dining room for all three residences and a gymnasium which could also be used for examinations, dances, teas, and Sunday morning church services. The cost of a room, three meals a day, and maid service, was forty dollars a month. Students could appear at breakfast in sweater and slippers and be "half decently" clothed at lunch, but were to be properly dressed for dinner. Students remained standing in their places until the Provost had said the University's Latin grace.



When Assiniboia and Pembina Halls were opened, some of the administrative offices were moved there from Athabasca Hall. In 1915 most of the remaining non-teaching facilities in both Athabasca and Pembina were moved to the newly opened Arts Building making more space available for student accommodation. From 1941 to 1945 the three residence halls as well as Corbett Hall and St. Joseph's College were taken over by the Royal Canadian Air Force to house the Initial Flying Training School No. 4. Six hundred men were fed in shifts in the Athabasca Hall dining room which served as a cafeteria.

No account of Athabasca Hall would be complete without mentioning Reg Lister, a well-known and much-loved figure on the campus for very many years. He emigrated from England as a teenager and started to work on the campus in 1911 as a bricklayer and general labourer. In 1913 he was appointed Superintendent of Residences. Between 1916 and 1918 he served with the 11th Field Ambulance, Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps, in France. The following year he returned to the University where he remained until his retirement in 1956. During the 1920s the Listers lived in a suite in the basement of Athabasca Hall. For his dedicated service Reg Lister was made an honorary member of the 1949 graduating class. He wrote a delightful memoir, *My Forty-five Years on the Campus*, which was published by the University of Alberta in 1958 on the occasion of the University's 50th anniversary.



In 1964 the first two undergraduate residences, Alexander Mackenzie and Anthony Henday, and a large dining hall appropriately named Lister Hall were opened. Athabasca and Pembina Hall became residences for the senior undergraduate and graduate students, and Assiniboia Hall was used as office space for some teaching departments. In 1974 plans were announced to demolish all three residences and build a graduate residence and social centre. Fortunately these plans met with such opposition that they were abandoned. Pembina Hall was found to be in excellent condition because of its concrete structure, but the interiors of the other two residences were found to have deteriorated beyond repair, and it was decided to rebuild each within the original



brick and stone exteriors. The total renovation of Athabasca Hall cost about two million dollars and provided about 47,500 square feet of space. The building was officially opened on October 8, 1977 by Premier Peter Lougheed who had been a resident in 1952. For a short period until another building was completed on campus Athabasca Hall had the minor distinction of being both the oldest and newest University building on campus. For his work on the renovation of the two buildings the principle architect, Mickey Holland, received a Heritage Canada Medal in 1978. A plaque commemorating this award appears at the front entrance to Athabasca Hall.

The renovated Athabasca Hall was occupied for a few years by the Chancellor's Office and a number of departments providing administrative services to the University until more suitably located space gradually became available. In May 1996 the Facilities Development Committee gave approval for the Department of Computing Science to move in stages to Athabasca Hall and for the necessary renovations to be done as space became available. In addition it was decided to replace the Annex by a modern computing laboratory to be called the Computing Science Centre which was to be attractively joined to Athabasca Hall. It was officially opened on June 13, 2001 in a ceremony chaired by the Dean of



Science and addressed by the President of the University, the Minister of Learning, and others.

The Department of Computing Science is now the sole occupant of Athabasca Hall. The lower floor is occupied by graduate students, the main floor by the administration and technical support staff, and the two upper floors by faculty. The front lobby and the comfortably furnished adjoining Heritage Lounge have been preserved in their original style. With their historical displays they serve as reminders of the important role that Athabasca Hall has played in the development of the University of Alberta.



Keith Smillie

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Athabasca Hall



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