

# IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK...

WINGHAM'S TWIN TOWERS LIGHT UP THE NIGHT.  
BY JODI JEROME

No matter the approach to town, two iconic towers, facing one another across the main street, signal your arrival in Wingham. These splendid heritage-designated buildings sit on the rise of the main street hill and at night they're both lit up like town beacons.

And it has been that way since 1907.

These two government buildings brought an air of civility, culture and heritage to a pioneer town. The Wingham Town Hall sits in French Second Empire splendour with its bell tower that once rang out at noon, 1 p.m. and at threats of destruction. The old Wingham Post Office, now the shuttered North Huron Museum, lights up the night with its four illuminated clock faces marking north, south, east and west. Each building marks the passage of time.

When the railway first came to Wingham in 1873, it altered the geography of the town. Prior to 1873, the town's centre was located on the other side of the Maitland River, at the west end of Victoria Street, in an area now home to a soccer field. The Grand Trunk Railway station drew the centre of town to the northeast, out of Lower Wingham, also known as Lower Town. Businesses began to relocate closer to the train station on Josephine Street.

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narrow roadway being between them. Looking over the fence I saw a number of cattle in the enclosure. It is a small parcel of land containing only one fifth of an acre. As I am more acquainted with municipal business in my own town, it made me take special notice of this unsightly spot situated in the centre of what is called a go-ahead town .... I asked for information as to what was contained in all those old straggling buildings ... they were old buildings that had been moved out of the way and placed there.

The town square migrated to a piece of property that was rumoured by pioneers to be the first cemetery. The first school in Wingham, abandoned for a larger building, was moved to the "new" town square to serve as the Wingham Town Hall around 1879, set amidst a crowded huddle of wooden buildings and manure-filled pens of cattle. There were no sewers or sanitary waterworks at the time.

In 1889, the *Wingham Times* newspaper published a letter to the editor by an unidentified visitor to Wingham.

He wrote, "Sir, - I was recently taking a walk around your town for my evening exercise when I strolled into the centre of town and was surprised to find the cattle pound was situated close by the Town Hall, only a

"As there was no signboards over the doors, I asked about the purpose of those buildings... the large one was the Poor House and it had only one apartment. The next one was the lock-up and the other buildings were private accommodations. I asked him if there was any persons kept in the Poor House, and he told me it was always occupied since it opened and the town supported it. I took a general survey of the small plot containing so many charitable institutions and would say to the council of Wingham in the name of humanity to remove the Poor House or the pound... I would recommend to remove the pound as the Town Hall is only a few feet from the stench..."

That same year, Judge B.L. Doyle, who occasionally



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presided over the Division Court held in the old Town Hall building, wrote, “I deem it my duty to call your attention to the fact that it is your duty to provide suitable accommodation for holding the Division Court and that you are not doing so.

“In the present state of your hall it is impossible to make it comfortable, and its appearance is simply disgraceful... the court accommodation furnished by you will not compare favorably with that of your less important neighboring

divisions... I trust that for the sake of the respect due to the administration of justice, as well as for the public convenience, and the credit of your town, you will take prompt steps to procure suitable accommodation.”

These letters, particularly the Division Court judge’s condemnation, may have nudged Wingham Council into upgrading its municipal property.

By 1890, a new yellow brick town hall with a Second French Empire-inspired mansard roof was standing, well clear of the cattle pens. This town hall, still used as the municipal headquarters, has governed, educated, entertained and moulded Wingham for more than a century.

In its council chambers, lives were changed by either council decisions or court sentences. Its chambers served as a meeting place for organizing sports, community events, fundraisers (in 1907 at a hospital supper and concert, 400 people were served dinner in the council chambers), and as the dressing room for the second-floor theatre, also known as the Opera House.

Nobel laureate Alice Munro, who grew up on a farm outside Wingham, recalls her school putting on a play in the Opera House during the 1940s in her short story, “Changes and Ceremonies,” from the book *Lives of Girls and Women*.

“We started going to the Town Hall for our practising. The Town Hall auditorium was large and draughty, as remembered, the stage curtains ancient blue velvet, gold-fringed, royal, as remembered.

“The lights were on, these winter-dimmed days, but not all the way to the back of the hall, where Miss Farris would sometimes disappear, crying, ‘I can’t hear a word back here! I can’t hear a word! What are you afraid of? Do you want the people at the back of the hall to be calling out for their money back?’ (p. 143) ... “The Council Chambers directly below the stage — and connected to it by a back staircase — were divided into dressing rooms with sheets hung on cords.” (p. 149)

The theatre has undergone several renovations since it was unveiled in 1891, cloaked in the splendour of velvet

curtains, and full set of hand-painted scenery backdrops that included a street, a jail, a parlour, kitchen, forest, rocky shore, dreamy landscapes and a scene of Venice.

These luxuries were purchased with funds raised by John Hanna from publicly-spirited citizens, who wanted an Opera House equipped with 200 opera chairs and scenery for any play.

They were also the backdrop to speeches by Canadian Prime Ministers, including Sir Wilfrid Laurier, R.B. Bennett, William Lyon Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau. The walls have rung out with passionate speeches, election debates and — perhaps — more cussing than discussing of town issues. Plays, musical performances, famous writers and some of the area’s first cinema, have and continue to grace its stage.

The basement of the Town Hall held a different type of drama. Four heavy-duty jail cells installed in the basement, provided the town police with holding cells for heavy drinkers, criminals and the men who rode the rails during the Great Depression. In an effort to minimize begging and stealing, strangers coming into Wingham during the Depression were given one night’s accommodation in the jail and a hot meal in exchange for cutting wood and leaving town the next day, while one jail cell’s graffiti laments how a First World War soldier, freshly returned from overseas, spent his first night behind bars due to overindulgence at the hotel.

On the first floor, where municipal staff now work, housed the Wingham Public Library from 1890 to the 1990s. This refuge for a young Alice Munro and many

generations of Wingham readers, held a world of books and was the perfect place to watch the busy flow of people at the post office across the street.

The red brick post office, designed by David Ewert, chief architect of the Department of Public Works, in 1904 and built by area craftsmen and contractors between 1904 and 1907, bustled with commerce and news.

It was not until 1913 that the post office kept time for the town with a working clock tower. When the clock arrived from M.T. Evans Clock Co. of Birmingham, England, in April 1913, the original clock tower was not tall enough to house the clockworks.

That fall, local contractor W.J. Deyell dismantled the peaked metal roof and brick top portion of the clock tower, setting it on the post office’s flat main roof.

Then the tower walls were built higher, going from four to six storeys in height. The clock and bell were installed and the metal roof was rebuilt. All of this was accomplished between September 1913 and March 1914.

From 1907 until the 1970s, the town hall bell tolled for lunch and emergencies, while the post office clock struck every hour, on the hour. Though the bell and clock chimes are now silent, the two buildings still watch over the town, witness to its history and still contributing to its future. ■

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