

Me, Uncle Bert, Oronhyatekha and the Temple Building

I had an uncle in Sudbury who not only was a member of the Masons, he was also, an Elk, a Toastmaster and an IOF (Independent Order of the Foresters). My mom used to say Uncle Bert belonged to so many men's groups so he'd have an excuse to get out of the house every night of the week.

These often benevolent men's groups steeped in ritual and ceremony and fancy regalia came into their own during the Victorian era during the rise of the Industrial Revolution, thus making more leisure time for these various men's groups to flourish within the working and middle classes.

Toronto, on its way to becoming the most Victorian city in the Empire, embraced the concept of men's societies in a huge way so much that we were to have the tallest building in the entire British Empire as home to Independent Order of the Foresters and various Masonic chapters, aptly called the Temple Building.

The building a then remarkable height of nine stories (a tenth storey was added in 1901) had richly tiled floors, hand-carved paneling with ornamental

doors and the main office would eventually have a gilded replica of Edward VII's coronation chair.

The Temple Building was constructed in 1895 on the southwest corner of Bay and Richmond by Canadian-born architect George W. Gouinlock. And just to make sure it attracted the up-and-coming business crowd desperate for modern office space, the new building would have the fastest elevator in town.

The Temple Building had thick brick and stone exterior walls, which measured 4-foot thick at the base and an astonishing 18-inches thick at the ninth-floor which made the building's construction a grueling, painstaking process and its demolition in 1970 an equally difficult process.

So much so that in 1970 the *Globe and Mail* wrote about the destruction of this monumental building:

"Want to see a monument destroyed? Go down to the corner of Bay and Richmond streets and watch them make gravel out of the Temple Building. It won't go easily or prettily because it wasn't built with destruction in mind.

"It was intended to last like the Pyramids, one of



the wonders of a young country, a great stone tribute to an Iroquois who became supreme chief ranger of the Independent Order of Foresters in 1881."

The Iroquois referred to was Oronhyatekha, born in 1841 in a Six Nations Reserve near

Brantford, whose ultimate destiny was to become the Supreme Chief Ranger of the IOF (Independent Order of the Foresters).

It was Oronhyatekha (who always insisted on being called by his Mohawk name rather than the anglicized Peter Martin) and his tire-

less efforts that made it possible for the Temple Building to be constructed in a time when only white men were allowed into any of these men's clubs that dotted the landscape of Toronto and Canada.

Through his charm, wit and entrepreneurial spirit he rose up the ladder rapidly and finally the IOF made an exception to the rule when he joined in 1878.

So beloved was this great man that after his death in 1907 a life-size bronze statue of him stood inside the Temple Building.

The construction of the Temple Building made Bay Street a fashionable address to locate one's business, and with the opening of the then New City Hall (now Old City Hall) in 1899, these two great stone monuments complemented each other thus cementing Toronto's reputation as a great Imperial City of the British Empire.

However after WWII and with a shortage of modern



office space in Downtown Toronto the Temple Building was marked for demolition.

In 1954 the IOF moved out and in 1970 the building that was "intended to last like the Pyramids" was torn down. During its halcyon days, the Temple Building was one of the great social centres of Toronto where in its ornate Assembly Hall the well-heeled members hosted dances, meetings and conventions.

I have a vague memory of the old Temple Building that has stayed with me to this day. On our yearly jaunts to Toronto, because my uncle was a member of the Sudbury chapter of the IOF, every time we would drive pass the old Temple Building with its huge IOF sign high on top we all would say "There's Uncle Bert's building!"

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