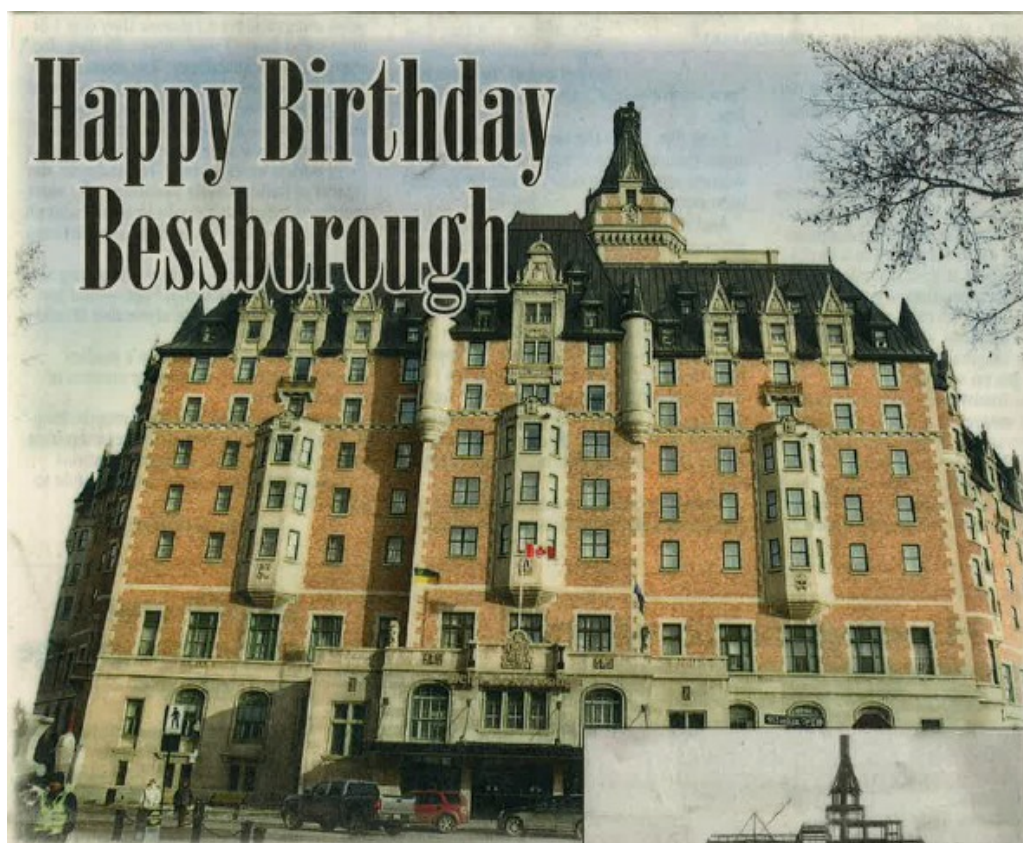


Happy Birthday Bessborough



—SP Photo by Greg Pender (above); File Photo (right)

The landmark Delta Bessborough Hotel as it appears today and (right) during construction in the early 1930s

City's castle on the river celebrating its 75th year

By Cassandra Kyle
of The StarPhoenix

Like its grand cousins across the country, the story of the Delta Bessborough Hotel starts with a national railway company looking to build a majestic hotel with a view. But what makes the local landmark different from the other Canadian National Railway-built hotels is the community spirit that lobbied for the construction of the Prairie palace, pushed for the opening of the Bessborough after years of financial delay and supported the growth of the castle on the river for nearly 75 years, said the hotel's general manager, Andrew Turnbull.

"When you think of this hotel born in the Depression and still dominating the landscape today, you can imagine what it must have meant . . . on Dec. 10, 1935, when finally the grand opening (was held) and how much that must have symbolized the end of one of the most difficult periods of time for this province," said Turnbull.

As the diamond anniversary of the hotel approaches, it's time to reflect on what the Bessborough means to Saskatoon, Turnbull said.



The hotel is set to announce anniversary celebration plans — and a fundraising partnership with Habitat for Humanity — at an event at the Bessborough today.

"An architectural landmark doesn't in itself define a city, but what it can be is a touchstone that helps create a sense of place. It can be the focal point of pride for a community," he said.

With the help of Turnbull, the hotel's sales and marketing director Stefan Deprez and the staff at Frances Morrison Library's local history room, The StarPhoenix has compiled a list of interesting facts and folklore about the city's most famous building.

In the beginning

Plans for the hotel started in 1928. Sir Henry Thornton, then president of the Canadian National Railway, told the city the hotel "will be consistent in size and character with requirements of (an) enterprising and progressive city."

■ CONT'D: Please see Hotel/A4

Hotel: Hope visited

■ Continued from A1

Architect J.S. Archibald of Montreal designed the French Chateau-style building, while contractor Smith Bros. & Wilson and an army of 41 subcontractor firms built the structure. It is estimated the project cost \$3 million.

Construction on the hotel was completed in 1933; however, financial restraints during the Depression delayed the opening until Dec. 10, 1935.

The opening was celebrated with a luncheon for 350 business and professional men and a supper dance for more than 1,000 people.

When the hotel opened, a guest could rent a room from \$3 a day and get a meal at the cafeteria for as little as 25 cents.

Facts and figures

The hotel was named after Vere Brabazon Posonby, the ninth Earl of Bessborough and the Governor General of Canada between 1931 and 1935.

Original bricks for the hotel came from the Dominion Firebrick Co. Ltd. of Claybank, while original tiles for the building were supplied by International Clay Products of Estevan.

The first registered guest of the hotel was Horace Stovin, a radio station operator based out of Regina. The Bessborough's lounge now bears the guest's name.

About 3,000 people applied to work at the hotel when it opened in 1935, but only 150 people were hired. Staff dormitories were located on the ninth floor.

The seventh and eighth floors of the hotel were used as a military recruiting station during the Second World War.

Today, the hotel employs about 180 people to service its 225 guest and 12 meeting rooms.

Hidden treasures

The Bessborough's tower — a cover for the old coal smokestack and current boiler exhaust pipe — is adorned with signatures of former employees and guests. Former prime minister John Diefenbaker asked to be taken to the top of the tower on one of his many visits to the hotel to sign the highest point of the building. His signature remains in the tower to this day.

During renovations in 2000, contractors uncovered an original painted plaster relief over the doorway in the interior of the Battleford Room. It is believed the work of art — which depicts dragons flanking

covered in the 1960s during a modernization of the hotel.

Another hidden gem was found at the Bessborough during renovations in 2005. Two chandelier medallions were found on the roof of the William Pascoe Room when a dropped ceiling was removed. The plaster moulds were strengthened with horse hair.

In the mid-2000s, former hotel manager George McCabe returned a large oak mechanical clock he had purchased from the Bessborough several years earlier. The clock is now displayed in the Signature Club Lounge.

Celebrity guests

Famous comedian Bob Hope often stayed at the hotel after playing rounds of golf in Waskesiu — one of the star's favourite courses.

Another funny man, Bill Cosby, stayed at the Bessborough in more recent times. At the guest's request, Cosby was brought fresh croissants from Christie's Mayfair Bakery in the mornings. Cosby later mentioned the flaky pastry in his act as the best he had ever tasted.

Canadian rockers The Tragically Hip have requested to play in the Bessborough Gardens and last did so in July 2007.

Over time, the hotel has played host to numerous celebrities, such as Liberace, Princess Margaret, Jim Nabors and Marie Osmond.

Myths and mysteries

Have you heard the one about tunnels beneath the Bessborough? It's true, but it's not as interesting as might be imagined. The tunnel was built in the 1970s, connecting the hotel with the Avord Tower across the street. The tunnel is still used infrequently for parking purposes.

Although some would argue otherwise, the construction of the hotel was not a Depression-era make-work project. Canadian National Railway decided to build the castle on the river prior to running into financial trouble in the 1930s.

Several stories suggest the hotel plays host to a ghost or two. One tale says a bellman slipped and fell while dragging luggage down the stairs, cracking the marble floor with his skull. Other stories tell of a ghostly man wearing a fedora greeting people on the convention floor and mysterious piano playing coming from the eighth floor. Hotel management says they haven't yet encountered any ghosts on any