

**Family Services à la famille Ottawa – 312 Parkdale Avenue
Celebrating Our 90th Anniversary
(A series of 9 articles leading up to our Birthday Celebrations in May 2005)**

*Did you know..... What we did during our 2nd decade?
(1924-1934)*

In the previous decade, we saw the beginning, in 1914, of the Ottawa Welfare Bureau (OWB), now known as Family Services à la famille Ottawa, and how they became a trailblazer by starting the Christmas Exchange and Mothercare Programs, setting up the Soldiers' Aid Commission, and responding to the Spanish Flu Epidemic.

OWBs 2nd decade began with them now firmly established as the primary source of welfare aid, providing both financial and in-kind support. The first request for help on November 3rd, 1914 had blossomed into 556 families seeking help in November 1926.

During this period, we spent the majority of time assisting families to meet basic needs, and as the organization became a key part of the community, the need for a dedicated Director became apparent. In 1925, Thelma Williams, a Social Worker, was appointed Executive Secretary, a position she maintained for 30 years.

Her first task was to work with the City of Ottawa to deal with an unmanageable situation created by the vast increase in demand for relief placed on OWB by those in need. This historic meeting took place on December 11, 1925, and the City agreed to provide assistance for the aged and those deemed unemployable, whereas OWB would assume administrative responsibility for unemployment relief. The unemployment rate was relatively low at this time, so it seemed like a workable arrangement. With this clear mandate before it, OWB launched its first fund raising drive in 1925. This was in a period before the existence of United Way, which began in 1932.

In December 1927 an appeal for financial assistance was sent out to the general population in the form of a Christmas letter, arousing sympathy by highlighting quotes from clients: *“Winter has come and heavier and heavier grows the demands on the Ottawa Welfare Bureau. New applicants line the waiting room. Their stories differ only in substance, the underlying need is the same - they all require HELP ... We draw the curtain but the never ending stream rolls on. Each problem requiring, not only financial assistance, but much TIME, THOUGHT AND CARE. Said one man “Miss there ain’t a bit to eat in the house, and the Missus and kids are freezing. Said the little woman who seemed so anxious “There is eleven of us and my man is out of*

work. I asked a policeman what to do, and he said “You’s all would help me”.”

The Board of Directors maintained a very active role, spearheading the activities of OWB. Board members during this period included Mayor Allen, Mrs. H.S. Southam, Senator Cairine Wilson, Charlotte Whitton, T. D’Arcy McGee and Major Charles Ford. Senator Wilson, chosen for office in 1930, was the first female Senator in Canada. Annual Meetings often included attendance by a representative of the Queen, including Lord Tweedsmuir, Viscount and Viscountess Wellington, and Earl and Countess of Bessborough. These annual meetings were significant events held at the Chateau Laurier, usually in the Palm Room or the Convention Hall, with announcements and coverage by the newspapers of the day. Speakers were brought in from across North America, including Frank Stapleford, the founder of the Toronto Family Service Association and a pioneer in Canada in establishing Employment Insurance, Mothers Allowance and Disability Support.

By the end of this decade, the agency had moved south a few blocks and was now housed at the Bank Chambers at 102 Bank Street, Rooms 20 to 24. The rooms were not much larger than living rooms and were designed to accommodate both staff and waiting areas. They were described as damp and dingy, and when the wind blew off the Ottawa River, it went straight up Bank Street.

Miss Williams maintained a goal to both professionalize the organization and provide counselling and emotional support as key ingredients to helping those in need. October 1929 changed all that as the Stock Market crashed and the Great Depression set in. Ottawa had the second highest unemployment level for most of the depression, and OWB, having agreed with the City in 1925 to deal with all unemployment cases, felt the brunt of this economic disaster.

What started with one telephone call on November 3, 1914 and grew by the early years of this decade to 556 families and individuals, had mushroomed by November 1932 to a caseload of over 12,500. This staggering figure was about to sink the agency permanently, as the 25 paid staff treaded water. OWB turned to an ex-Board Member, Charlotte Whitton, for help. As Director for the Canadian Council on Child and Family Welfare, she was asked to survey the conditions of the OWB and its sister agencies in Toronto and Montreal. This led to an historic change, and coupled with the Federal Government’s “Bennett New Deal”, the City of Ottawa took responsibility for direct relief of the unemployed. This change was a turning point in our history, as the OWB was going to shift its mandate to concentrate on preventative case work and counselling.

(Next issue, Decade #3, 1934-1944).