

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

*Did you know..... How we began?*

*Decade # 1 (1914-1924)*

It's 1914. A time before governments assumed responsibility, a time when illness could be devastatingly costly, a time when, as a Dominion, we were entering into the Great War, and a time when vaccinations were unheard of.

Picture the site of 38 Bank Street. What was there? How did our city look? What is now the sight of the Bank of Canada was the small drafty office of an experiment -- an experiment in private philanthropy assuming responsibility for the financial and material needs of the less fortunate.

It all started with an emotional reaction, a reaction to having been away from Ottawa for some time and returning to find a bread line at City Hall. This led to the creation of a survey regarding poverty, and then to the creation of the Ottawa Welfare Bureau (OWB). Elizabeth Shortt, Mrs. J.P. McLaren and Mrs. Anabel Stewart were the driving forces behind the creation of the Ottawa Welfare Bureau, the predecessor to our present organization, Family Services à la famille Ottawa.

OWB was originally designed to be a clearing house to coordinate relief efforts amongst the various charity groups, such as churches, and service clubs such as the Lions club. The sense was that some families were going without, while others were receiving more than their fair share by accessing help from multiple charities. One of the first mandates of OWB was to respond to this imbalance by creating the Social Service Exchange and the Christmas Exchange. However the women of OWB, drawing upon their own financial resources and commitments from others, were soon supplementing aid themselves.

The OWB initially set up their offices on the second floor of City Hall but soon moved to 38 Bank Street. On November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1914, 3 days after being established, phone number "Queen 7371" rang. A woman and her family were in need of help. Mrs. Fraser, a volunteer with OWB, paid them a visit in their downtown apartment. She found that rent per month was \$10.00, but with 6 children and unemployment, they could not make ends meet. Mrs. Fraser provided emergency relief support and helped this family through a rough patch. This family remained involved periodically with OWB until 1948.

The OWB continued to be a trailblazer throughout this time period by recognizing and filling gaps in service. It helped organize the first Neighbourhood Associations so that Social Workers and agencies were more geographically focused. In 1915 when infant mortality was at an alarmingly high rate, OWB organized the first Mothercare lessons and created "Milk Stations" or exhibits to help mothers with the care of their newborns.

Within its first year, OWB was seen as invaluable to the community and was sought by other institutions to assist them. The Federal Government and Veterans Affairs were at a loss to deal with the devastation caused by World War I in terms of casualties and illness. Families who lost men to war were destitute, and the government turned to OWB in Ottawa for help. We set up the Soldier's Aid Commission to conduct investigations into the well-being of servicemen's dependants.

In 1917 the Spanish Flu Epidemic hit Ottawa, and the Bureau was active in reaching out to those who were sick and coordinating treatment -- so active that our first Executive Secretary, Elizabeth King, contracted the illness herself and was temporarily bedridden.

The annual report in 1919 summed up the paradoxes that the Bureau was faced with -- a city turning its back on those less fortunate, and a conviction on the part of some charities that there was an inability or unwillingness for some to help themselves. At this time, a shift began from provision of emergency services to a focus of "helping people help themselves", or counselling and casework. *"The giving of doles year after year to families, always at the poverty level is being replaced by effort to raise the needy above the need for relief once and for all. It is being realized that hastily writing a cheque or sending a grocery order is mere trifling that often does more harm than good. The deserted wife may need encouragement and advice more than she requires financial assistance; for the widow, the immediate need may be suitable employment; for the demobilized soldier in distress, contact must be made with the proper governmental agency; for the shiftless husband and father, stern warning and perhaps an interview with the police is required."*

As the first decade came to an end, it was clear that while their mission was to coordinate existing relief services, the OWB was quickly becoming a leader in provision of material welfare. The offices at 38 Bank Street and its 3 staff members and very prominent Board were overwhelmed. As their 2<sup>nd</sup> decade began in 1925 they were to come to an agreement with the City that within 8 years would almost ruin them.

(Next issue, Decade #2, 1924-1934).