

Built to Last—Concrete Block Buildings

For a short period in the early 1900's concrete blocks, made on site, were a popular construction option in rural Manitoba

For a few years in the early 20th century, many buildings in southern Manitoba were built with locally cast concrete blocks.

Because these blocks did not require high-temperature firing like bricks, there was no need for the substantial infrastructure used in conventional brick-making. They could be made on the building site with portable equipment.

It all began with the patent in 1900 for H.M. Palmer's block machine in Michigan. Within a few years, this new technology really caught on. There was the advantage of making your building material on site with locally available materials. Additionally, by using a variety of molds, one could produce an attractive and durable exterior. By altering the type of sand used you can get a bit of variety in colour and texture.

The use of concrete blocks was popular only for a short while, with most examples being from 1904 to 1910. Perhaps with improved rail access, the availability and quality of both wood siding and bricks were a more attractive option. Or perhaps the uniform grey colour was not as appealing?



▲ At first glance this attractive house on a farm near Boissevain looks like it might be one of the many field-stone homes in the region. A closer look tells us that those building blocks are concrete.

Looking back at how so many of these buildings have survived in good shape we can see it was a good practical choice for the times.

If you are passing through one of the towns in the southwest corner keep an eye out for more examples. (Hint: Check out the buildings of the Waskada Museum, or have a look at the corner of Main and Souris Streets in Melita, or drive down Egan street in Boissevain. You won't be disappointed.)

Sources:

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◀ Much larger than bricks, the blocks were hollow, and were typically flat on the interior face but patterned on the exterior face.

How Cement Blocks Were Made

- 1) The cement was poured into a mold arranged with the outside surface (in various patterns) at the bottom. Depressed end pieces were put in to make the blocks partly hollow.
- 2) When the mold was half filled, a metal block known as the "core" was placed in position.
- 3) The mold was then filled to the top and tamped. It hardened quickly under the pressure and could be taken from the mold at once. The "core" was then removed, leaving the blocks hollow.



▲ Numerous concrete block buildings are still standing and looking good in towns across our region. They include fine heritage homes, old schools, and commercial buildings. The Telephone Office in Waskada was built in 1910.