

The Campaign for the City Hall Site That Won the Battle for the Eastenders

"EVERYTHING that is worth having is worth fighting for," was the slogan of the people of the east end of St. Thomas when they went after the city hall site. To win a battle there must be strategy. An army seldom wins without a battle plan and the Generalissimo in this campaign drove his stakes, dug his trenches, and protected his flanks. The city comprised six wards, twelve aldermen and a mayor when the fight began. The east end wanted a city hall; the west end opposed it. The ancient relic on the corner of Stanley street had done service for civic business from time immemorial and was good enough for the west enders and the new-comers were interlopers who had no business to disturb the serenity of the pioneers.

The first vote taken was to decide if a new city hall was wanted, and the Anderson site was put up and knocked down. The old west end drew the first blood. Then came an offer of the Idsardi site for a city hall for the sum of one dollar. As it was evident that another vote would be taken the west end put up the Ellison site to knock down the Idsardi site and succeeded.

It was then that the campaign of the east-enders was established on scientific lines. There was a von Moltke behind the scenes conducting the battle who did not show his hand.



City Hall, built in 1898 After Long Fight

Club rooms were opened in the Dake House and ward workers of both political parties here laid the pipes. Lew Dake was commander of the forces in the field and his clerk, Oscar Rymph, was installed as secretary of the movement.

Dake circulated a petition to purchase the Idsardi site, which was now valued at \$6,200. The site had been offered to the city for nothing and now it was proposed to make the city take it and pay a big price for it. And the city took the site and paid the price.

The west end put up a fight in the old-fashioned way, but it was out-manoeuvred by modern methods. It was claimed that the Idsardi site was one corner of the old Moore tan yard, a bog hole where there was no proper foundation on which to erect a building, and the newspapers were used to instruct the ratepayers along this line.

Something had to be done to counteract this warfare and Lew Dake, Alderman Patrick Meehan, Oscar Rymph and W. Popham and other eastenders, were equal to the occasion. One

midnight night when the moon and stars were curtained by clouds, they procured a dark lantern and an auger and bored a hole down to the clay or claimed they did. Some were mean enough to say they procured the clay at a brick yard and lugged it to the site in bags. However the clay was there and the west end auger lost its underpinning.

A supply of clay being found for a foundation, Lew Dake secured a man the next day to dig a hole four feet square and erected a sign over it which said, "This is the corner of ground we propose to build the city hall on. Ratepayers come and see for yourselves."

The next night being Hallowe'en, some west enders secured a private toilet, which had seen long service, and placed it over Lew Dake's hole on the Idsardi site, and put a sign on it which read, "Lew Dake's New City Hall." This was one on Lew Dake and he had to take the laugh. This only served to make the east enders more vigilant and active in the battle. The toilet was removed the next morning, the east end sign once more erected over the hole and a guard placed every night to watch the sign and the hole.

The day of doom had come for the west enders. The east enders had six aldermen and elected Mayor Fred Wright, also an east ender, and at the crucial moment Mayor Wright gave the casting vote to submit a by-law to purchase the Idsardi site for a city hall.

There was some manoeuvring before this was done. A Mr. Edwards was an alderman for No. 6 ward, and he had moved to London. The west enders tried to have it declared that his seat was vacant, but the east enders sent a delegation to Toronto and on the best legal advice obtainable, established the fact that Edwards could legally hold his seat to the end of the year. Numerous council meetings were held over the matter before the final vote to submit the by-law was taken and Lew Dake went to London and escorted Alderman Edwards to every council meeting held in St. Thomas while the matter was under consideration. There were no chances taken.

At last the Idsardi site was got before the electors and carried by 17 majority. It was a great victory for the east-enders. It meant that not only the city hall was coming to them, but that the business of the city was coming also. There was great rejoicing that night in the east end. The rain came down in torrents but it did not dampen the glory of the victors. The band came out and played its loudest music. Lew Dake, feeling and acting like a conqueror, mounted the roof of the hotel verandah and gave vent to his feelings. The rank and file took liquid refreshments in honor of the victory. A visit was made to Mayor Wright's, where a substantial repast was served to everybody who came, and the celebration was brought to a close by singing "God Save the Queen."

Having been beaten at the polls, the west enders tried to stop the erection of the city hall on the Idsardi site by legal forces. An injunction was applied for in the courts by Lawyer David Crothers, acting for west enders. City Solicitor Doherty appeared for the city and the injunction was not granted. Further legal proceedings were started by Mr. Crothers, but on his offering to "pull off" if the east end would pay him \$200 for his fees and disbursements, the \$200 came across and the battle ended. The city paid \$6,200 for a site which a few months before had been offered to it for one dollar. The star of empire moved east. The west end saw, when too late, that sometimes it is better to compromise than to fight. And through the dust of it all the west enders got a glimpse of the hand that pulled the wires.