

Winnipeg Police Ambulance

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1911 – 1975



1913 Police Ambulance in front of Rupert Avenue Station

In Winnipeg, when it comes to medical emergencies you think of 9-1-1, ambulance and paramedics. But it hasn't always been that way. In the early 1900s and for many years later, the ambulance was operated by the Winnipeg Police Service. In fact, until 1949, the Winnipeg Police Ambulance was the primary emergency transport in Winnipeg.

The first call for tenders of a “police automobile and ambulance” combined was in April 1911 following years of public outcry for free ambulances in Winnipeg. In May 1911 a committee consisting of Chief McRae and two aldermen recommended the purchase of a Speedwell Police Wagon and Ambulance from the Breen Automobile Company. The vehicle was purchased in October 1911 for \$5,950.00 and the publicly funded ambulance service was immediately put into operation. Its operators included three chauffeurs (two days and one night) and three first-class first-aid men referred to as Wagonmen.

We don't exactly know what finally prompted the Service to proceed with the purchase of an ambulance, but we do know

that Chief Donald MacPherson was the acting Chief Constable at the time of its acquisition and that he held a certificate in Instruction in Ambulance Work which he obtained while working as a police officer in Glasgow, Scotland in 1899. Also not surprising, the request to purchase an ambulance came at a time when Saint John's Ambulance opened a chapter in Manitoba, call boxes began being installed in Winnipeg and City Council was forwarding money to the City's Health Department following a major typhoid outbreak.

In addition to their regular duties, Police Ambulance operators were responsible for attending to all fires in case of injuries. Until many years later, a Sergeant usually

rode along with the Ambulance operator. While officers were being trained in first aid, they had no formal ambulance care training. Their main role was to pick up a person and get them to a hospital as quickly as possible. In June 1918, the Police Commission recommended Patrol and Ambulance Constables be selected from returned soldiers who were previous members of the police department. In 1920 it was decided that a regular vehicle horn was no longer sufficient for warning people in closed vehicles and a gong, provided by the Marshall Wells Company was added to the ambulance.



Things didn't always go smoothly for the operators of the ambulance. On July 26, 1915, the Winnipeg Police Ambulance was being operated by Constable George W. Fogg when it struck both Mr. F. W. Bowles and Mr. Paulo Gawlo aka Paul. Both men died from their injuries. It was reported that Mr. Bowles was cycling on Sargent Avenue approaching Sherbrooke Street when the ambulance, travelling north on Sargent Avenue, swerved to avoid a boy on a bicycle. The ambulance crossed the sidewalk, struck Mr. Bowles and a pedestrian, Mr. Gawlo, and crashed into the corner of a business. Incidentally, the ambulance was transporting the nine-year-old boy who had been run over by a

streetcar at the time. The driver, Constable Fogg, worked as a chauffeur for the Winnipeg Police Service from 1910 until February 1914 when appointed to motor patrol and ambulance. He was removed from his position of driver in August 1915. The widow of Mr. Bowles filed a claim against the City of Winnipeg and the Police Commission. In June 1918, a verdict was reached in Kings Court and Mary Elizabeth Bowles was granted \$12,000; \$5,000 for her, and \$3,500 for each of her two young children. The decision was later upheld by the courts.

Fast forward to 1940, the Winnipeg Police Force purchased a new ambulance, a National Monarch wagon. The Winnipeg Police Force was publicly criticized for allowing the "Brass" to use the ambulance to shuttle them around. It was alleged this caused an increase in police ambulance response times. Keep in mind, the driver, although sworn in as a Special Constable, was also the service's designated chauffeur at the time.

Early uses of the Police Ambulance included,

- Transporting a 9-year-old boy who was run over by a streetcar and lost his foot, and providing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to an adult female suffering from overexposure to coal gas in July 1915
- Used by local hospital staff for a fee of \$6/day between 1918 – 1919, during the Spanish Flu.
- Rushing an adult male to the hospital after he was struck by a

train and suffered two fractured legs and a hemorrhage in June 1924.

- Transporting a male who fell from a ladder and cracked his skull in the Canadian Pacific Railyard, and a 52-year-old woman who slipped on the street and fractured her leg in March 1930
- Taking an 18-year-old woman to the hospital after she cut off a finger while chopping wood in October 1942.
- Assisted a doctor in January 1945 by transporting a pregnant woman in labour to the hospital when he was unable to get a private ambulance.

By the 1950s, the Police Ambulance operated alongside private ambulances, responding to motor vehicle accidents, reports of people collapsing in public, industrial accidents and fires. Private ambulances were responsible for responding to house calls to convey sick persons or persons injured in their homes. The operation of the 999 call system in 1959 was to allow private ambulances to be dispatched on a rotating basis.



In January 1959 a complaint by the Veterans-Prince Ambulance operators against the Police Ambulance was brought before the Police Commission. They were

objecting to the use of the Police Ambulance in some private calls. Chief Taft was quoted saying "There will be occasions when the police arrive in a place that not come under the intended use, and then humanity and common sense must dictate their action" and "the police must never turn their back and walk away from human suffering once they are on the spot". This was primarily an argument of free municipal service vs a service fee, as no doubt, the Veterans-Prince Ambulance company would have been losing out on.

In November 1959, the manager of the Veterans-Prince Ambulance again brought a complaint before the police commission indicating they were being sent to calls where the police ambulance had also been dispatched, wasting resources. At the same time, Chief Taft noted the fire department's rescue wagon and the police ambulance were also needlessly attending the same calls. It was at this meeting a motion was made by an Alderman to disband the Police Ambulance; the motion was not supported by Chief Taft.

In 1962, Chief Taft revisited the issues taking the position that a single public ambulance service may improve the ambulance situation in Winnipeg. This came following a recommendation by the Manitoba Medical Association that a single provincial ambulance agency be established.

In 1966 the Winnipeg Police Force began using a station wagon accident prevention vehicle (traffic car)/ambulance to augment the 1963 Oldsmobile and 1954 Mercury ambulances the department was using.



In the late 60s, two more station wagon traffic cars/ambulances were purchased; one was assigned to the North End station and the other to the Fort Rouge Station. The 1963 Oldsmobile became a reserved ambulance and the Mercury was taken out of service. The new station wagons were equipped with stretchers but no sirens. In 1969, several officers were trained by hospital staff in the use of resuscitation equipment which was installed in the police ambulance along with a set of airways, suction equipment, oxygen tanks and masks.



1972 Dodge ambulance

In 1971, five of Winnipeg's nine private ambulance companies created their own central dispatching service which was linked into the City's 999 emergency switchboard to eliminate the ongoing competition for business between services. In addition, it eliminated the act of private ambulance

avoiding destitute areas for fear of not being paid and meant the ambulance based nearest to the call would be dispatched.

Upon amalgamation in 1974, all private and police ambulance services fell under the umbrella of the new Winnipeg Ambulance Service. One existing private ambulance service, the Crestview Ambulance, remained while it fulfilled its contractual obligations to Assiniboine Downs.

After many discussions and debates, the Winnipeg Ambulance Service was implemented on June 16, 1975. This corresponded with the conversion of Winnipeg's three-digit emergency number from 999 to 911. The Winnipeg Ambulance Service was created by the City of Winnipeg and the Provincial government and administered by Manitoba Blue Cross. It boasted a fleet of 15 fully equipped, radio controlled, allowing the available ambulance nearest to a patient to be dispatched. The ambulance was available for both emergency and non-emergency calls.

The topic of who's umbrella the Winnipeg ambulance service should operate remains a topic of debate more than 100 years after its inception.