

## Heritage Research Report Inco Recreation Hall

189 Davis St.

Part Lot 26 Concession 1 Humberstone Township

### Architectural Features:

The former International Nickel Company Recreation Hall sits on the northeast corner of Nickel and Davis Streets (now 189 Davis St.). The oldest and original part of the building faces south onto Nickel Street, and was built in 1918 as a residence first for the construction workers who were building the plant, and then, once construction on the plant was completed, it became the mechanics' boarding house.<sup>1</sup> This original portion is a two-storey structure built of red-brown brick, with east and west wings, and a raised basement. It has a symmetrical, nine-bay façade with six over six-paned windows, which all appear to be original and intact, and features a central window on the second storey with narrow, four over four-paned sidelights. The five-paned transom window over the front door is also still intact. The window lintels and sills on the first storey appear to be made of terra cotta tile, a line of which also serves visually to distinguish the basement from the first and second storeys. A single, decorative band of vertical brick runs horizontally around the building under the second-storey windows, and there is brick quoining on the corners of both the main portion of the building and its wings (making eight quoined corners altogether).

The entryway incorporates an element of Edwardian Classicism into the building's architecture, with a prominent lintel sitting upon squared terra cotta pilasters on either side of the doorway. The lintel piece seems to be relatively intact, although it is partially hidden by a porch covering that was a later addition (See Appendix 1). The symmetrical façade and window style are reminiscent of the Georgian style of a century earlier, yet the dark brick gives the building a decidedly Arts and Crafts appearance. There is even a touch of the Italianate style in the form of the long, overhanging eaves and dentilled soffit (the dentils have since been removed). This building represents an amalgamation of architectural styles, which was one of the hallmarks of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The rear (northern) portion of the building was built and opened in 1937, marking the beginning of its use as the Inco Recreation Club. Although the addition is significantly larger than the original portion of the building, its design was unobtrusive, and in keeping with the look of the original building; it does not interfere at all with the original façade. The decorative brick quoins of the original are echoed in the brickwork along the walls of the addition, though the brick itself is reddish in colour, not red-brown like that of the original building. The horizontal line of terra cotta tile is also continued at the same height as that on the older portion.

The main portion of the extension, on the west side, served as a gymnasium and auditorium. It is two storeys, with mainly slot windows under the eaves, and one second storey window on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Construction*, published by H. Gagnier Ltd., February 1919, Volume XII No. 2. pp.56-59.

east side. The eastern portion of the extension, which held the bowling alley, is one storey, also has just one window, and has a door featuring sidelights and transom window. All these features are in keeping with the style of the original building as closely as possible.

### **History:**

After two years of planning and construction, the International Nickel Company of Canada opened its Port Colborne refinery in 1918. The construction, and presumably the architectural design, too, was carried out by the Foundation Company. The first buildings to be erected within this planned industrial complex were two lodging houses: one, on the north side of Nickel St. (189 Davis St.), for the engineers and technicians working on the plant's construction, and the other, on the south side of Nickel St., for company executives. At this time, Port Colborne did not have boarding houses of the scale required for the large influx of people that the building of the plant occasioned, and the construction and architectural detail of these lodging houses speak to the grandeur of the project that was being undertaken. As mentioned above, once the plant opened in 1918, the boarding house on the north side of Nickel St. continued as the mechanics' boarding house; the lodging on the south side of the street became the superintendents' club house. The buildings were heated by steam, which was fed underground from the main plant.

As noted above, construction on the addition to 189 Davis St. began in July of 1937, and the Recreation Club opened to the public in December of the same year. The mechanics' lodging house was renovated and incorporated into a Recreation Club for Inco employees and their families, and for the larger community. The opening of this recreation facility coincided with the creation of Inco's Employee Welfare Association, and a similar facility was opened at the Sudbury plant around the same time. The former lodging house now held the club's kitchen, reading and reception rooms, and women's locker and shower rooms on the first floor, while the second floor held the lobby, the men's locker and shower rooms, and a billiard room. The new addition featured a 96' x 60' "aud-gym", for the purpose of hosting both athletics, including badminton, volleyball, basketball, tennis, and golf (with a one-storey "annex" for bowling); as well as entertainment in the form of concerts, dances, the Port Colborne Festival of Music, Port Colborne High School theatrical productions, Port Colborne Operatic Society's productions, etc. (See Appendix 3). The building additionally served the community by hosting events such as political debates and blood donation clinics.<sup>2</sup> In 1989, Inco donated the building to Christianview, and it continued to be used as a place to serve the community as a "drop-in centre, soup kitchen, and meeting place" (*Inco Triangle*, December 1993).

### **Architectural and Historical Significance:**

The Foundation Company was a construction firm which had a great impact on Canada's built landscape. The company was founded in New York in 1902, and this is an example of their work within their first decade of operations in Canada, before the official Canadian subsidiary was

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<sup>2</sup> For information, consult the Inco Recreation Hall file in the L.R. Wilson Archives' Local History files

formed in 1924, at which point it became the Foundation Company of Canada Limited. The company has since undergone several acquisitions and amalgamations, and is today a part of Aecon Group Inc. During the First World War, they hired many immigrants, particularly from eastern Europe. Despite the worker shortage in wartime Canada, war industries were reluctant to hire so-called “enemy aliens,” immigrants from nations which Canada was at war with, so many of these men ended up in construction work; and once the Inco facilities were completed, many of those workers transitioned into jobs with International Nickel. The company’s hiring practices for plant personnel continued to favour ethnic and linguistic minorities for many years, creating a vibrant and ethnically-diverse community in Port Colborne.

Inco’s Recreation Hall is also significant in its greater physical context, as part of a complex of buildings which represented the company’s influence and importance, including the company’s main administration building, right at the main entrance to the plant. Though the administration building, the mechanics’ boarding house, and the club house are all slightly different, there are architectural similarities present that create a visual unity between the three. Each is a two-storey building that features a symmetrical façade, and each has a unique, yet similarly monumental entryway, though that on the administration building is grandest, incorporating the window above on the second storey into its frame. The administrative building is further distinguished from the former residential buildings by its flat roof, which serves to align it aesthetically with the factory buildings as well. Of the three buildings discussed, the former recreation hall is the only one to retain its original windows.

The Inco Recreation Hall holds a great deal of historical and cultural significance in Port Colborne. The Recreation Hall, its facilities, and its activities was a central part of International Nickel’s corporate welfare initiatives at the Port Colborne refinery to maintain good employee and community relations. The Recreation Hall occupied a prominent site within the refinery’s extensive complex, across from the main administration building, and adjacent to the main entrance, offering visibility and easy access, especially for Port Colborne’s working-class community which surrounded the plant. During the Second World War, the hall hosted blood donor drives, first aid training, and fundraising activities for Canada’s war effort. The recreation hall was a central gathering place, not just for the refinery workers and their families, but for the whole community, most notably Port Colborne’s working classes, and a gathering place for the east side neighbourhood.

**Appendix 1** – Photograph, ca. 1917, from the collection of M. Hili, scanned 2025



**Appendix 2 – PCHMM 992.16.133**



**Description:**

Photograph of Nickel St. ca. 1919. Left: Mechanics' Boarding House; Centre: General Office; Right: Superintendents' Club House

**Appendix 3 – 2015.3.23**



**Circa:** 1946

**Description:**

Photograph of the cast of the Port Colborne Operatic Society's production of H.M.S. Pinafore in 1945-1946 on the stage at the Inco Recreation Hall. The performance was part of the annual production done at the INCO Recreation Hall. Mr. Raymond Coghlin is listed as the director of this show.