

REMEMBERING MONTGOMERY.

A History of Montgomery Place, 1945-1956

by JOAN CHAMP

The neighbourhood of Montgomery Place on the west side of Saskatoon, has been described as "more like to a resort village than an urban residential subdivision."¹ Developed in the mid-1940's under a federal government plan to create housing for returning World War II veterans and their families, Montgomery Place today retains its unique rural character. Some of the original half-acre lots--designed to allow veterans to augment their incomes through the tending of garden plots, fruit trees, chickens, apiaries, and so forth--remain. More significantly, the strong sense of community that characterized this development during its early years, still exists in Montgomery Place today. Although they are located next to industrial complexes such as Intercontinental Packers and the AGPRO Grain Elevator, people living in this west side oasis would no doubt agree with the statement made by one of the neighbourhood's first residents: "Montgomery Place is a great place to raise your kids."²

Founding

Montgomery Place is named after Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (1887-1976), a British military leader given the title 1st Viscount Montgomery of Alamein for his great victory at the Battle of El Alamein in North Africa in 1942. The founding of Montgomery Place was directly related to the Veterans' Land Act, enacted in 1942. Early in the war, the Canadian government realized that accommodation would have to be found for the thousands of returning soldiers, sailors and airmen--most of them young men recently married or about to be married.

The Veterans' Land Act was a measure to assist veterans of World War II

...to settle in Canada as full-time farmers, part-time farmers (small holders) and commercial fishermen. Assistance [was] also available to veterans who wished to act as their own contractors in the construction of their homes.³

Grants and loans were to enable qualified veterans to settle as small agricultural holders, coupled with other employment. A veteran was eligible if he was honorably discharged, met specific service requirements, and



*Lt. General Bernard Law Montgomery in 1942.
(From Nigel Hamilton's Monty; The Making of a General, 1887-1942, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981).*

was a resident of Canada before his enlistment and after his discharge.⁴

Under Part I of the Act, a qualified veteran could receive up to \$6,000 to assist him in settling on a small holding containing a minimum of one-half acre. The Act stated that

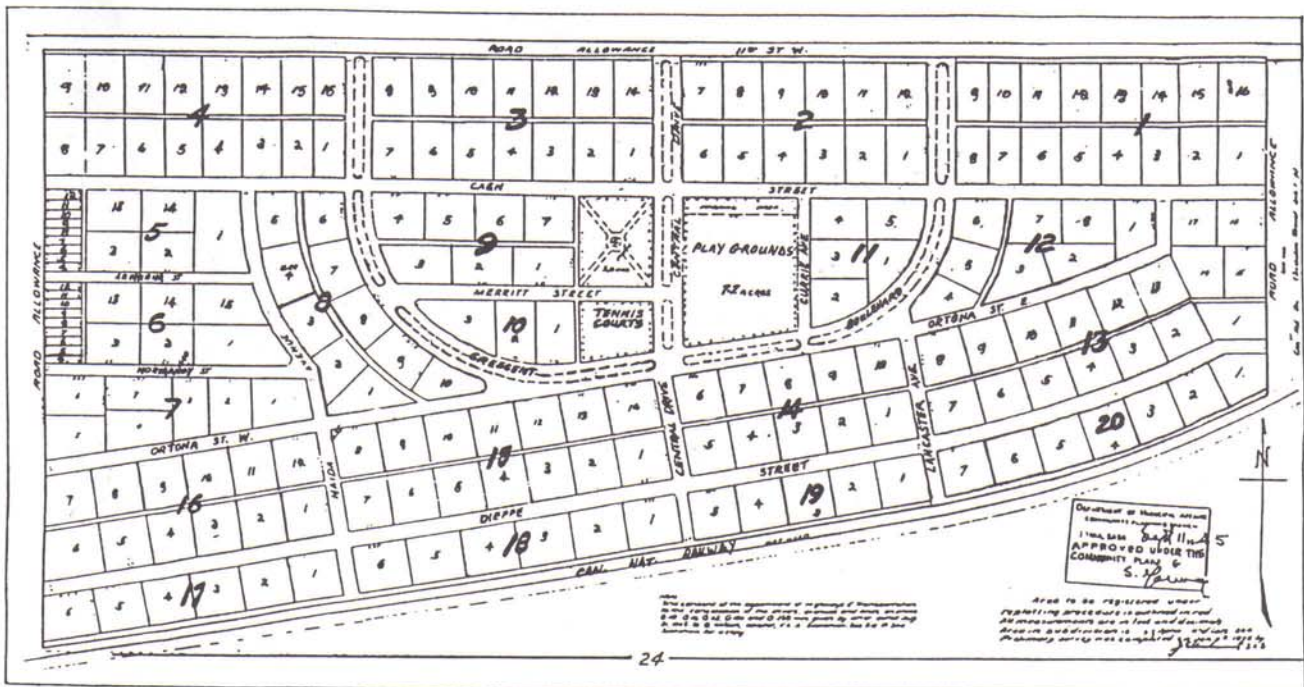
This amount may be spent for land, existing buildings, new house construction, building materials, the payment of debts that were reasonably incurred in acquiring or improving the property, and for livestock and farm equipment.⁵

The veteran contracted to make a down payment of ten percent and to repay two-thirds of the amount paid for the land, buildings and permanent improvements. Payment could be spread over a period of twenty-five years at an interest rate of three and one half percent. The veteran settling on a small holding was also eligible for a conditional grant (not exceeding \$1,200) for the purchase of stock and equipment. If he fulfilled the terms of his contract for ten years, he did not have to repay this grant.⁶ Under the terms of the contract with the VLA, the highest monthly payment required from a veteran on his small holding was \$28.47, plus taxes.

The Regional Office of the Soldier Settlement of Canada and the Veterans'

Land Act opened in Saskatoon in the summer of 1944. Its first objective was to find a suitable location for the establishment of a small holdings project for veterans. The Regional Advisory Committee, chaired by W.B. Caswell, a Saskatoon lawyer and alderman, looked over many properties in and around the city. Its first choice was land within the city limits, east of Avenue A and north of 33rd Street.⁷ This location, considered by the committee to be "the most logical site,"⁸ was however ruled out by the Saskatoon City Council "on account," the City Clerk advised, "of prospective industrial developments and the fact that the property in question is mostly zoned for heavy industrial use..."⁹ A large number of wartime houses were subsequently built on this property, prompting a VLA official to comment that "the City of Saskatoon did not co-operate to the extent which they could have done."¹⁰ Two other sites within the city were considered and ruled out as unsuitable before the committee turned its attention to property outside the city limits, but close enough to facilitate the installation of sewer and water lines.

The Rural Municipality of Cory owned most of the land surrounding Saskatoon. Small pockets of property were, however, in the hands of private landowners. From 1910 to 1912, Saskatoon had experienced what authors Don



Plan of Montgomery Place subdivision by Underwood and McLellan, 1942. Courtesy of Veterans' Land Administration (VLA), Veterans' Affairs Canada, Division Office, Saskatoon.

Kerr and Stan Hanson called "three years of delirious boom" during which intense land speculation took place.¹¹ Wildly optimistic predictions of population growth for Saskatoon led to the creation of 25,000 subdivided lots outside the city's boundaries.¹² Many of these lots, far from the city centre, were sold for up to \$350 before the "bust" that took place between 1913 and 1915.¹³ When the anticipated urban growth did not happen, these Saskatoon subdivisions reverted to the Rural Municipality of Cory. Many of the private owners of individual lots, however, paid their taxes over the years and thus held on to their properties. The land that the VLA chose as the site for the veterans' small holdings project--to be named Montgomery Place--was one of the old 1910-1912 subdivisions, originally named River Heights.

On July 11, 1945, the VLA purchased from the R.M. of Cory 2,115 lots on 230 acres located half a mile west of Saskatoon.¹⁴ The original subdivision plot divided this land into five blocks (Plans G.40, G.41, G.42, G.156, and G.250 located on the NW corner of Section 24, Twp. 36, Rge. 6, W3M). There were actually 2,158 lots in the River Heights subdivision; however, forty-three lots were owned by private individuals, residing mainly in eastern Canada. Because of the presence of these privately-owned lots, the VLA had to purchase the land to create Montgomery Place on a lot-by-lot basis rather than on an acreage basis. They paid \$6.00 per lot, for a total purchase price of \$12,690.

The VLA was then faced with the problem of obtaining title to the lots held by the absentee owners. In the spring of 1945, letters were sent to the private owners informing them of the purchase of the lots from the R.M. of Cory for the "present-day value" of \$6.00 per lot and asking them to sell their lots to the VLA. Title was obtained from most of the owners; however, several individuals wrote back asking \$100 to \$200 per lot. R.C.T. Smith of Hamilton, Ontario responded:

Since 1940 the city of Saskatoon have [sic] been charging me \$2.00 per year... [Y]ou are willing to give me back the taxes I have paid for the last six years... If you want my two lots I will sell for \$100--that is about half what they cost me-- otherwise I will hold my two

lots.¹⁵

In total, eighteen private owners refused to sell their lots. The VLA therefore decided on a replotting scheme whereby the old River Heights subdivision was cancelled, the land re-subdivided and the old, privately-owned lots exchanged for new lots located at the western edge of the new subdivision.¹⁶ The replotting scheme proved to be a long drawn-out legal process. It was not until early in 1947 that the "non-consenting" private owners were served with the notice regarding the change in the location of their property at Montgomery Place. These eighteen lots eventually held up the expansion of the neighbourhood. As late as 1962, inability to obtain title to the property from absent or missing landlords prevented the VLA from further development of the project.¹⁷

Establishment

VLA administrators were generally pleased with the Montgomery Place site. According to J.P. Nottingham, the Regional Supervisor, it had several advantages.

It is located on a high piece of ground...well-drained and very suitable for the installation of sewer and water. It has, on the North side of it, a hard surface road leading to all the main roads West of Saskatoon...It has gravel roads on the East and West of it, and there are gravel roads which have been graded...through the actual block itself, so there is ample means of travel in all directions...[I]t has a good soil type, one which is very suitable for the growing of gardens, and it [is] situated on the West side of Saskatoon where I would say the majority of work which most of the men would require [Union Stock Yards, Intercontinental Packers, and the Government Elevator] is located.¹⁸

The Montgomery Place subdivision was surveyed and laid out by the Saskatoon firm of Underwood and McLellan in 1945. 363 half acre lots were plotted; several acres, situated approximately in the centre of the project, were set aside for playground and park space or school grounds. Wide, gravel-coated streets and avenues with

boulevards were constructed; however, no sidewalks or concrete curbs were planned. Moreover, there was no provision for storm sewers in the development, necessitating the open drainage ditches still in use today.

In September of that same year, the VLA began construction on twenty-five houses at Montgomery Place. Three veterans built their own homes, giving a total of twenty-eight residences. The homes built in Montgomery Place were typical wartime houses, except that they had full basements. They were small and had no eaves. The original houses consisted of four basic floor plans--two bungalow styles and two one-and-a-half storey styles--ranging from about 600 to 800 square feet. All the houses had full basements, four to five rooms and a bath. Unfortunately, the sewer and water lines were not hooked up until the fall of 1946. Some veterans, desperate for a place to house their families, signed temporary agreements with the VLA that summer, permitting them to move into the all-but-completed houses before these connections were made. These agreements stated in part:

I, the undersigned...understand the sanitary conditions under which I undertake entry to this property and will make the necessary requirements until connected

with sewage and water.¹⁹

The first four families to move into Montgomery Place in the summer and fall of 1946 were the G.L.V. Moonies (3149 11th St. W.), the Thomas M. Mainlands (3145 11th St. W.), the Robert L. Coopers (1101 Lancaster Boulevard) and the Arthur H. Gents (3211 11th St.). According to Mrs. Margaret Gent, when she and her husband and their three small children moved into their new home in September, water and sewer had still not been hooked up. Bob Cooper, a veteran who worked at Intercontinental Packers, brought in barrels of water for the residents on his truck and hauled their garbage out. For several weeks, these first neighbourhood residents disposed of sewage in holes dug in their back yards.²⁰ No telephones were installed for several months and mail had to be picked up in the city. Despite these considerable inconveniences, the veterans initially took it all in their stride, happy to be building new homes for their young families. There were, however, rumblings of discontent from some of the original twenty-eight homeowners at Montgomery Place--rumblings that eventually made themselves heard the following year.

On January 21, 1946, the City of Saskatoon agreed to provide to the VLA the use of their sewer and water



Montgomery Place, September 1946.

mains, and to install and maintain all service meters. The outlet for sewer and water connections with the city's system was located on 11th Street West opposite the Intercontinental Packing plant--776 feet from the corner of the project. The higher elevation of the VLA property, however, meant that there was a gradual decline from west to east, allowing for sewer drainage without pumping to the city.²¹

The short connection from the subdivision to the end of Saskatoon's water and sewer lines proved to be expensive for the VLA. The pipes and mains had to be laid under two sets of railway tracks and Highway #14, a hard top roadway. Quicksand was encountered during the construction of this connection; a cave-in at the junction resulted and trenches twenty feet deep had to be dug.²²

Further Problems

The installation of sewer and water did not eliminate all of the problems faced by the veterans settling on their newly-established small holdings at Montgomery Place. In March of 1947, Saskatchewan's Reconstruction Minister, John H. Sturdy, met with a delegation of veterans who complained about "exorbitant" prices for homes at Montgomery Place and about the poor quality of materials used in their construction. According to a newspaper report:

Veterans at present living on the small holdings felt that some adjustment of prices should be made.²³

In November of that same year, the veterans of Montgomery Place submitted a brief to Walter A. Tucker, M.P., parliamentary assistant to the Minister of Veterans' Affairs. In this brief, the veterans described their dissatisfaction with several aspects of the project. In particular, the veterans pointed out problems related to the construction of their homes, including poor insulation, cracking plaster board and inferior wood flooring. The veterans declared that

The deficiencies of workmanship that are now manifest will be aggravated by time until, within a very few years, these places will have lost much of their present day value.²⁴

They also complained about the location of Montgomery Place:

It is our opinion that the selectors of this property

could not have found a less desirable place for a residential section within the confines or vicinity of Saskatoon. We would point out that railroads run on three sides of the project and to the immediate east of this project are stock yards, two abattoirs and a meat packing plant.²⁵

The VLA responded to these complaints by pointing out in the Saskatoon Star Phoenix that, because of post-war housing shortages,

...most of the veterans were pleased at being able to secure houses of any type.²⁶

Regional Superintendent J.M. Varey wrote to the VLA Director in Ottawa that, when the veterans applied for assistance to be-come established at Montgomery Place,

...they knew all about the location, the soil, the types of houses being built, and no doubt the class of materials being used..."²⁷

In a separate report, Nottingham confirmed that many of the veterans had inspected the progress of construction before they signed their applications to purchase small holdings.²⁸ Both Nottingham and Varey defended the location of Montgomery Place in their reports. Nottingham outlined the history of the site selection process in some detail, quoting the chosen site's proximity to Saskatoon and its good soil type as evidence of location value. With regard to the veterans' complaint about the proximity of railway lines, Varey suggested that this was "unjustifiable criticism." He pointed out that railways cut through several residential areas in Saskatoon and other cities, and that in small towns, "practically every house...is within 600 or 1,000 feet of the railway."²⁹

J. Dutton, District Construction Supervisor for the VLA, reported to Varey that all of the Montgomery Place homes were "well constructed" and that "there have been no cases of faulty workmanship."³⁰ Remedial work, undertaken the previous summer, had largely solved the problems indicated by the veterans. According to Dutton:

A number of veterans have stated that the remedial work completed this year has made their homes more comfortable.³¹

Furthermore, VLA officials believed that the veterans' monthly payments of



Mrs. Gilbert (Freda) Moonie in front of her family's new home in Montgomery Place, May 1946.

\$28.47 plus taxes were "a very reasonable outlay for home accommodation." 32 Dutton observed that similar houses, built within the city limits a year later, were priced approximately twenty-five to thirty percent higher than the VLA houses. In fact, the VLA did not build any more houses for several years after the initial phase of the project because of soaring construction costs. 33

Expansion

The veterans of Montgomery Place became increasingly concerned about the lack of building in the neighbourhood. In the spring of 1950, veteran settler T.G. Tregaskis (3132 Caen Street) met with VLA officials to explore ways to stimulate expansion of the project. He was told that despite a concerted advertising campaign, "Build Your Own Home," that year, no interest had been indicated by veterans in the Saskatoon area. Tregaskis then suggested that civilians might be allowed to build homes in Montgomery Place. 34

Early in 1951, the Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association unanimously passed a resolution to open up the project to civilian settlement. 35 In a letter to the VLA, Association re-



Donald and Allen Moonie, 1951.

representative G.D. Eamer (3148 Caen Street) stated:

The veterans...feel that... lack of progress not only prevents them from getting essential services at the present time but jeopardizes their financial interest in their property...³⁶

At this point, VLA officials were also expressing serious concerns about the future potential of the Montgomery Place project. While approving the sale of lots to civilians, officials in Ottawa recommended that the half-acre lots be subdivided and sold in blocks to real-estate developers who, through concerted sales campaigns, could sell more lots than the VLA could by selling them on an individual basis. In addition, VLA head office suggested that the 207 unserviced lots be posted for sale because, one administrator wrote, "we cannot anticipate that we will make any use of this block."³⁷

The VLA Regional Office in Saskatoon decided on a more moderate course of action. A small number of Montgomery Place lots were offered for sale to the general public in April 1951. These lots, located on 11th Street West, were fully serviced and retained the half-acre size (with the option to subdivide).³⁸ A month later, the first lot sold to a civilian (3217 11th Street West) was made to E.W. Geall, Director of the Saskatoon Dairy Pool. This sale served to kick off a new phase of growth for Montgomery Place. Over the course of the next year, fifteen new dwellings were built, all but one (Geall's home) to veterans who had qualified for VLA loans.³⁹ These additions increased the total number of houses in the development to almost fifty.

The rush of applicants to the VLA Regional Office was soon so great that officials became concerned whether there would be enough serviced lots available. Out of an original seventy serviced lots, only eleven had not been applied for by November 1952. In the VLA's 1953 building program, thirty additional lots were serviced with sewer and water mains and released for sale to meet the heavy demand from veterans.⁴⁰

The reason for the sudden expansion of Montgomery Place, after several years of delay, is no doubt related to the booming prairie economy in the early 1950's. Saskatoon was one of the fastest growing cities in Canada during this decade--a consequence of the post-war "baby boom" and of an in-

flux of rural population into the city. Housing construction flourished throughout Saskatoon, with new subdivisions developing in the fringe areas.⁴¹ It was only natural that Montgomery Place would benefit from this economic and population boom. Another factor contributing to the expansion of the neighbourhood was the improved financial position of many veterans. The Star-Phoenix reported in the fall of 1952 that several of the veterans building on the newly developed lots of the project had purchased cheaper houses after the war, improved them, sold them and used the profits to help finance the construction of their new houses.⁴²

The VLA project continued to grow by leaps and bounds throughout the 1950's and into the 1960's. In 1959 and 1960, Montgomery Place set records for the number of new homes started in the neighbourhood in one year (58 homes in 1959 and 62 homes in 1960). By the end of 1960, a total of 305 houses had been built in the settlement.⁴³

The Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association

In 1949, the VLA held a nationwide small holding development and improvement competition. After visiting the twenty-eight homes in Montgomery Place, the judges made several favourable comments in the local newspaper about the progress the veterans had made. They were impressed by the fact that every veteran was developing his entire half-acre property. Permanent landscaping was extensive, they observed, adding greatly to the appearance of the homes. The secret of success in Montgomery Place, the judges stated, was the strong community organization. Said one of them:

In the main we have found the best developed subdivisions are those with the best community associations.⁴⁴

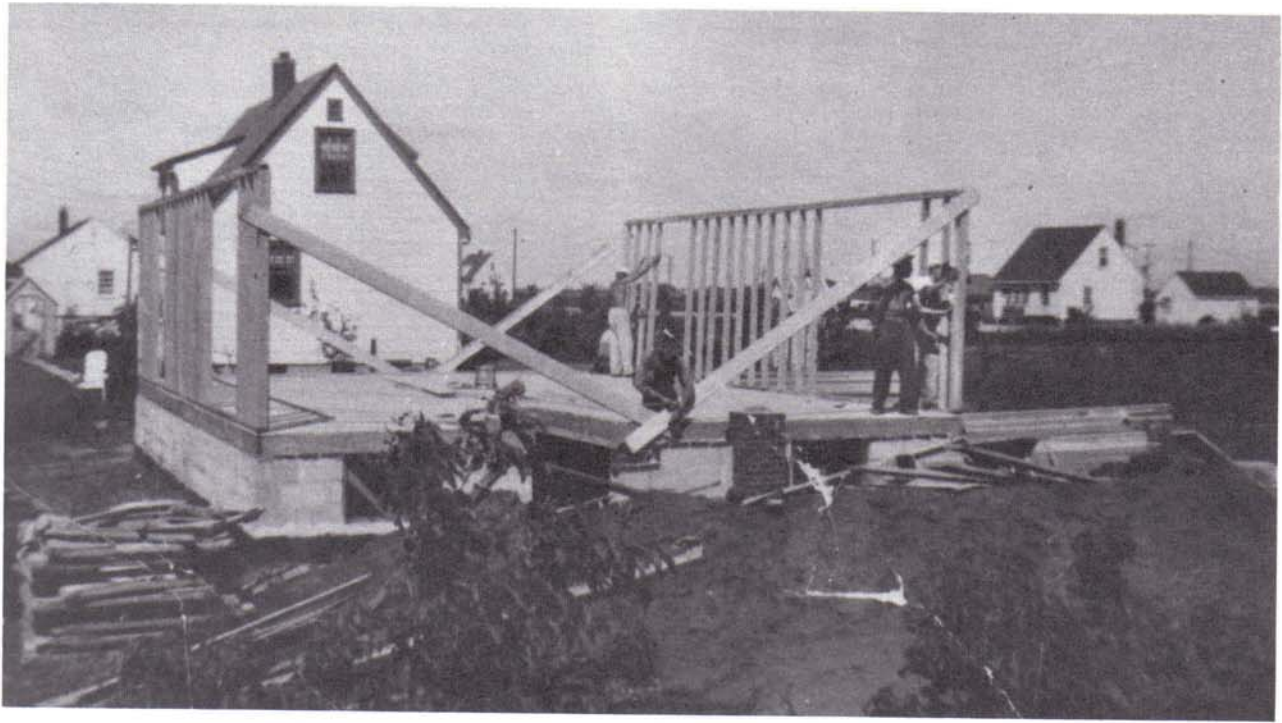
The Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association was indeed an impressive organization. This group played a prominent role in the development and improvement of the community. In the spring of 1950, for example, the association organized a combination "beautification" field day, rally and picnic lunch for the purpose of improving the grounds, walks, roads and playgrounds. With the co-operation of the Cory municipality, the Saskatoon Horticultural Society and the VLA administration, the entire community came out to work.



'Clean-up' day, June 17, 1950.



'Clean-up' day, June 17, 1950.



Home of Ken and Charlotte Brand under construction at 1205 Lancaster Blvd., summer 1951. In the background are the Edwards, Sedgewick and Baldwin homes.

While the roads were constructed by the VLA and maintained by the R.M. of Cory, almost all other essential services were coordinated by the Ratepayers' Association. Garbage disposal, for instance, was handled by neighbourhood resident Bob Cooper until 1952, when the R.M. took over the responsibility.⁴⁵

The Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association held their meetings in the cafeteria of Intercontinental Packers. The residents of Montgomery Place had established a good relationship with the plant and its owner, Fred Mendel. For example, the City of Saskatoon's bus service extended only as far as the packing plant, so residents had to walk to the plant to wait for the bus. One early resident recalls that Mendel would call people into the cafeteria to wait, offering drinks to the children and coffee to the adults. Intercon also helped the veterans develop their gardens by hauling and dumping manure on their plots free of charge. Mendel offered use of his plant's cafeteria "any time" for association meetings and for social events held by the community. Neighbourhood Christmas parties were held in the cafeteria for many years and were especially successful, often boasting a 100 percent attendance rate.⁴⁶

The residents of Montgomery Place

also created their own recreational facilities. In the winter, a skating rink was made between the Gent and Cooper houses on 11th Street West. Every Sunday a neighbourhood hockey game was organized, Bob Cooper and Ed Smith acting as goalies.⁴⁷ Eventually the Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association began to develop plans and raise funds for a Community Centre, including a hall and a curling rink. These plans were complicated, however, by the incorporation of Montgomery Place into the City of Saskatoon in 1955. It was left to the City to implement the plans to develop recreational facilities in the neighbourhood--a difficult task given the nature of the tax limitation agreement reached between the VLA Regional Office, the City Administration and neighbourhood residents at the time of incorporation.

Amalgamation with the City of Saskatoon

The expansion of the Montgomery Place project led to significant negotiations between the Ratepayers' Association and the City of Saskatoon in the early 1950s. Saskatoon City Council was interested in including the fringe area neighbourhood within the greater city limits. Residents of the development had serious reservations about the City's proposal. In particular, they were concerned about

tax increases that might result from incorporation into Saskatoon. On March 22, 1953, the Association unanimously approved a motion for the formation of the village of Montgomery Place by January 1954.⁴⁸ Shortly afterwards, in May, the City Commissioner of Saskatoon contacted the VLA Regional Office to ask about the possibility of reaching a tax limitation agreement with Montgomery Place residents, so that the neighbourhood could be added to the city.⁴⁹

Negotiations began in the fall. The Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association wanted assurances from the city administration that services such as street lighting, garbage disposal, road maintenance, snowploughing and bus service would be provided. More importantly, the Association sought a tax limitation agreement with the city to ensure that the Montgomery Place mill rate would not exceed a certain fixed amount. Initially they asked for a maximum rate of 48 mills, the current City of Saskatoon mill rate being 60 mills.⁵⁰ This special agreement was vital, as property taxes

would otherwise soar upon amalgamation to reflect the large Montgomery Place lots.

The tax limitation agreement had to be approved by the Director of the VLA. Regional officials worked hard throughout the fall and winter months, attending meetings of the Ratepayers' Association as well as every meeting between the city administration and the Montgomery Place veterans. In the spring of 1954, the terms of the tax limitation agreement were finally approved by all parties involved in the negotiations. This twenty-five year concession agreement set the Montgomery Place mill rate at either 51 mills a year or twenty percent lower than the current city rate, whichever was lower. The agreement came into effect on January 1, 1955, when Montgomery Place was officially incorporated into the City of Saskatoon.

Conclusion

Beginning in 1945, the VLA fostered the growth of Montgomery Place. The VLA arrangement came to an end in 1971, at which time many non-veterans



Montgomery Place Ratepayers' Association Christmas Party, 1953.



Aerial view of Montgomery Place looking east, 1979.

moved into the neighbourhood, creating new lots through the division of the half-acre lots. In 1980, the tax limitation agreement expired and full city taxes became applicable. By that time, however, many of the lots had been subdivided, making property assessments tolerable. Assessments in this subdivision remained lower than other city neighbourhoods due to the lack of sidewalks, curbs and underground drainage.

In the years since incorporation Montgomery Place has grown steadily, to the point where today there are over 800 homes and a population of about 2,700.⁵¹ Two elementary schools, Montgomery School and St. Dominic School, have been built; parks and playgrounds have been developed; Trinity United Church serves the

spiritual needs of the community; and two grocery stores, one at Dundonald Avenue and 11th Street West and the other at Elevator Road and 11th Street West, provide the convenience of local shopping.

Driving down Montgomery Place streets such as Lancaster, Mountbatten, Dieppe and Normandy--names associated with World War II--one is struck by the mature landscaping and the long, generous lots which give the neighbourhood an open, park-like feeling. Newer homes, gracefully interspersed among the original wartime houses, are built well back from the streets. In the midst of its remarkable growth, Montgomery Place has retained its individuality--its "resort village" character being the direct result of its interesting history.