

Comment on the Metric System

National House Builders Association

It seems inevitable that Canadian industry must, some day, convert to the metric system of weights and measures. The residential construction industry is no exception and, no doubt, the day will come when it abandons the English inch, foot and yard and adopts the meter as its basis of measurement.

Because Canada is so closely allied with the United States and since we are both each other's best customers, it will be difficult for this country to make the change before it also occurs south of the border. On the other hand, much of the rest of the world already uses the metric system and other Canadian exports would benefit materially were we using it today.

The housing industry in Canada uses products and materials which are largely Canadian in origin and manufacture. The decision to "go metric" could, therefore, be made in Canada without undue dependence on supplies from other countries. Most of the tools used by tradesmen in the building operation could be readily converted to the metric system.

Manufacturing machinery for building materials would require certain alterations and the manufacturers' point of view on this will be significant. The design of buildings could quickly be altered to metric measurements since scales and drawing instruments are already available.

It would be a great mistake simply to continue to produce building materials in metric equivalents of their present sizes, but rather the opportunity should be taken to redesign their dimensions to a new and better metric module.

The training of tradesmen and the instructing of draftsmen, designers, engineers

and architects in the use of the new metric units would require some time but would not be too difficult to organize, particularly in the light of the heavy European ethnic base of our labor force.

It should be a federal government responsibility to establish a timetable for metric conversion, so spaced as to give ample time for the required steps to be carried out. The residential construction industry will be able to change to a metric basis as soon as building materials become available to do so.

Canadian Construction Association

The Canadian Construction Association was one of the first industry groups to advocate conversion to the metric system of measurement (S.I. units) in Canada. The CCA National Council, comprised of officers of the Association and representatives of its member associations serving many sections of the industry and country, discussed the subject at its January and June sessions in 1968.

These discussions led to the adoption on June 24, 1968, of a four-point Motion directed at the federal government urging prompt action:

1. to expedite the establishment of the proposed Standards Council of Canada.
2. to direct the SCC to carry out a study of the implications of conversion to metric.
3. to include in the study, in collaboration with the construction industry and allied professions, a proposed schedule and related requirements in construction operations in Canada.
4. to enact legislation providing for the mandatory use of the metric system of measurement.

During 1968 and 1969 representations

were made to the federal cabinet, the Senate Committee on Science Policy, etc. to this end. The CCA was especially concerned over the delay in the establishment of the Standards Council of Canada because of its role in the metric conversion operation. It was accordingly gratifying when the SCC Bill was passed in the House of Commons in June 1970.

Similarly, the federal government's White Paper on the Metric System, issued earlier this year, is a formal commitment to conversion. We were naturally pleased that the full text of the CCA's policy on metric was included in this White Paper.

Our main concern now is that the conversion process be carried out as smoothly as possible. The U.K. experience will in particular be helpful to us. Canadian architectural, engineering and contracting offices will in many cases benefit from the fact that many of their personnel are post-war immigrants brought up on the metric system.

The 1970 National Building Code will contain comparative metric measurements wherever their inclusion was practicable. Then again, all ASTM standards are now being published in metric. These and similar actions will be most helpful during the transition period.

The main problem will likely be faced by manufacturers. Elsewhere they have received special assistance during metric conversion. Canada, as a trading nation, cannot ignore that metric is now in mandatory legal use in countries containing almost 90 per cent of the world's population. If metric conversion is inevitable in Canada, the longer it is delayed the greater and more expensive the problem will be.

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History at the Hair-Raising Level

(continued from page 25)

Shaw's exploits would make a pretty good TV adventure series. He was treed by a wolf, confronted by a grizzly, shared his bed with a rattlesnake, ate skunk when faced with starvation, and generally lived in conditions so primitive that they hardly seem imaginable today.

He gives a good picture of what the prairies were like when the number of white settlers west of the Red River could almost be counted on fingers and toes.

Cities like Regina and Calgary were non-existent.

Shaw saw a good deal of various Indian tribes, and he seems generally sympathetic to them, though he was nearly knifed by one and nearly scalped by another. And he was almost shot by Sitting Bull and his Sioux when he encountered them unexpectedly; they had crossed into Canada after the Little Big Horn massacre, and were wearing the uniforms of General Custer's troops.

Shaw tells about it all in a droll, laconic style that is more effective for its understatement. For example, in describing the

attitude of some Indians to the coming of the railway, he writes: "The Plains Indians, in certain areas, expressed some disapproval of the white man's entry into their land. Though they rarely tampered with survey markers or removed them, they would sometimes express their resentment by defecating upon the top of every available stake, which added nothing to the amenities of the job."

Shaw's tale is one of high adventure, but it is more than that. It reminds us again, in dramatic fashion, how close we are to our past. And seeing our past in perspective may help us to understand better our future.