

500 Howard Street: A forgotten piece of Oshawa's history

By Dave Flaherty
The Oshawa Express

An earlier edition of *The Oshawa Express' Fourth Estate* looked at the infamous Genosha Hotel located in the city's downtown core.

For years, numerous developers have attempted to revitalize the once-bustling hotel. After many stops and starts, it seems the current effort will be fruitful, as work has begun to improve the building's condition and a permit has been officially granted to the developer.

However, just a few blocks away, to the south, stands another historic piece of Oshawa's history and a reminder of its once thriving industrial sector.

The exact address is 500 Howard Street, the former home of the Ontario Malleable Iron Company and Knob Hill Farms.

For almost two decades, the building has sat mostly vacant with a few spurts of activity here and there.

But that wasn't always the case. At various points, this building was an epicenter of business in Oshawa, and home to some of the city's largest employers.

In contrast with the bright future of the Genosha, which will see the construction of luxury apartments, the former Ontario Malleable Iron building will mostly soon fade away.

But more on that later.



Photo courtesy of the Oshawa Museum



Photo courtesy of jerm IX

A leader in industry

To begin the story, one must go back before the turn of the 20th century.

Brothers John and William Cowan were born in Ireland and immigrated to Canada in 1841.

While owning and operating a business in Toronto, they opened up a branch in Oshawa in 1862.

The Toronto location was closed in 1866, and the brothers then moved to Oshawa.

About six years later, the Cowans established the Ontario Malleable Iron Co. and built the original plant. The company initially employed about 50 men.

In 1894, the original plant was destroyed by fire. In reporting news of the fire, *The New York Times* called Ontario Malleable Iron Co. one of the most "important" industries in Canada.

The plant was then rebuilt with the addition of a grey foundry.

The spacious operation took up 10 acres of land and was the largest moulding shop in the Dominion of Canada. At one point, Ontario Malleable Iron Co. employed more men than the McLaughlin Carriage and Automobile Works, which eventually became General Motors Canada.

The company employed anywhere from 350 to 800 people per year and was usually equipped with the most modern equipment available.

It featured its own monorail system for carrying large loads around the yard, and a railway track ran directly to its loading

area.

The company was able to manufacture around 80 tonnes of cast iron, iron that can be bent or shaped by force, a day.

Products made at the plant were supplied to various companies all over the country, and included small to large pipe fittings, automobile and railway car castings, agricultural equipment and other parts.

In 1929, the company was sold to the Grinnell Company of Canada.

With the onset of the Second World War in 1939, the company moved its focus to supporting efforts of the Canadian military. This included constructing bogie wheels for Bren gun carriers, a product which eventually became half of the company's total manufacturing capacity.

A tumultuous relationship

While the company was successful and helped to bring economic prosperity to the city, it was not without its controversies.

According to a Department of Labour journal, a strike in 1900 threatened to leave operations at the plant idle.

The disagreement began when a core-maker was ordered by a foreman to dump moulds. The action would have required heavy exertion next to the very hot molten metal causing the worker to sweat.

The core-makers would then return to the "relatively cold" pattern-making room, causing concern about catching a chill from the temperature difference.

The Labour Minister of the time, William Mulock, was summoned by Mayor Fredrick Frowe, who was concerned that the strike would cripple the plant.

On Dec. 12, 1900, the strike was settled with both the satisfaction of the workers and company.

In 1937, the workers were unionized, signing with the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers.

In 1940, the original contract between the company and union had expired, and meetings began in March.

Employees were seeking wage increases for hourly and piece work.

A strike began on March 27, 1940, and pickets soon began to form outside of the factory to prevent the company from moving product.

In a letter published in *The Oshawa Daily Times*, the company reached out to workers, stating the best way to come to an agreement would be to meet without the involvement of the union.

After the intervention from the Ontario Labour Department, the 23-day strike came to an end later that month, with workers receiving a 7.5 per cent increase in wages, a five-day, 45 hour work week and time-and-a-half for overtime.

There were more strikes in 1945 and 1966.

On Jan. 18, 1976, employees were locked out the plant over disputes over pay increases, and would ultimately never return.

The legacy of the Ontario Malleable Iron Co. in Oshawa ended on March 16, 1977, when parent company ITT Grinnell announced it was closing the city's plant.

The company cited "a slumping marketplace" and "general uncertain market conditions" in making the decision.

A spokesperson for the company also said officials were unsure if they'd be able to regain their share of the industry after being non-operational for more than a year.

Lynn Williams, District Six Steelworkers director, told *The Oshawa Times* it was a "classic example of uncontrolled and irresponsible power of this multi-national colossus."

Bill Fairservice of the Oshawa and District Labour Council said he was most worried about the approximately 85 seniors who were left without work.

"They gave their best years - now they are too old to relocate," Fairservice said, adding that the city would now have them stuck on the "welfare rolls."

"...Damn near time the government took some steps to ensure this sort of company not be allowed to relocate to Canada," Fairservice stated. "I think it's disgusting [for] a company to pick up and leave like this without any penalties."

A new tenant moves in

The factory stood vacant for almost five years until 1983 when another since dissolved Canadian giant of business moved in.

Knob Hill Farms was established in the 1950s and quickly became one of the largest grocery chains in Canada.

In 1963, founder Steve Stavro opened his first "food terminal," considered by some to be the equivalent of the big

box stores of today.

The terminal was a 65,000 square foot store at Woodbine Avenue and Highway 7 in Markham.

In 1983, the company opened up a 226,000 square foot terminal in the former Oshawa factory.

In addition to the grocery store, the building also included a pharmacy, bakery, dentist's office, video rental store, wine store, and card shop.

Local historian Amanda Robinson grew up in south Oshawa and remembers visiting the Knob Hill Farms store as a child.

"It was almost like a Costco or Walmart. There were also little vendors in the front of the warehouse. There were these really neat concrete fountains," Robinson recalls.

A notable tidbit regarding the Oshawa location was it was the first Knob Hill Farms store to become unionized.

In fact, in 1988, the Ontario Labour Relations Board found the company had acted improperly when it fired 14 employees who were trying to organize workers.

In 1991, a Brink's guard was fatally shot in front of the store.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Knob Hill Farms remained a strong company, but as new competitors came onto the scene, its market share weakened.

In August 2000, Stavro announced all stores, including the Oshawa location, would close.

Once Knob Hill Farms closed its doors, there were a few tenants such as a flea market and liquidation outlet store, but eventually, the building was sealed off to the public and has

remained so since.

A shell of what once was

Over the past two decades, the building has fallen into relative disrepair. The Knob Hill Farms logo still adorns the highest point of the building, a reminder of what once was.

Since 2000, the building has become a popular spot for urban explorers, a community that travels to abandoned buildings and chronicles their experiences through photos, videos, and articles.

The area around the building has similarly suffered, as the former Pittsburgh Glass Works factory was closed in 2009, ending a legacy that had started in the 1920s.

"You go there now and it's like a bomb went off," Robinson notes. "You've seen a real urban decay."

Robinson says when industrial areas, especially those surrounded by residential housing, are booming, much of the associated nuisances or negatives are often overlooked because of the economic impact.

But once companies fold or leave town, it can wreak havoc on the aesthetics and identity of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

"When these manufacturing industries are operating, they mean jobs. You are not taught to see these industrial landscapes as ugly," she comments. "But when they are abandoned, nobody wants to live near an abandoned industrial landscape."

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Photo by Vik Patwa from the Torontoist Flickr Pool



Photo by Dave Flaherty/The Oshawa Express

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Time to GO?

In 2011, Metrolinx, the entity responsible for GO Transit, began to make overtures about acquiring the property for future development on the Lakeshore East line in Oshawa.

However, Metrolinx announced later that year a deal could not be reached.

Only two years later in 2013, the provincial organization announced plans to expropriate the land for its expansion.

Metrolinx took ownership of the land in 2014. The Oshawa Central GO station to be built at 500 Howard Street was announced a short time later.

A Park and Ride location was unveiled in April 2018 to allow commuters an alternative place to park in order to get to the extremely crowded Bloor Street Station.

The Lakeshore East expansion is set to include another new GO Station in Oshawa in the area of Thornton Road and Consumers Drive, and stations in Courtice and Bowmanville.

The former Liberal government announced the expansion would be completed by 2024 with construction expected to begin in 2019.

The building that stands now has been designated as a heritage building, which under the Ontario Heritage Act, could protect it from demolition.

According to a presentation provided by Metrolinx at a public meeting in April, it is planning to retain the cultural heritage attributes to the former Ontario Malleable Iron Co. building, but not the later Knob Hill Farms additions.



Photo courtesy of the Oshawa Museum

Metrolinx is proposing to demolish the former Knob Hill Farms structure in order to accommodate the new transit station.

During the unveiling of the park and ride, current Mayor John Henry voiced his satisfaction that some new life was being breathed into the area.

“It’s great to be here today because this is the next step of a city that’s evolving,” he said. “This train station, when

it’s finally completed will allow residents to move in and out of the city to go to work, but more importantly, get home to have a great family life.”

In 2005, only a few short years after Knob Hill Farms left, and likely when there seemed to be some notion the building would again soon be in use, the City of Oshawa commissioned a research report on the building.

Su Murdoch Historical Consultants wrote in the report, “Overall, this site symbolizes the prominent role of the Ontario Malleable Iron Company Ltd. in the industrial stability of Oshawa for over a century. Its architecture is representative of a 19th-century industrial form and design. Founders John and William Cowan were leading employers and patriarchs in the community.”

What exactly will remain of one of the city’s most historic buildings once Metrolinx is finished is yet to be seen.

The fact it has remained standing nearly 20 years after it was regularly in use is quite an accomplishment when so many other elements of the city’s history are long departed.



Photo courtesy of jerm IX

The story behind the story



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The Oshawa Express

As someone born in the 1980s, I’m a bit of a nerd for the history and culture of that period.

When I attended Durham College over a decade ago, I was aware that somewhere in Oshawa stood a former location of Knob Hill Farms.

Growing up in the Kawarthas, I recalled seeing commercials for Knob Hill Farms on television, and for all I know, my family may have shopped there when we still lived in Scarborough.

I was just a teen when the company folded in 2000, but learning about the former food terminal being in Oshawa

piqued my interest.

As a few of my college classmates and I liked to explore buildings we really had no business being in, (Whitby Psych, anyone?) it was always on our list but never realized.

When I moved back to Oshawa, I just happened to be driving down a side street and something caught my attention.

It was a Knob Hill Farms logo! I had found it.

I got out and looked at this old building sitting there, no life to it.

My interest was immediately raised and I started to research. I found that the Knob Hill Farms aspect of the building was just a tiny piece of its history.

I soon discovered when I referred to the old Knob Hill Farms building, most people think of it as the old Ontario Malleable Iron Co. building.

There was a lot more history to this than I realized. And there was plenty of history available, but it was much more scattered and took a bit more searching than other historical pieces I have written.

In fact, I had my first chance to use microfilm to view old newspaper articles at the Oshawa Public Library.

The fact the building has been sitting vacant for almost 20 years and has stayed standing adds to its aura in my opinion.

How much longer it will stand, and exactly what parts will remain, are in question as Metrolinx has announced plans to build a new GO Station at the location.

The Ontario Malleable portions of the building have been designated as having cultural and heritage value, so the reminders of what once was will not be totally destroyed.

It’s a case of progress that is needed intersecting with history, and in those cases, the former usually wins.