

Yorkton Stories

The audio version of this and all other podcasts can be found at www.yorktonstories.ca and on all podcast directories.

This transcript was produced using voice recognition software, which is not perfect. It has been edited for clarity, to correct misspellings and to delete duplication.

The flour mill: 125 years of history

Published 24 July 2023

Dick DeRyk

Twenty or so years ago, a tall brick building at the corner of Livingston Street and Beck Avenue in Yorkton, along the CP Rail Line, presented a conundrum. It was one of Yorkton's oldest buildings still standing, although barely, and it was the oldest building of its kind in Saskatchewan. It had stood proudly along the rail line for more than a century. At one time it had storage sheds and a grain elevator attached to both store grain and the flour that was produced in that building. It was and is Yorkton's Flour Mill, built in 1898 by J.J. Smith, an early pioneer whose father, Dr. John Smith, had brought his family to the original York colony, located several kilometers north of the present city.

When the railway came through, the settlers moved south to be alongside the rail line. And J.J. took the opportunity to build a flour mill to serve the fledgling settlement. It became not only a provider of a necessary staple for the village, but it was a meeting place where farmers and townspeople would gather to sell grain and buy flour and talk about the news and likely the gossip of the day. But by the time the building turned 100, it had become an eyesore, a potential danger having been abandoned by its most recent owner and left to deteriorate. Discussions took place at City Hall and within the community. Could the building be saved? After all, it had great historic significance. Should the building be saved? And if so, what would we do with it?

The building is standing today, with many structural and cosmetic improvements having been made in the past 10 years by the Yorkton Brick Mill Historical Society, which now owns the mill and is spearheading its rejuvenation and expansion. The grounds have been cleaned up and landscaped, the interior walls and machinery have been painted and cleaned. Events are hosted during summer, and tours of the mill are available in July and August. A campaign to raise money to add an interpretive center to the mill is well underway. And an outdoor display area, an ongoing project, tells some of the history of Yorkton.

This is the story of how the mill was then and how it is now. The early part of the then is told by Carmen Smith, the grandson of J.J. Smith who built the mill. Carmen Smith lives in Barriere, British Columbia. Now in his mid-80s, he spent much of his life building and operating a sawmill business with his brother Ted, a business founded by his father Gilbert, son of J.J. And Carmen still sits on the board of directors of Gilbert Smith Forest Products. His dad Gilbert left Yorkton when JJ took his family west. He was 16 years old, but talked fondly of Yorkton over the years as he shares stories of his youth with his family, stories that Carmen recalls to provide a first-hand look at the early years of Yorkton. We talked with Carmen in January of 2021 about his family and the mill. That story can be found on the website of the Yorkton Mill Society at

www.yorktonflourmill.ca. You will hear excerpts from that conversation and talks with those involved today on this podcast.

Carmen Smith

I'm the youngest son of George Gilbert Smith, and was born in 1936. I attended the University of British Columbia, graduated with a degree in forestry, and I became a professional forester and have lived in Barriere, B.C. since 1964.

Dick DeRyk

But you're not the only one with the connection to forestry.

Carmen Smith

My oldest brother taught forestry at UBC. My second oldest brother, who's still alive, Robert, he was a civil engineer and he built pulp mills all over the country. My brother Ted, he and I built the cedar mill here. The whole family is related to the forest industry.

Carmen Smith

When we had a reunion in 2005 at the mill it was just derelict. It was boarded up and you couldn't get in. And the mill being restored, as far as I'm concerned, is fantastic. My father told me many things about it growing up. I had the opportunity to visit in '89 and have a video of that. During the visit, we talked to many people there, and they referred to it as the J.J. Smith Mill. It's quite something to have a historic landmark that your grandfather built in 1898.

Dick DeRyk

There was a Dr. John Smith in the original York Colony who had a connection to Charles Tupper, later the Prime Minister of Canada. Dr. John Smith was JJ's father.

Carmen Smith

My great-grandfather came to the Northwest Territory in 1874, after landing in Quebec City in 1870, and then settled in Toronto. He must have liked what he saw on the prairies as he had four sons and three daughters settled in the area around Yorkton and were the first settlers in 1882. John Smith and Charles Tupper went to the University of Edinburgh together and could have been roommates, as they graduated in 1843 and then went to London together for surgical training. My great-grandfather had lots of available money when he went to medical school, and Tupper had little. According to the stories, my father and other family members have told me, John helped Tupper with tuition. On Tupper's recommendation, he decided to move to Canada at the age of 53. He came to Canada with his wife and eight children. Smith Street was named after Dr. John Smith. And Darlington Avenue was named after his wife's family.

Dick DeRyk

JJ turned out to be quite a businessman. It wasn't just the flour mill that he built. He had other interests and built other businesses as well.

Carmen Smith

He built a foundry, he built a store where he sold everything under the sun. He was involved in the electricity outfit there in Yorkton. He was involved in that, the power company. Yeah, I think he was the founder of that. First thing he did when he came to Yorkton was to make lime. They

brought limestones, he bought the rock, and dad said they brought it in by horses, of course. And then he brought wood from, I think he said the Beaver Hills to power the lime kiln. And then after he did the lime kiln, he built a brick plant.

Dick DeRyk

So JJ Smith used his own bricks to build his own grist mill.

Carmen Smith

Yes, right. And he donated the bricks, I believe, for the church and some other buildings around Yorkton.

Dick DeRyk

That would have been what was then the Methodist church downtown, which is still there.

Carmen Smith

Because they were Methodists.

Dick DeRyk

Why did he build the mill?

Carmen Smith

He had approximately 600 acres of land at that time, but mostly he raised cattle, but he had a thrashing machine and many teams of horses. So the natural thing for him to do was to build the mill, because the mill at the old site was not running. At that time, I guess it was in disrepair. That's why I think he built the mill was because he saw a need, and he knew the railway connection was coming because Tupper was in charge of those particular things because he was in government at that time. He had the bricks, he had all the mortar and that because he had a lime kiln, and he obviously had some great brick masons. It was well constructed.

Dick DeRyk

The JJ Smith mill had a granite millstone. Apparently, they had some experience, bad experience, with the millstone at the old mill on the original town site, and he went with granite.

Carmen Smith

My dad was quite emphatic about the fact that the grist mill had a sandstone wheel at the one that failed, and he said that was one of the reasons it failed because it couldn't grind the grain very well, it ended up with sand in it, and that was no good for flour. So they had a granite wheel in the mill originally, but when I talked to the boys in the mill in '89, they said the stone was gone when they acquired it. A lot of the machinery came from Ontario and some from Liverpool. And Dr. John's family in England were millers. JJ always, must have had connections in England.

Dick DeRyk

When we think about powering a mill back in those days, we've seen pictures, we think of mills being located on streams, and the water provides the power. Obviously, there was no stream anywhere close to the new mill. How was the power provided?

Carmen Smith

There was no power inside the mill at that time. Came out of the mill's wall, and he would park his thrashing machine there and power it there.

Dick DeRyk

How was business done in those days? Cash, no credit cards, no debit cards, obviously.

Carmen Smith

How did they settle up? It was a barter system, I think, a lot of barter systems. And a lot of the deals were a handshake. And my grandfather was great at that. That was his downfall. I have a friend in Barriere in later years, they took grain to that mill and had it processed, took some home, and the mill kept the rest.

Dick DeRyk

What were your father's recollections of his life in Yorkton? He left at the age of 16. He was here during his youth and teenage years.

Carmen Smith

It was great. He had a bunch of relatives. You know, Charles Henry had a lot of kids, he went to school with my dad and McFarlines and Hopkins. They're all relatives. If you look at the lists of the Yorkton schools, whatnot, you can see where my dad is on there and attended school. And the funniest thing is that they must have had the same English teacher because they all had the same handwriting. The letters we have from the First World War and whatnot, same handwriting as my father.

Dick DeRyk

You said JJ did business on a handshake, and that proved to be his downfall. What exactly happened? Why did the family leave?

Carmen Smith

After a fire in his store, he opened the safe too soon, and records of his receivables caught fire and burnt. J. Allen Smith, son of Morris, said J.J. had considerable money on the books and receivables, as they did a lot of bargaining at that time. According to the story, J.J. overheard a conversation in the grist mill by his Lodge brother, who said, Tough luck, we don't need to pay him. So he went out and sold the mill to Levi Beck, a good friend. The Ukrainians and the Doukhobors heard what the Lodge brothers had in mind. They had a meeting and said that they knew how much they owed JJ and would do their best to pay him, and they did. They shamed some of his Lodge brothers to do the same. However, my dad, Gilbert, said that his dad could not live with these people every day, knowing that they owed him money. To everybody's surprise, he started liquidating everything he owned and took the family and moved west. JJ's brother William Thomas also did the same and moved to the U.S.

My dad left Yorkton with all the family to head west. Dad was 16, his older brother was 19, his other brother was 18, and my Aunt Grace was six years old. My dad said that the money was sewn in the boys' underwear. When they left Yorkton, they sewed all the money in the boys' underwear. You know, the banking system wasn't that great. Uncle Alan got sick on the trip and they stopped in counts and ended up staying, as the doctors said Uncle Alan's symptoms would not get worse.

They were headed to Vancouver to buy land. So they headed up in North Thompson Valley and settled in the Chinook Cove, Darfield area and purchased roughly 1,200 acres of timber-covered land. They eventually broke that land, some of it. J.J.'s sons, Gilbert, Alan and Morris, and daughter Grace all grew up until J.J.'s death in 1924. The Gilbert Smith family still own 160 acres of that original land in Darfield. I live approximately 15 minutes from their old homestead on 400 acres of land in Barriere, BC. My dad is the only one who remained in the North Thompson Valley and his business that produced cedar poles, mine props, and railway ties, and he eventually founded Gilbert Smith Forest Products Limited in 1955 with his sons Terry, Bob, Ted, and myself.

Dick DeRyk

Besides all the things we've talked about, you have one more famous connection to Yorkton. A famous historical event in Yorkton.

Carmen Smith

My great-aunt Adela Smith married in 1874 to Cosmo McFarline. They had their first white child born in Yorkton. It was York Colony in May 7, 1884. Lily McFarline, that was her name.

Dick DeRyk

That was then. Since then, many changes have taken place. As Carmen mentioned, in 1902, Levi Beck bought the mill from J.J. Smith when the family left town. Then in 1936, the Yorkton Milling Company was established, local owners who purchased the mill from Levi. And in 1944, that group was made smaller when Keith Hallett, Charles Peaker, and Tom Jepson bought out their partners. It appears that by 1947, ownership had changed again, and it involved primarily Keith Hallett and his son Gordon.

Dick DeRyk

In 1973, milling flour ceased due to lack of customers, Wheat Board regulation, and on a practical level, the retirement of the miller who was working at the mill. It sat empty for about 10 years. In 1983, it was purchased by William Kent of Kent Flour Mill of Virden, Manitoba, but they gave it a try, it didn't work out, and they left in 1989. Shortly after, someone by the name of Hubert Lacoste purchased the mill with the intent to begin organic milling. Again, Wheat Board regulations got in the way, and that effort was discontinued.

In 1997, Yorkton Flour Mill was designated as a municipal heritage property by the City of Yorkton. And a Save The Mill group became active. The problem, of course, was that they didn't own the mill. The city didn't own the mill. So without the cooperation of the owners at the time, very little could be done.

It was sold again in 2003 to an investor who owned a mill in Viscount and was primarily interested in some of the equipment. And in 2010, the city became the owner because of outstanding taxes. Carol Bolt, a longtime resident of Yorkton and a former elementary school teacher, was among the first people who were involved in the effort to save the mill.

Carol, when were you first involved with the mill committee? And what prompted that involvement?

Carol Bolt

I was involved right from the very beginning. And the reason I was involved was because I saw the old city hall get torn down. And it was a beautiful building. There was no reason to rip it down. And then I saw the Balmoral Hotel go up in flames under some mysterious circumstances. And then the mill was ready to be ripped down. So I thought, well, I just can't let this happen. So there was a notice in the paper from the city saying, and I believe this is what happened, they wanted to remove the municipal heritage designation from the mill so they could demolish it. But they had to notify people that they were going to remove this designation. So they put the ad in the paper and said, come to a council meeting if you would like to speak to this. So I went. There were three of us who spoke. There was Sharon Pickup, Sheila Harris, and I. And Gene Denischuk was there with Sheila Harris, but he did not speak. There were only three of us there who spoke in defense of the mill. And the city council said, Well, okay, how about if you get a committee together and we'll talk about it?

Carol Bolt

So Sheila, who had been working on this for years and years and years and had extensive information about mills all over the place and heritage designations and how to preserve stuff and grants and all this kind of thing, she set up the committee. So she was the president, I was the secretary, Glenn Wiseman was the treasurer, and Barry Sharpe, Dale Cherry, Vern Brown, Keith Kyle, Kevin Pickup, Glenn Wiseman, David Harris, I think, and Alan Bailey. Other people were advisors, Gene Denischuk who had extensive photos and he knew a lot of the history; Jim Husiak who's the techie person, and Terri Prince, who was the city historian. They didn't attend meetings, but they were peripheral to the committee. We met at the old Army Navy Air Force Club on Broadway, which is now a skin care place and financial place. We'd meet there at 9:30 in the morning on whatever day. Barry Sharpe was a member of that club, and he, I don't know, he had a key or something, so we could get in there and have our meetings.

Dick DeRyk

And that building has historical value as well.

Carol Bolt

Yes, it does. It absolutely does. So the city had taken ownership of the mill because whoever had it defaulted on taxes or whatever, and the city did not want to have anything to do with the mill. They wanted to rip it down, just raze it to the ground. So we tried to figure out how to save it, and we eventually got the city to decide not to rip it down, although the elevator and all the surrounding buildings were destroyed, which should not have happened. It should have been left intact. Well, some of the outbuildings maybe could have gone, but the elevator should have stayed for sure. It would have been a really good historical site. We worked on that for a long time, and that's how that's how it started.

Dick DeRyk

Were you encouraged by the support of the people who you know got involved with the committee, or were there frustrations? Because it took a while before anything started to happen.

Carol Bolt

Oh, yeah. The main stumbling block was money raising. That just didn't happen. We needed money, and there was lots of going round and round in circles saying, Well, we need to do this, we

need to do this, but it never got done. Okay, when Larry Pearen turned up, that's when things took off. Sheila was the driving force behind this. If it hadn't been for her, that mill would be gone. She lived really close to the mill and saw it every day, of course. And her grandchildren actually referred to it as Grandma's mill.

Dick DeRyk

So Sheila, of course, passed away just pretty recently.

Carol Bolt

Yes, she did. Anyway, the city could see absolutely no historical value in that building. Alan Bailey made a really good comment, which is really funny. First of all, I have to explain to you what blue plaques are. They have them in England and they put them on buildings of historical significance, like Florence Nightingale was born here, Charles Dickens wrote Bleak House here, Cary Grant lived here in Bristol. I just read about that this morning. Anyway, Alan Bailey said the way things are going with the historical buildings, we're gonna have to put a blue plaque on Walmart because it's gonna be the oldest building left. I thought that was just absolutely wonderful. Yes, you're right, Alan.

Dick DeRyk

So how long were you involved? Did you stay involved? You're still involved?

Carol Bolt

No, I'm not still involved. I became president for a year or two, and then Vern Brown took it on for a really long time, and Larry has just become the new president.

Dick DeRyk

In retrospect, was it worth the effort? Are you pleased with what's happened?

Carol Bolt

Oh, I'm absolutely shocked at how well it's doing. I can't believe all this stuff is happening. I never thought it would open to the public. I really didn't. I never thought it would get that far.

Dick DeRyk

And the story continues from there as we talk to Larry Pearen, who's been involved with this process for many years and who is now the president of the Yorkton Brick Mill Heritage Society Incorporated.

Dick DeRyk

Larry, when the brick flour mill, as it stands now, corner of Beck and Livingston, I remember 20, 30 years ago it was considered by most people to be a bit of a derelict building. It hadn't been used, the windows were smashed in, you know, it didn't look all that great. But obviously a lot has changed. But going back to those days, and you were on city council, and I was on city council for a period of that, there was a lot of skepticism. People wondering, you know, is this thing worth saving? And the effort is now being made to save it. What is your recollection of back in those days and some of the discussions that took place at city council and in the community about the value of that building and specifically the historical value?

Larry Pearen

Well, I think when it was designated a municipal heritage property in 1997, that kind of established its importance in the community. The frustration was that a group of volunteers led by Sheila Harris and Sharon Pickup, Carol Bolt, had done several presentations to the WDM Thresherman's group. But the challenge with the city when they came back, was the city didn't own the property, it was privately owned. So there was no way they could interfere with that until they got it. Interestingly enough, when Kent Flour Mill pulled out, then they thought, well, that would be a chance. And then a Hubert Lacoste purchased it to make it an organic mill. But he ran out of steam, and with the Wheat Board regulations and things, he was then able to continue. So then it was like another situation where ownership is changing and it sat vacant for a while with the credit union at the time being the financial group behind it. So then a person by the name of Rob Keller from Viscount came and wanted to buy a piece of the mill, which was the pellet machine, and apparently he offered \$40,000 for it. And Russ Korol, who was at the credit union at the time, who's handling the account, says you can have the whole thing for \$40,000. So he was quite excited. So now he has a pellet machine he wants, he's gonna move it, and he has now this building or group of buildings. The challenge with that was he ended up having health problems, cancer, and then died. And his estate did not want it. So they defaulted on taxes and things, and then that's when it fell back to the city.

Larry Pearen

And then when the city had it, then it was a chance to do something with it. So with Sheila and Sharon and Carol, the committee grew with Dale Cherry, Alan Bailey, Dave Farrell, Jim Husiak, and Paula Maier. And they went to council and asked if it was possible for them to take it over. And from my recollection, council said they would give them one year to come back with a plan and say, okay, if you're going to do that, you've got one year to fundraise. Now, the challenge with all this was there had been an engineer's report that said the building could go either way. If it was going to be reused for something or usable, it would have to have major work done to it. And the engineer at that time said he didn't think it was worth the time and effort to do that. It was too far gone. So the committee, through a SaskHeritage Foundation grant, hired another company, another engineer who was involved with restoration and structural engineers of heritage properties. And he did a report. And his report was the opposite, it's worthy of being saved. And it's important to save this because it's such a historical site, one of the last flour mills and the only brick constructed flour mill in western Canada. So, yes.

Dick DeRyk

And one of the oldest buildings still remaining in Yorkton.

Larry Pearen

So it's pretty important to save that. Without SaskHeritage 50 cent dollars supporting us through all these grant applications, it wouldn't have happened because you're spending \$20,000 on an engineer's report. Well, you can't raise \$20,000 selling hot dogs and hamburgers. So with that, then they could come back and say, well, yeah, this is worthy of being saved. And that's when Brad Taylor from J.C. Kenyon Engineering, who's a structural engineer, and he was actually on the SaskHeritage Foundation board at one time. So he became involved with the project way back in 2010. And the neat thing is, as we move this forward into phase two, a new building, he is the structural engineer that's working with the architect. He's been involved from day one and he's

been very supportive. And he understands heritage properties and the value of them. And that's the biggest part.

Dick DeRyk

Even though somebody said, or an engineer said it's worth preserving. I'm guessing that that was not a unanimous kind of feeling among either council or the community at large, because it didn't look like something that might be worth saving.

Larry Pearen

Conversation was it's going to cost the city a lot of money to get rid of this. It was an eyesore. And it's not that far from downtown. So again, it was a distraction. It was a negative. So council was kind of lukewarm to the idea of saving it. And then a few of us identified the value of it with the new engineers report. There was a discussion on council that we remove the municipal heritage status, because you couldn't touch the building until that was removed. So that was the biggest discussion and controversy. And it came out that it was not supported by council to remove the heritage status. So that was the first hurdle. And then once we knew that was happening, it was fairly easy to get five of the seven supporting the idea of, well, we can do something with this, and let's give that committee a chance to fundraise and come back with a plan. And they did. I mean, their plan was to stabilize it, and it took off. It's interesting to see how people got also got involved in the site. Randy Holfeld was involved and Stu McFadden, and they went through the building. And yeah, there's some positive things here. So there was some support from city administration behind the scenes as well. And you don't have to just knock things down. It does have historical value for the city.

Dick DeRyk

There were also some misconceptions in the community because I think the common assumption was that this was an empty building, which obviously it wasn't because there's still equipment in it that is now being used for showing people how flour milling was done, you know, at that time. But certainly my initial impression at the time when these discussions were going on was this is just a shell of a building, but it isn't.

Larry Pearen

No, it's full of all the original equipment from 1898 going forward. There was some modernizing taking place, like dust collection. It went from exterior engine drive shaft to electric motors. So those are new things. But the mill, the roller mills and all the configuration of pipes and things is all there from the original. All the cup shafts and things, it would take the grain up when gravity would bring it down through the pipes into the sifters and then go down, back and forth, up and down six times to get the flour at the end. It's all there. The other sad thing was happening, we were making decisions and not being allowed to be in the building. It was unsafe for anybody to be in. So, how can you determine if it's worthy of being safe?

Dick DeRyk

There was a shed, an annex to the east of it, and there was obviously the elevator right along the rail tracks. Those were taken down by the city, I believe, when it took ownership. Would those have had any value today, or was that the thing that needed to be done?

Larry Pearen

When the city inherited through back taxes and things, and the Credit union at the time says, take it, we don't want it. The sadness was it was too far gone to save the wooden structures. So in the late 1940s, when the elevator was involved, the second elevator and the annexes and things. So you had an annex, you had a building attached to the front for loading trucks, they had a little office and bulk food store on the north side, and then a very large storage area on the east side. All those buildings, because they were all wooden construction, and because of the rodents and other things, they came down. And I know at Council, some of us were lobbying to say, well, it's going to cost \$100,000. We were getting some estimates of taking it down. Why not take that \$100,000 and invest it into it? And no, but we couldn't get that, couldn't get that passed. So I think the number was \$108,000 and change to decommission and demolish all those wooden structures and remove it. And so all that's remaining then was the old brick flour mill. A lot of people, as we talked going forward from those days, think it's a brick-producing mill when it should have been brick-constructed flour mill.

Dick DeRyk

It's a flour mill, it's not a place that produces bricks. The bricks were made over on Betts Avenue, Myrtle Avenue in that area. I remember going into that annex because at one point the manager for Kent Flour Mills, I think, at the time, was a fellow by the name of Ben Kowal, who was also a member of City Council. And I was in the newspaper business, and when I needed to talk to Ben, I went to the flour mill. I remember it from those days. I remember, as we all do, you know, just you know looking like it was ready for the wrecker's ball. And that would have been in the 80s and 1990s. And as you said, it looked like a bit of an eyesore. But obviously that has changed because the heritage society, the roof, the windows, the brick, you know, and all the repairs that have been done. I think you dug out around the foundations and did repairs there. What's been spent on that over the years?

Larry Pearen

\$350,000. And I have to again thank SaskHeritage Foundation because probably about \$85,000 has come from that. But because of all these grants, and we have one currently, it was doing the replugging of the bricks of the east wall. The wall looks amazing. It almost embarrasses us to get some more grants for the other walls because we had the repairs done a couple of years ago, and all the windows and things, all the structural damage was because man had created problems. The mason working in the building was from England, trained and had a crew of three or four, by hand, and he says the walls are three and four layers thick. This building, with the equipment rattling and shaking and trains going by, would have stood another hundred years, but the people who owned it over the years would change a window or change a door or knock something down, and that weakened the structure of the building. That's what caused the cracks. It was man, not the building.

Larry Pearen

We're so pleased with the detail of the repairs that have been done, and that's part of your SaskHeritage grant. You have to get it back to original as much as possible. So the excitement was those walls are going to be there for another 100 years just because the quality of the work. When you went through, they didn't just cosmetically fix the brick that was cracked on the third outside wall. They went through all three walls. So it was fascinating to see that. And with their scaffolding and things, every brick was hauled up by pail, by hand. No conveyors, no forklifts, nothing like

that. So they handled every piece of brick or stone that went into that. They also did the stone foundation. Like it's totally amazing how much labor and love, because it's hard work. You're chiseling and removing things.

Dick DeRyk

So obviously, when JJ Smith built the thing, he knew what he was doing because a simple brick structure without that kind of solid walls would never be standing today.

Larry Pearen

In some ways, he was ahead of his time because many mills, well, they were all built of wood. And because of grain dust and so on, there was fires. They were all, so many of them burnt to the ground. So here's a guy who is a farmer who has a brick plant, a merchant says, Well, let's build it out of brick. It's like the three little pigs, you know, straw or wood. No, let's do it out of brick. So here it is, 125 years this year, 2023, and it's still standing.

Dick DeRyk

You mentioned the branch that the organization has applied for and received, but now that we're post-COVID, you're back into doing events as well for fundraising purposes, the road rally, the dinner. What's coming up over the next year or so through the summer and into the fall as far as fundraising for the organization?

Larry Pearen

Part of the vision of the group was to have a reason to come to the mill. So it made sense if you had different events, different opportunities, it would attract people to visit the mill. Because a static building, even with machinery, you're going to come once and that's kind of it. One of my initial activities was to build historic signs with a \$25,000 grant from YBID. And I felt at the time it was important to have First Nation representation. We built the structure, found pictures with Terry Prince and others, archives. I reached out to the tribal council to see if they would help me with the text of those panels, I guess reaffirming they were the right pictures to tell Treaty 4 story and so on. And then they suggest I talk to the Saskatchewan Treaty Commissioner. She had some graduate students working for her, and they got really excited. And I was totally amazed of all the wording on those two eight by eight aluminum signs. They changed about six words. I was kind of proud that we were thinking openly enough to tell it kind of a nurse story. And then she got involved. She came down with the ribbon cutting, it was part of it. I gave a donation, and this is part of reconciliation. She said, You're doing it. This is action. And I was surprised that this is the first tangible First Nation signage. They had properties, but there is nothing part of the community to say, yeah, we're part of the community. I'm really pleased that we did it that way first because they were here first, and we're just continuing on that history. It was so important to include them.

Dick DeRyk

The incorporation of the Historical Society, which is a not-for-profit incorporated organization, took place late in 2011. You are at this point the owners of the property. You have a campaign going and are still accepting donations of all sorts for various purposes. Are the donations tax deductible? Because to a lot of people, that's a pretty important question. If I make a donation, do I get a tax benefit out of it?

Larry Pearen

As of April this year, we received our CRA tax designation. So now we can give receipts for donations. We don't have to have them go through the city. The city of Yorkton was on side. Number one, they wanted to dispose of the building. So it would be the committee's responsibility for a number of reasons. Liability with insurance, because it was a vacant building, it would affect their insurance premiums. And so they didn't want to insure it. And then if something happened and somebody got hurt, they're still responsible. And the second thing is they felt it would be to our advantage for fundraising. It's not a city property. Why is this committee raising hundreds of thousands of dollars repairing a city building?

Dick DeRyk

People who pay taxes to the city are a little reluctant to you know throw in a whole lot of extra money, I'm assuming.

Larry Pearen

So instantly, that helped us opening those doors. And then the third thing was there's a huge tender process with the city if you're doing any expenditures over, I think, \$50,000 or something. And we were doing that at the time. So it was felt that we could encourage subcontractor donations and things if it was done through a committee versus through the city policies. It's really complicated. Plus, they would have been making decisions of who could do work, and we felt we were closer to the front line to the ground to connect with some of these. And we had several very generous subtrades step up and help from hauling topsoil to electrical. I mean, it was a very good discount of prices with the structural work. We've had three different construction companies in Yorkton working on the project over the 10, 12 years kind of thing. So, I mean, those are all positive. So, yes, we took ownership. There was discussion. Do you want to do this? So we bought it for a dollar. I was lucky guy to present the dollar to the city manager and mayor, and it's allowed us to do more flexible things looking forward.

Yorkton Stories is presented by



Supporting sponsors

MICCAR Group of Companies

