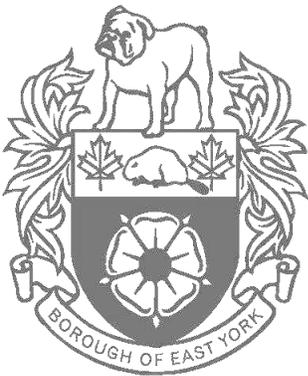


# *East York Tidbits*

*Stories About East York Presented by the East York Historical Society*

## **East York in the Great Depression: The Formation of the East York Workers Association**

No community in our nation escaped the economic and social strife of the great depression. Many schemes and dreams were put forward by well-meaning government and civic leaders to escape the grip of the depression or at least loosen its icy hold on families.



The fledging East York Township, who only 5 years before the depression hit in 1929, sought and gained independence from York Township to better serve its citizens, faced enormous economic and social challenges. What a predicament for East York's leaders; wanting to stand on your own two feet, the province grants your wish for independence to better serve the needs of your citizens, and a short 5 years later the bottom falls out of not only of your community, but the entire nation.

With a population of around 30,000, it's fair to characterise East York in the 1920s and 30s as a less than affluent municipality, with a mix of urban and rural lands requiring services and a weak industrial tax base. It was settled by new comers to the nation, mostly of British stock. The families were young and working class with little money. Some built their own homes, toiling year after year and plank by plank as their meagre wages would allow them to purchase a little more building material.

It's no surprise, therefore, that the depression hit East York hard. For instance, in January 1930, about 2% or 550 persons in East York were on relief. At its peak in February 1935, 16,700 persons were on relief, representing a staggering 45% of the Township's population. By 1933 the tax arrears in the Township reached \$1.1 million, the second highest of the 15 largest municipalities in the province. Only Windsor had a higher percentage of tax defaulters. That same year, despite cutting all Township employees salaries by 10%, East York

Council could no longer meet its financial commitments, and it placed itself under the control of the province. Incidentally, by late 1941 only 267 persons, representing less than 1 percent of the Township's population, were on relief.

One strange scheme to cut costs during the depression encouraged the unemployed and their families to leave the Township and go "back to the land" to farm. The provincial government sponsored the scheme. The tract of land selected for East Yorkers to farm was near Cochrane, between Sudbury and Moose Factory. In 1933 about 25 families decided to face the challenge of farming in the wilds of northern Ontario. For most who took the challenge, the experience of farming the Shield was a disaster and they quickly returned to the Township.

With such dreadful economic misfortune as a backdrop, it's no wonder that in March 1931 about 200 people met in a local school to discuss solutions to the Township's unemployment problem. A few months later, in June the East York Workers Association was formed.

No one is sure of the initial roots of the East York Workers Association. Some have suggested it was men who met at the Township's welfare office to pick up their welfare vouchers who decided to organise. Others believe the Workers Association had its roots in the Township's ratepayers associations, who had the foundations of organisation with presidents, secretaries, treasurers and essential to any organisation, a pool of members. Perhaps it was a combination of both that brought people with seemingly diverse views together for a period of time to face a common challenge.

**Prepared by John Michailidis  
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**The East York Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and sharing information about East York's rich past. The Society meets 5 times a year usually on the last Tuesday in January, March, May, September and November.**

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