

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Behind the White Fence

By Jacqueline Stuart

One day in February 1919, the news spread around Town that the working day at Collis Leather ? Aurora's second largest employer, located on Tyler Street ? had been reduced from ten hours to nine, with no reduction in pay.

The time traveller was a bit cynical about this apparent generosity on the part of president Sidney M. Collis.

The tannery (which converted animal skins to leather) was by no means the first industry in the country to reduce workers' hours and in many cases production had actually increased. And such a move was probably wise at a time when there was a good deal of labour unrest: the Winnipeg General Strike was just around the corner.

The tannery's late founder, Sidney Collis's older brother Walter, had previously worked at the Davis tannery in King Township. There he had introduced the use of chrome, replacing the tree bark traditionally used in tanning. Chrome reduced to just one day what had been a month-long stage in the process.

The benefit to tanneries was immediately obvious but the long-term harmful effect on people and the environment took longer to be recognized. In the early years of Collis Leather (which opened in 1912) the wastes were simply dumped into the stream which ran through the property.

Spurred by a growing understanding of pollution and by the constant complaints from residents, steps began to be taken to treat the tannery's wastes.

A treatment plant, settlement lagoons, and a pond were installed. In the hot summers the odorous solids in the pond, including animal hair and flesh, might build up to ten inches in depth and were sturdy enough to walk on.

One air-borne chemical tended to turn the white paint on nearby houses black: repainting was done at the expense of the tannery. Over time the active pollution problems were dealt with.

The tannery was purchased by Canada Packers early in 1936. Meat packers and tanneries ? a convenient combination.

Quite stylish additions were made to the original brick building, including some designed by architect William Fleury, descended from the Aurora family famous for its ploughs. But in time Collis, like most tanneries in Canada, was defeated by foreign competition and the use of synthetics. The tannery closed in March of 1988, costing just over one hundred employees their jobs. After Collis closed the various spaces in the plant were for many years rented to different businesses, but in 2013 the owners (by then Maple Leaf Foods) sold the site.

The time traveller was able to visit the building about that time: he saw some spooky black pits at the lowest level, acres of wood flooring on an upper floor, and a bright pink lunchroom/auditorium.

The new owners began the long process of preparing the brownfield site for residential development.

All structures disappeared and mountains of gravelly soil moved in and out. Today neat white boarding lines the Tyler Street frontage and in due course there will be no sign of this site's industrial past.

Or perhaps there will be an actual sign (as the time traveller would hope): a plaque informing the passerby of the importance of Collis Leather in Aurora's history.