

## Deindustrialization as Public History: An Exhibition at the Manitoba Museum

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### Article abstract

The mass settlement and industrialization of southern Manitoba that began in the 1870s, and the reversal of much of this development in the twentieth century, is a major theme of the newest permanent gallery at the Manitoba Museum. This paper examines this history of industrial activity and deindustrialization and explores how these processes have been interpreted in the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery. Three distinct industries are considered: the Leary Brick Works in Roseisle, the Manitoba Glass Company of Beausejour, and Mary Maxim Limited, a mail-order woollens company that began in the village of Sifton.

# ***Deindustrialization as Public History: An Exhibition at the Manitoba Museum***

***Sharon Reilly***

## ***Abstract***

***The mass settlement and industrialization of southern Manitoba that began in the 1870s, and the reversal of much of this development in the twentieth century, is a major theme of the newest permanent gallery at the Manitoba Museum.<sup>1</sup> This paper examines this history of industrial activity and deindustrialization and explores how these processes have been interpreted in the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery. Three distinct industries are considered: the Leary Brick Works in Roseisle, the Manitoba Glass Company of Beausejour, and Mary Maxim Limited, a mail-order woollens company that began in the village of Sifton.***

## ***Résumé***

***La forte colonisation et l'industrialisation massive du sud du Manitoba à partir des années 1870, et le recul d'une grande partie de ce développement au cours du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, est l'un des principaux thèmes de la plus récente exposition permanente du Manitoba Museum.<sup>1</sup> Le présent article étudie cette industrialisation et désindustrialisation et analyse comment ces processus ont été interprétés dans la salle des forêts-parcs/forêts mixtes. Trois industries distinctes sont étudiées : la Leary Brickworks de Roseisle, la Manitoba Glass Company de Beausejour et Mary Maxim, une entreprise de vente par correspondance de lainages qui a vu le jour dans le village de Sifton.***

## ***Background***

A drive through southern Manitoba today reveals little of the bustle of activity that once characterized this region. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tens of thousands of immigrants made their way into the area and established hundreds of fledgling communities here. After a brief period of prosperity, however, this rapid growth ended and the economy entered a long decline. Today sparsely populated farmlands, littered with the shells of old homesteads, spread out as far as the eye can see. The railroad tracks that once linked communities and fostered small industries often have been torn up, and many towns have disappeared or been reduced to little more than an intersection.

The development of the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery presented an opportunity to interpret this dimension of the province's history at the Manitoba Museum. Originally called the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the institution was planned in the 1960s to interpret the natural and human history of the province. A series of permanent galleries was envisioned, based on the biomes of the region: the Arctic/Sub-Arctic, the Boreal Forest, the Grasslands, and the Parklands/Mixed Woods.

The history of immigration to Manitoba is told, in part, in the Grasslands Gallery. But southern Manitoba has a surprisingly

diverse landscape. Although best known for its tall grass prairie, much of the region comprises rolling parklands, mixed-woods forests, marshes, rivers, lakes, and streams. Abundant glacial deposits also are found here. Although not as fertile as the prairie, this area also attracted large numbers of homesteaders. The natural environment provided a rich resource base for industrial activity, and a tremendous economic expansion followed the mass settlement of the region.

By 1900 a huge demand had developed for building materials of all kinds. Sawmills, lumberyards, gravel pits, quarries, and brickworks sprang up to meet this need. As farms expanded, small dairies processed milk for distribution and made cheese, butter, and cream. Grain elevators, gristmills, abattoirs, woollen mills, and other industries emerged to handle agricultural products. Furniture makers and manufacturers of household goods were established, and drugstores, bakeries, and other shops opened to meet the needs of the growing population.

Expanding road and rail transportation networks fostered this fledgling economy and spurred the growth of an agrarian industrial economy. By the 1910s, local businesses were beginning to compete in regional and international markets. In the decades that followed, however, these companies found it increasingly difficult to compete with larger outside concerns, even for local markets. As transportation and communications networks became better integrated, many local businesses were forced to close their doors or to merge with larger corporations from outside the region. Towns that only a decade earlier predicted growth and prosperity now often faced stagnation. Some simply disappeared.

This almost forgotten part of Manitoba's history was important to include in the museum's new gallery. In developing the theme of industrialization and deindustrialization in southern Manitoba, the challenge was to develop an artifact-rich exhibition that spoke to diverse public audiences and to do so in a limited space that came at the end of a much larger, multidisciplinary gallery.<sup>2</sup> Planning began early, allowing time to involve the public in research and collections development to support the planned exhibits. Primary, secondary, and oral history research were undertaken; field trips were made to parklands communities; and artifacts and historical photographs were selected as the cornerstones upon which to build each story. Interviews were conducted with artifact donors and others who had experienced the events to be portrayed in the displays. Wherever possible, exhibits were designed to be interactive, and to be presented in several layers so that visitors looking for further information could find more in a pull-out panel or drawer, a "curatorial notebook," an audio clip, or a computer kiosk. Photographs and information about the men, women, and children whose lives were being portrayed was included to help bring this history alive for visitors.

The industries selected to illustrate the history of industrialization and deindustrialization were chosen for a number of reasons. Each had a rich material history that, once collected, begged



Rob Barrow

*The museum's Mary Maxim Company exhibit features a Spinwell wool carder and spinning machine, invented in Sifton in the 1930s, and a selection of the famous Mary Maxim patterns and sweaters that emerged as the woollen industry grew in the 1950s.*

interpretation in a museum exhibit. An unusual looking spinning wheel, marked "Spin-Well Manufacturing Co., Sifton, Manitoba / Patent Pending"; a finely crafted glass chain and a collection of crudely made, green glass beverage bottles, all from Beausejour; and stories of an extant beehive kiln tucked away in the hills of the Pembina Valley served as a starting point. Research demonstrated that each of the three industries had a significant cultural, economic, and physical impact on the region. Together, they represented a self-reliant, diversified rural economy that characterized the early period of settlement in the region and demonstrated the process of industrialization and deindustrialization. Yet these industries had received scant attention from historians, and despite community efforts to preserve their histories, their existence gradually was being erased from living memory and from the landscape. Interpretation in the museum gallery would ensure that this history was not forgotten.

### ***The Brick Industry***

The Leary Brick Works, located 124 kilometres southwest of Winnipeg, near present-day Roseisle, was in many ways typical

of the dozens of small brick companies that flourished briefly in rural Manitoba. John George Leary was among a number of Irish Protestants who immigrated to Manitoba from Ireland in the early 1880s and established homes along the Boyne River in the Pembina Valley. Part of the legacy of this group was the perpetuation of the Loyal Orange Lodge in Manitoba. Leary founded the brickworks in 1900 as the Boyne Valley Brick Company. He also spent considerable time in Winnipeg, employed as an accountant and auditor for Premier Rodmond P. Roblin, and became well connected to members of the city's business and political elite.<sup>3</sup>

The Boyne Valley Brick Company prospered during its first few years, producing good quality bricks and selling each summer's output for local construction. Many buildings constructed of Leary brick still stand today. Like other brick factories in the region, Leary's provided seasonal employment for nearby farmers and for unemployed labourers. Women also worked in the industry, maintaining the bunkhouses provided for the labourers, keeping vegetable gardens, and working as cooks. Children living around the site sometimes were employed as well, and usually given the task of turning the wet bricks to facilitate drying. Oral histories



The Manitoba Museum

***Workers at the Marion Street Brick Yards, St. Boniface, Manitoba, 1913. Hundreds of workers were employed each season at brick factories across southern Manitoba. This group includes 12-year-old Julia Candale (#3), and Arsene Candale (#8), who may have been her father.***

from brick sites in the province recount children playing with marbles rolled from the clay and sometimes getting into trouble for slinging wet mud at one another near the brick moulds, which had to be kept clean and dry.

Although the early years at Leary's were busy ones, the demand for brick gradually dwindled. Crop failures and reduced immigration combined to slow the economy and decrease the demand for housing, while the growing popularity of frame construction for houses also curtailed brick sales. In an effort to remain solvent, Leary re-financed the brickworks as the Dominion Press Brick Company with a number of new Winnipeg-based partners, including Premier Roblin. This arrangement lasted until 1910, when Leary regained control of the operation. He continued to run the factory with two of his sons until 1917 but, at this point, falling demand and a wartime shortage of labour forced the company to shut down.

The brickyard remained closed until 1947, when George's son William Leary refurbished the plant and once again began

production. Although the first "burn" was successful, it proved difficult to compete with the centralized production and distribution facilities that by this time dominated the industry. William's sudden death in 1951 resulted in the closure of the yard. It was purchased in 1962 by E. Tallman of Winnipeg, but the new owner's one attempt to produce bricks failed and the property back was sold back to the Leary family.

In planning for interpretation of the brick industry, museum staff initially hoped to reproduce the Leary brickworks and the many activities carried on at the site, as a miniature diorama. Part way into the project, however, financial constraints intervened and a new interpretive approach had to be found. Fortunately, by this time, a fascinating array of artifacts and photographs from the brick-making industry had been collected. A rare brick cart, discovered inside the Leary kiln, served as the centrepiece of the display and represented the labour-intensive nature of the work. Bricks stamped with the names of as many different companies as could be found, and representing the many different types of decorative and building brick made in the region, were placed



around the cart. A six-brick, wooden brick mould; a fourteen-kilogram die, used to stamp the "frog" at the centre of each brick with the maker's mark; a miniature brick sample used by a travelling salesman; and a bricklayer's trowel, each from a different company—all reflected the many aspects of the brick industry. Interpretive text, in English and French, provides background information about the brick industry and describes the artifacts and photographs displayed, while a series of pullout panels below the case provides additional information and archival photographs.

The participation of women and children in brick-making was illustrated with several photographs of workers. One of these, dated 1913, shows a group of brick-makers at the Marion Street Brick Yards in St. Boniface, now a part of Winnipeg. The workers included twelve-year-old Julia Candale and Arsene Candale, who may have been her father. It is possible that young Julia worked as a cook's assistant to the woman standing beside her, but the dirtiness of the girl's clothing suggests she worked alongside Arsene in the brickyard. This photo, and a handful of clay marbles, stand in sharp contrast to a box of turn-of-the-century toy bricks meant for wealthier children placed nearby. An illustration on the box shows a middle-class couple and their children in their home playing with the toy bricks.

### ***The Manitoba Glass Factory***

In August 1989 western Canada's first glass container factory was commemorated at the Manitoba Glass Works Historic Site in Beausejour, Manitoba. Located forty-six kilometres northeast of Winnipeg, Beausejour once was a bustling industrial community at whose centre was the glass factory.

Operating from 1906 to 1912, the Manitoba Glass Company is an excellent example of the rapid growth of manufacturing during this period in southern Manitoba. Founded by German and Polish immigrants, it also demonstrates the important contribution made by European immigrants as investors and craftsmen to the industrial development of western Canada. At its peak, the Manitoba Glass Factory employed over three hundred and fifty men and boys and produced hundreds of thousands of bottles for regional and distant markets. The glassworks spurred railway development and, for a few short years, created a demand in the community for accommodation and for goods and services of all kinds. The factory's demise in the face of technological change in 1912 also reflects the swift deindustrialization of the area and the growing concentration of industrial production in central Canada.

The availability of a large deposit of sand, and a local Polish settler's knowledge of glass-making techniques, led to the founding of the Manitoba Glass Company by German immigrant Joseph Keilbach in 1906. By the January 1907 the glassworks was in full operation. Initially the factory employed only thirty men, including a core of highly skilled glass blowers recruited from Poland, and manufactured just one type and size of bottle. Soon, however, 20,000 beverage bottles were being made each week and a growing demand from the region's businesses prompted the owners to diversify into a much wider range of glassware.



***Exterior view of the Manitoba Glass Factory, Beausejour, Manitoba, ca. 1910.***

Production at the glass works was organized around "shops" or groups of workers that included three journeymen glass-blowers and three apprentices, boys ten to twelve years of age. A number of girls also were employed at the factory to place the tops on sealer jars.

For a time, Beausejour seemed destined for greatness, as hotels and other services sprang up to meet the demands of the growing population. However, even as the town grew, new methods of manufacturing were being adopted in the United States and central Canada to reduce the industry's dependence on skilled workers, speed production, and generate higher profits. In an effort to keep up with these changes the glass factory moved to eliminate the highly skilled Polish crafts workers and their traditional, hand-blown method of making glass. Cheaper and faster semi-automated bottle-manufacturing equipment and processes were adopted, and American glass-makers familiar with these techniques were recruited to work in Beausejour.

Despite these efforts, which included re-capitalizing the plant with new investors from Winnipeg, corporate mergers and increasing automation in the glass industry left the Manitoba factory ill-equipped to compete with larger concerns in central Canada. The Manitoba Glass Company failed when the Diamond Flint Company of Toronto and Montreal, which held the licence for the Owens automatic glass-making machine in Canada, purchased land to set up a rival glass factory nearby. Threatened with a price war it could not hope to win, the Manitoba Glass Company sold its land, factory, and equipment to Diamond Flint in March 1913. The new owners promptly closed the Beausejour plant and shipped all useful equipment to be used in its shops in Red Deer, Alberta. The collapse of the glassworks, Beausejour's most important manufacturing plant, slowed the town's growth for years into the future.

The interpretation of this history in the museum gallery was centred on the glass bottles produced at the factory. Little remained of the moulds or equipment used at the site. In the late 1970s, however, a group of local glass collectors had helped the museum to produce a temporary display of Beausejour glass and donated a number of pieces to the institution. In addition to a

variety of bottles, this collection included several “whimsies”—a glass chain and glass canes—made by the glass-blowers in their spare time to demonstrate their skill and to sell to earn extra cash. This collection, and a fascinating series of photographs from the glass factory taken by John Reifschneider, one of the American glass-blowers who arrived in Beausejour about 1910, became the basis for further research and collecting. Reifschneider also left behind an oral history interview and contemporary photograph from a visit to Winnipeg in 1973.

Research for the exhibit also included several visits with George Chopping, a Saskatchewan collector who spent months poring through the glass factory site searching for bottles, moulds, and other artifacts. Other important sources included an exhaustive report on the history of the factory prepared by staff of the Manitoba Historical Resources Branch, and information and photographs provided by members of the Manitoba Glass Works Historic Site, Inc.

As word about the museum's plans spread, additional artifacts were offered for display, including a ceremonial glass cane with an inscribed silver cap that was presented to Premier Rodmond Roblin at the official opening of the glassworks in 1906. This cane and several other whimsies were displayed effectively in a glass case with a backlit panel, with dozens of bottles in various shapes, sizes, and colours made to hold beer, wine, medicine, aerated water, milk, cream, ink, and fruit. Some bottles were embossed with individual company names, while others had paper labels. A selection of blowpipe fragments, mould covers, and glass shards also was included. Interpretive copy briefly described the history of the company and the artifacts on display, while more detailed information was presented a twenty-page “Curatorial Notebook” and in pullout panels and drawers.

### ***Sifton and the Mary Maxim Story***

Today, a cairn in Sifton, Manitoba, commemorates the important contribution made to the town by former stationmaster Willard McPhedrain and the mail-order company that he founded. Few people realize that the internationally successful Mary Maxim Ltd., now based in Paris, Ontario, and Port Huron, Michigan, had its beginnings in this tiny community. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, Mary Maxim was the source of patterns and wool for the most popular sweaters in Canada. Women and men across the country knit the bulky garments, decorated with countless patterns including eagles, reindeer, ice skaters, and curling stones, for virtually every family member. Personalities like Premier John Diefenbaker, swimmer Marilyn Bell, England's Princess Anne, and Hollywood star Bob Hope were all honoured with Mary Maxim sweaters. For a time, the woollen industrial in Sifton and the Mary Maxim company that arose out of it made the town famous and prosperous. Ironically, it was the very success of Mary Maxim that led to the loss of the industry.

Located 330 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg, the village of Sifton began in 1885, settled first by British and then by Polish and Ukrainian homesteaders. During the early years of the Great Depression, local farmwives were unable to sell the wool from

their sheep and had no means to process their wool. In an effort to help these families, local blacksmith John Weselowski developed and began manufacturing an inexpensive, new kind of spinning wheel and a unique, hand-operated carding machine. Between 1934 and 1936, thousands of these spinning wheels and hand-carders were sold locally and across Canada under the name Spin-Well.<sup>4</sup> Profits from these sales and money borrowed from the credit union were used to build the first of several woollen mills to be erected in Sifton.

The *Sifton News* of 26 March 1937 reported that the new mill would be advantageous for western farmers who, until then, had been forced to sell their wool at a meagre price to manufacturers in central Canada and then buy it back in the form of finished products. Wool from local farmers would be purchased to be washed, spun into yarn, and made into goods like socks, blankets, cloth, and sleeping bags. I.B. Griffiths, minister of health and public welfare, officially opened the new mill 14 October 1937. By 1941, however, it was short of capital. New equity had to be put into the company and the new partners decided to move the mill to Brandon (becoming the Brandon Woollen Mill) to take advantage of better sewage disposal, water supply, and transportation facilities.

Willard and Olive McPhedrain continued to sell woollen goods produced in Sifton under the name Sifton Products. In 1947, in an effort to personalize the company and bolster sales, they began advertising under the name of their housekeeper, Miss Mary Maximchuk. Ads were carried in the *Free Press Prairie Farmer*, the *Family Herald*, and the *Western Producer*. The strategy proved successful, and Miss Maximchuk was soon receiving volumes of mail requesting not only the young lady's homemade socks but also, sometimes, her hand in marriage. The company name soon was changed to Miss Mary Maxim and then, simply, to Mary Maxim.

It was not until 1951 that Mary Maxim shifted its focus to the products that would make it famous. By this time, the company was distributing its products through retail outlets as well as by mail order. Family history credits a buyer from Woodward's store in Edmonton for suggesting that there was a great demand in western Canada for “woolen spun,” or bulky yarn to be made into Cowichan-style sweaters. Willard and his son-in-law Earl Shaw travelled to Vancouver Island, where they purchased ten Cowichan sweaters. Working from these samples, John Weselowski started manufacturing bulky yarn while a local knitter, Stella Sawchyn, designed a pattern for a similar sweater.<sup>5</sup> Thus began Mary Maxim's Northland Yarn and the first use in Canada of graph-style knitting patterns.

By 1954 Mary Maxim had outgrown its quarters in Sifton and the company, with most of its staff, moved to nearby Dauphin, where electricity, more space, and better mail service were available. Pressure to move closer to major suppliers and distributors led the company to open a second facility in Paris, Ontario. In 1956 the company decided to expand its sales in the United States and opened a mail-order office out of Port Huron, Michigan.

In 1957, however, the expansion into Paris and Port Huron and the opening of a warehouse in Vancouver led to the movement of the advertising and accounting departments from Dauphin to Paris, Ontario. This transfer signalled the loss of Mary Maxim to Manitoba. Despite efforts to maintain the Dauphin office, it was closed and the owners moved to Paris, Ontario. The company continued to expand, however, opening a branch in Leicester, England.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Leary Brick Works and the Manitoba Glass Company, Mary Maxim survived and prospered, but it did so by relocating to central Canada and the United States.

Researching the history of Mary Maxim for exhibition was difficult, for very little had been written about the company and few people seemed to be aware that the once-popular sweaters originated in Manitoba. The unusual spinning wheel in the museum's collection fuelled curiosity, but no other artifacts or information accompanied the machine. Visits to Sifton and Dauphin to view what remained of the industry in those towns and, later, to the contemporary Mary Maxim outlet in Paris, Ontario, all proved rewarding, but by this time many company records had already been lost. Fortunately, interviews with family members and others associated with the company provided valuable information and artifacts. Eventually, research resulted in the acquisition of a sizable collection of Mary Maxim sweater patterns, knitting needles, wool samples, blankets, photographs, advertising brochures, and company newsletters. As well, some twenty hand-knit Mary Maxim sweaters and a Spin-Well spinning wheel were acquired.

Two cases were assembled to interpret the Mary Maxim story, featuring the famed hand-carder and spinning machine, a selection of colourful hand-knit Mary Maxim sweaters, knitting needles, sweater patterns, company newsletters, catalogues, and wool samples. Photographs of well-known individuals and Mary Maxim staff wearing and displaying Mary Maxim sweaters completed the exhibit.

### ***Conclusion***

The importance of including the stories of the Leary Brick Works, Manitoba Glass Company, and Mary Maxim in the galleries of the Manitoba Museum increases over time as this history gradually fades from popular memory. Each industry played an important role in the history of Manitoba. Together, the three companies reflect the rapid growth of industrial activity in small towns in southern Manitoba in the early 1900s, as well as its equally swift decline due to technological change and the growing concentration of capital and industrial production in central Canada.

The Leary Brick Works was one of dozens of brick factories that once operated in Manitoba and were capitalized on a small scale by local investors to meet local needs. They served their communities well in the early years but were unable to compete with the national and continental concerns that soon entered their market. The Manitoba Glass Company, a unique operation in western Canada, had a somewhat different experience. During its brief existence it was highly successful in meeting the needs of households and businesses in growing prairie communities.

However, it could no longer compete when huge national concerns in Toronto and Montreal acquired the technology and had the financial means to put the company out of business. The Mary Maxim company, on the other hand, succeeded in competing nationally and internationally. However, despite its founders' commitment to supporting the people and industrial initiatives of rural Manitoba, the company believed it had to abandon the region in order to succeed.

The experiences of these three industries typify those of many other rural industrial activities in early-twentieth-century Manitoba. Industrial initiatives in the region since that time have met with mixed results. Some experiments have succeeded, but rural unemployment and depopulation remain a serious problem. Like the wooden grain elevators that once dominated the horizon, the built environment of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century rural Manitoba gradually is disappearing. The vibrant history of the region is in danger of being lost, even to local residents. Municipal, provincial, and federal heritage plaques mark the places where some of Manitoba's early industries stood, but little else remains of the region's built heritage. Initiatives to ensure that this legacy is preserved for present and future generations, many of which grew out of the heritage heyday surrounding the centennials of Canada and then Manitoba, have lost much of their momentum in the current repressive fiscal climate. Dozens of small, local museums, run largely by a diminishing corps of aging volunteers, struggle to preserve and pass on their local history.

The Manitoba Museum's exhibits on the industrialization and deindustrialization of rural Manitoba seek to fill that gap and to preserve the legacy of rural Manitoba's once-vibrant industrial economy.

### ***Notes***

1. The Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery opened 20 September 2003.
2. This history was one of a number of themes related to the experiences of newcomers to the region selected for interpretation by the curator of social history in the Parklands/Mixed Woods Gallery. Other exhibits included Canada's immigration policies, the homesteading experience, agriculture, fishing, the boat-building industry, community and social life, health care, and the impact of war. Other human history curators developed exhibits on the ancient archaeology of southern Manitoba and on the experiences of the region's Aboriginal and Metis peoples. In addition, a large portion of the 1,000 square metre gallery was devoted to interpreting and recreating the natural history of the parklands.
3. "George Leary Dies, Aged 88," 5 April 1939, *Winnipeg Free Press*.
4. "Sifton," *Dauphin Herald*, 14 February 1935.
5. A visit to the Quadra Island Museum in 1994 revealed a different perspective on this cultural exchange. As an exhibit at the centre explained, the Cowichan are perhaps the best known of western Canada's coastal indigenous peoples for their tradition of spinning and weaving mountain sheep wool. In the early nineteenth century, Catholic nuns introduced knitting to the Cowichan people, and they developed knitting patterns that reflected Native spirituality. The sweaters produced by Cowichan women in the early twentieth century became very popular, and at times it was difficult to keep up with demand. When others, especially Mary Maxim, began to imitate Cowichan patterns, the Native industry was seriously damaged. The Quadra Centre recounts this story of cultural appropriation and displays a Spin-Well carding machine along with a photograph of women using spinning wheels.