

## John East-Saskatoon's foundry pioneer!



*Above:*-The original John East Foundry at the Avenue C site in 1910. Photo LH 3979 - courtesy of the Local History Room, S.P.L.

### *Part 1 – Early training and initial success.*

John A. East was born on January the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1881, one of twelve children of a Grand Valley, Ontario farmer and his wife. As a young man in his late teens, he spent his time learning the foundry trade, first in Toronto and then at various U.S. centres, such as Chicago and Philadelphia as well as Birmingham, Alabama and Cincinnati, Ohio; during this period the young East also acquired considerable industrial machining skills.

After returning to Toronto for a brief period he, and his wife Elizabeth, headed west in 1905 with John initially finding employment in Winnipeg, at the Valley Iron Works. It wasn't long, however, until a better opportunity presented itself, and soon John East found himself heading off to Strathcona to take a job with the Jackson Brothers Foundry.

His tenure with his new employer was interrupted when he decided to try his hand at homesteading, acquiring land in the Innisfree area and working it for two years until he received his patent; apparently, East soon decided that farming was not for him and was persuaded to return to the Jackson Brothers. It was about this time that word was spreading about the prosperity of the fledgling city of Saskatoon and, in 1909, John East decided to pay it a visit; to his surprise, he discovered that, due to the lack of a community based foundry, the city was purchasing the manhole covers for its expanding water distribution programme and sewer system, from sources in Regina.

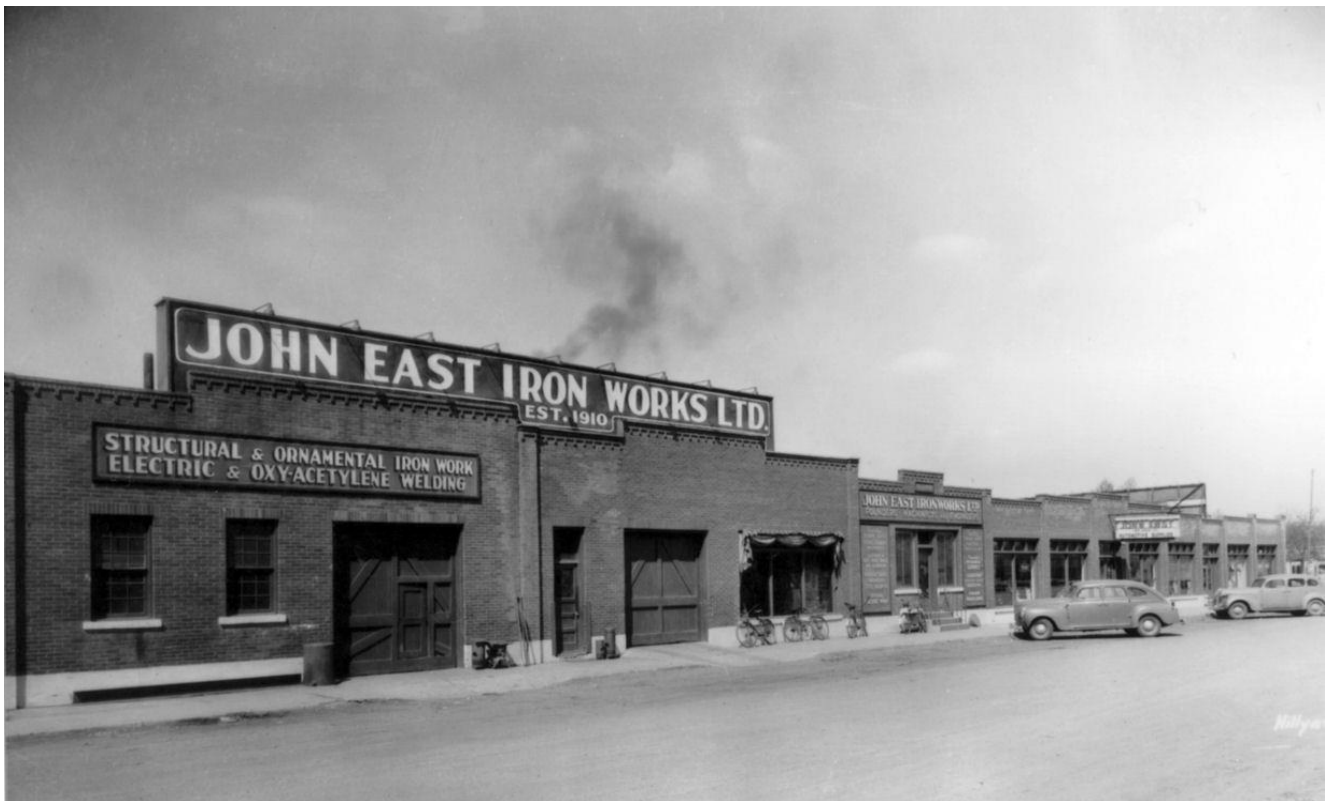
East approached City Council with a proposal to establish a foundry in Saskatoon, if he could be assured of obtaining the contract for the production of the manhole covers and, on the strength of considerable encouragement from members of the Council, he decided to move to the city and open shop. By early 1910, he had purchased 50 feet of land on Avenue C North, just south of the CPR station, and soon after completing constructing of a small 20' x 30' building on the site, began operations. The John East Foundry flourished, offering an amazing variety of products and services; the bronze expansion plates and light standards were provided for the University Bridge prior to its completion in 1916, and similar standards were also produced for the Saskatchewan Legislature.

In addition to the foundry, East's business also included pattern, blacksmith and machine shops as well as an oxy-acetylene welding facility, giving them the capability of manufacturing gears, pistons, rings etc. for almost any make of tractor, as well as being able to repair crankcases and rebore cylinder blocks. Cast iron and structural steel provided by John East, was also utilized in the construction of several Saskatoon buildings, including the Roxy Theatre. East's claim of "If it's made of cast iron, we make it" and "If it's made in a machine shop, we do it", certainly seemed to be justified.

After John's youngest brother Frank joined the firm in the 1920's, he assumed the role of shop supervisor and had a huge impact on the company's fortunes by introducing a fire hydrant line that he had modified to operate in sub-zero temperatures; this product would prove to be very popular in Western Canadian cities, and was used as far north as Alaska. It was during this period that John East's sons, J.W. (Bus) East (1923) and Mellville (Mel) Austin East (1925), also became involved in the business.



*Above:-The unique John East sub-zero fire hydrant. - courtesy of the Firefighters Museum, Calgary.*



*Above:-The John East Iron Works Ltd. building at 117-121 Avenue C North in 1946. Photo - A 800 by Len Hillyard - courtesy of the Local History Room, S.P.L.*



*Left:*-The same site as it exists in 2007; a strip mall and large Chinese restaurant now occupy the space. Photo-Alan L. Morton.

## *Part 2 – Hard times, growth, expansion and the end of an era.*

The John East Foundry was so successful, that by the late 1920's East was in a position to purchase the Yale Hotel; however, his ownership was short lived as a deal was made with Saskatoon businessman, and hotel owner, Vic Collaux, to trade the Yale for an automotive parts business that Collaux owned. In 1930 the expanded company incorporated, becoming John East Iron Works Ltd.; however, things were about to take a turn for the worse with the onset of the 'Great Depression'. The decade from 1930-1940 proved to be a difficult one for John East Iron Works; Mel East, who became General Manager in 1935, reflected afterwards that the company was very close to 'going under' at that time.

Apart from the odd diversionary project, such as Frank East building a special crane for the Broadway Bridge construction, the firm had to rely on manufacturing such mundane items as coal chutes and gravity fed warm air furnaces, in order to keep the business afloat.

By the mid 1940's, however, things had improved greatly, as by this time John East had created a substantial business as a supplier of cast iron stove parts that they manufactured from close to 9,000 different patterns; an inventory of approximately 19,000 interchangeable parts, was available to the 1,100 hardware dealers (located from the Lakehead to Victoria) that the company dealt with. With the onset of W.W.II, the foundry contributed to Canada's war effort by manufacturing 6lb shell extractors and a variety of aircraft and binocular parts for the military. During this period, the auto machine shop and parts division of the business grew substantially in both Saskatoon and at the branch operation in Prince Albert; this was due in great part due to the fact that John East had become one of the first companies to offer a rebuilt engine swap programme.

The 1950's and 60's, saw the company expand both in plant size and product diversification, and John East Iron Works became a major supplier of steel conveyor channels and metal castings for the burgeoning potash industry. Ornamental iron and other metalwork products were also in demand and, in 1959, John East Iron Works fabricated the metal for the Robert Murray sculpture 'Rainmaker'. This piece of art had been commissioned by the City of Saskatoon, and is now the centrepiece of the fountain in front of City Hall.

The company's founder and patriarch, John A. East, retired in 1951 and handed over the reins of President to Mellville; John's retirement was unfortunately short lived, as he died just one year later at the age of 71. In 1965, John's grandson, William (Bill) East became the third generation of the family to assume the President's chair and, with Frank East's retirement, Bill's brother, Jack, took over the day to day management of the foundry. In 1975, after 65 years under the John East name, the business was sold to John Rasmussen's Salvage Company who operated out of the East's plant five acre location for a brief time, however, by 1981, ownership of the property had passed to a developer, and the property was scheduled for demolition. Today, the site is occupied by a strip mall, dominated by a large Chinese restaurant, but for over half a century John East's enterprise and skill, and the company he headed, was inexorably woven into the basic fabric of Saskatoon. The City, ever mindful of East's contribution, honoured him by naming John East Avenue in the Hudson Bay Park area after him. ✨