



113 MARKET AVENUE
GREAT WEST SADDLERY BUILDING

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

30 April 1985

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The strong impact that the Great West Saddlery Building has upon Market Avenue derives partly from its site and partly from its design. The proportions make the structure attractive in that it is six storeys high yet twice as long as it is wide (50 feet by 97 feet), while the fenestration breaks up the mass. The pale brick and rusticated stone have recently been cleaned, releasing the warehouse from decades of grime and further lightening its visual impact.

Constructed in 1910-1911, this warehouse was the factory for the Great West Saddlery Company Limited. The main warehouse for the company was directly across the street, at 112-114 Market Avenue. By 1910 Great West Saddlery was already a huge national company, centered in Winnipeg and still under complete control by its founder and president, E.F. Hutchings.

Elisha Frederick Hutchings was one of those pioneer men who seem larger than life. He also took steps to maintain that image. He was born in rural Ontario in 1855, taking his training as a harness maker before coming west in 1876. After the disillusionment of chasing gold in the Edmonton area for a season, he returned to Winnipeg in 1877. After losing literally everything in a fire here, Hutchings secured employment repairing the padded portions of carts and buggies. By 1879, he was able to buy out a junior partner in a small local harness maker establishment, taking full control of the business by 1885.

By 1888, E.F. Hutchings had built this saddlery and harness supply into a major business. Operating from a wholesale and retail outlet on Main Street, Hutchings produced quality saddles, all kinds of harnesses and collars, whips, carriage equipment, trunks, valises and leather bindings. In testimony to the design and quality of the Hutchings saddle, the veterinary surgeon of the North West Mounted Police in Calgary recommended that they be adopted throughout the force for police service.² Possibly in response to N.W.M.P. contracts, Hutchings opened his first branch in Calgary in 1889, with a second branch in Edmonton in 1891. Regina and Saskatoon followed in the 1890s until Hutchings merged them all into a single operation. The Great West

Saddlery Company was reorganized in 1900 with a paid-up capital of \$250,000. Expansion of the company's retail interests to Portage, Boissevain, Selkirk, McGregor, Strathcona, Prince Albert and MacLeod followed to the extent that the company's capital had increased in 1911 to \$2 million.³ This made it one of the larger manufacturers operating in Canada at the time and certainly the largest supplier of its kind in the west.

In 1898, Great West Saddlery erected a large factory and warehouse, still in existence at 112-114 Market Avenue. This massive structure contained all the wholesale functions (with the retail store still operating at the corner of Market and Main Streets) until more space was required in 1909. A sixth storey was added to the original warehouse⁴ and in 1910, a new factory was erected across the street.

The new factory, the topic of this report, was designed by architect W.W. Blair. Instead of hiring a general contractor, Blair tendered the sub-trades himself and employed day labour whenever possible.⁵ This may have been a good way of cutting costs, provided the architect was agreeable. The building was completed in March 1911.

As with the majority of his other commercial structures, Blair employs a neo-classical design for this factory/warehouse. His trademark seemed to lean toward a particular resolution of large structures at street level, seeking to soften the impression of scale and make the structure more inviting. Here, Blair has continued the stone of the foundation several metres above grade to the top of the first floor. The roughly-hewed limestone is regularly coursed in smaller blocks. A smooth stone finish was used in the entranceway, in the pediment over the door, in the lintels over the windows and in the lugsill which form two continuous bands around the façade and the east elevation.

The front rises from this delineated base in three bays that are defined by capped pilasters. The attic floor is also set apart with a belt course and a brick cornice. The east elevation repeats the rhythm of the front in seven bays of two windows each. The west and north (rear) elevations are plain brick with almost no windows. Reinforced concrete construction of the floors, along with

the brick walls, make for the ultimate in fireproof construction. Electric lights and a freight elevator beside the stairway completed the building's features.

The interior contained the entire operation in the production of harnesses and cattle collars. The harness manufacturing and cutting, relatively light work, took place on the top three floors. Collar manufacturing took place on the second floor, with the onerous tasks of cutting the long straw and stuffing it into the collars, taking place in the basement. A large frame storage shed just west of the factory was used to store the straw. The offices and shipping department were on the ground floor. A concrete tunnel connected the factory to the main warehouse across the street.⁶ Both buildings had spurlines off the Transfer Railway running behind them.

With all the appearance of having created a commercial empire, E.J. Hutchings' fostered ambitions for political power as well. From 1886 to 1896, Hutchings represented a central ward on City Council. He then ran for a seat in the Legislative Assembly but was defeated. He was also defeated in a bid for the mayoralty in 1896 and again in 1897. In a fit of great anger at this second defeat, he told a reporter that he had enough of the foolish public. Clearly beside himself, he also vowed:

I have done a great deal towards developing the city and since they have deserted me, I will desert them...I will withdraw from Winnipeg and make a town of my own where my services will be appreciated. I have the plans perfected and it is only a question of time before the city will be receiving very little taxes from me!⁷

While a bad temper and poor sportsmanship are readily manifest in these comments, there are further connotations in his words. First, they reveal that being elected mayor was very important to Hutchings. Businessmen dominated council and ran the city in their own interests, presuming that business principles were ultimately for the benefit of any administration. Second, his words disclose that Hutchings was actually powerful enough to threaten to relocate his business, knowing that it would upset his fellow citizens. The plans he referred to were actually for the construction of the Market Avenue warehouse in 1898. What is unique about the outburst is not

the sentiments expressed but the tactless blunder of blurting it out to the press. Hutchings was probably little different in his attitudes than many others in the commercial elite, especially the breed that had experienced Winnipeg in its raw frontier years.

Again in a labour dispute in 1911, Hutchings displayed his intolerance. When some of his factory staff went to the Winnipeg Ministerial Association with complaints against Great Western Saddlery, the W.M.A. took up the charges with the president personally. Vehemently anti-union, Hutchings dismissed the men as complainers and the Union movement as objectionable.⁸ With a Winnipeg staff of 150 men, he had no compelling reason to back down from his stand. Once again the matter died out.

Notwithstanding this incident, Great West Saddlery's production for 1912 was valued at \$3 million.⁹ The retail store at Market and Main was renamed Birt's Saddlery, with the manager, John Birt, married to Hutching's daughter, Lulu.¹⁰ From this point on, Great West Saddlery did not operate a retail store under that name in the city while Birt's Saddlery continues to exist.

When it became obvious that the automobile was going to provide permanent competition to the horse and buggy, Great West Saddlery made the move towards stock automobile accessories as early as 1919.¹¹ The company also expanded the shoe findings and leather goods aspect of the wholesale. E.F. Hutchings sold his personal interest in Great West Saddlery in 1928, two years before his death, and concentrated on his two other companies, Equitable Trust and Canada Loan and Mortgage Company. He died in 1930¹² but his son Douglas J. Hutchings continued to manage his father's business into the 1940s. Vince Leah recalled E.F. Hutchings's nickname as "Lord Leatherhead", a sly reference to both his business and his character.¹³

As the harness supply aspect of Great West Saddlery shrank in significance, space in his factory became available for other wholesale concerns. During the 1950s, the garment trade used a portion of the building, gradually replacing all of its original function by the 1960s. Such firms as Dominion Garment, Crown Cap Manufacturing and Jeanmakers Pants Manufacturing became the primary tenants. The building became vacant in c.1978.

Great West Saddlery seems to have ceased its wholesale function under that name in Winnipeg in the early 1960s. As a corporation, however, it has endured and grown. In 1970 Great West Saddlery became Great West International Equities Limited, a company that seems to be controlled by the Bronfman dynasty.¹⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Frank H. Schofield, The Story of Manitoba Volume II, the S.J. Clarke Publishing Company (Winnipeg) 1913, pp. 123-125.
2. “Winnipeg Business Interests”, The Northwest Magazine, October 1885, p. 21.
3. “Great West Saddlery Made First Tops For Covered Wagons,” Winnipeg Commercial, September 1932, p. 48.
4. City of Winnipeg Building Permits No. 1427, 1909. The architect of this addition was also W.W. Blair.
5. Ibid., No. 1292, 21 May 1910.
6. Western Canadian Fire Underwriters’ Association, Fire Atlas of Winnipeg, 1917-19, Map No. 209.
7. “Andrews Mayor For 1898,” Manitoba Free Press, 22 December 1897.
8. “Ministerial Meddlers,” Winnipeg Saturday Post, 4 November 1911, p. 8.
9. “From Under The Bottom Dollar To The Top Of The Treasure Trail,” The Dominion, February 1913, p. 22.
10. Schofield, op. cit., p. 125.
11. Fire Atlas, op. cit.
12. “E.F. Hutchings Dies in Sleep; Aged 75 Years,” Winnipeg Tribune, 14 April 1930.
13. Legislative Library Manitoba History Scrapbook M25, p. 275.
14. Financial Post profiles on Canadian business.

APPENDIX I

William Wallace Blair

William Wallace Blair was considered to be one of the top architects in Winnipeg in the early years of this century. Blair received his architectural training at the Academical Institute in Belfast before immigrating to Ontario in the early 1870s. He worked in Toronto and Hamilton for several years, and even designed a warehouse and office building in Winnipeg, before returning to Ireland to superintend the construction of a massive waterworks system. Returning in 1898, Blair re-located his practice to Chicago until he moved to Winnipeg in 1905.

This range of stylistic influences is manifest in Blair's Winnipeg works. He designed both the Roslyn Apartments on Osborne and Roslyn Road and the Warwick Apartments on Central Park in 1908. The Roslyn is perhaps Blair's best known work, demonstrating skill and innovation in a new building form. Among W.W. Blair's other projects are the Princeton Apartments on Broadway (1909), now demolished, and the elegant Mark Fortune house at 393 Wellington Crescent.

In c.1912, Blair retired to the gentler climes of Victoria where he built himself a great rambling house that is still considered to be a showpiece of domestic architecture.

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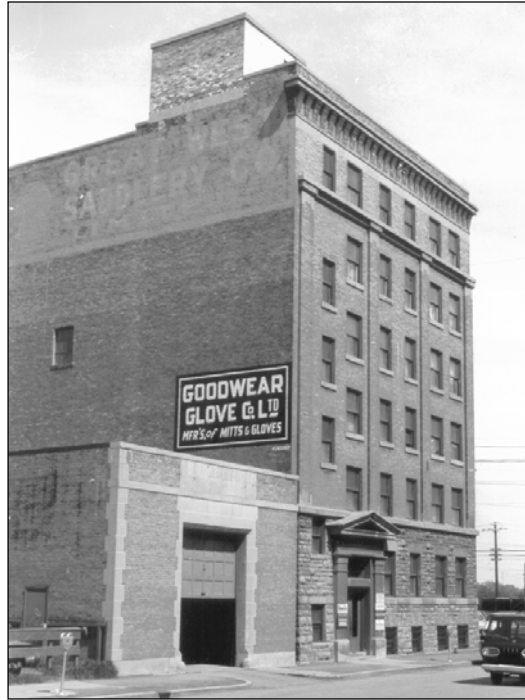


Plate 1 – 113 Market Avenue, Great West Saddlery Building, ca.1970. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)

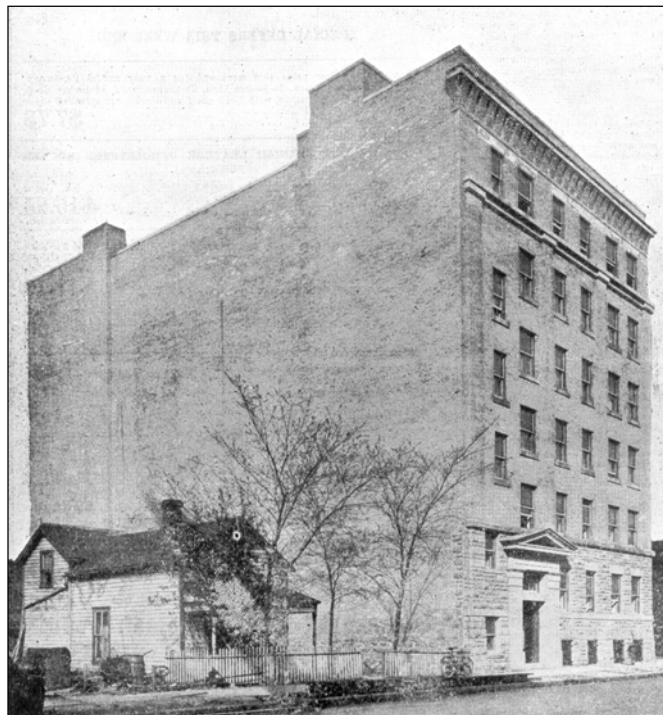


Plate 2 - As a factory in 1912. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N899.)

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Plate 3 – Across Market Avenue was the Great West Saddlery Wholesale. The two buildings were connected by an underground tunnel. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N8493.)

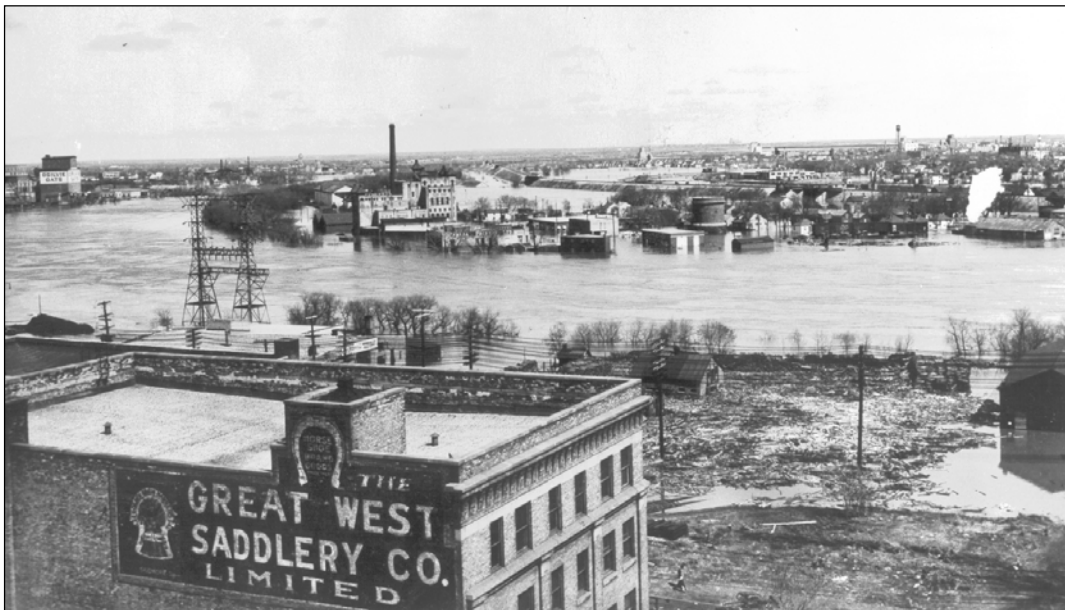


Plate 4 – The 1950 flood with the roof of the Great West Saddlery Building in the foreground. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)