

The Manitoba Glass Works

– Sharon Reilly, Curator of Social History



Josef Albert Keilbach, founder of the Manitoba Glass Works, c. 1922.

Born in Ketsch, West Germany, in 1854, Keilbach arrived in Canada in 1872. He died in Beausejour, Manitoba, December 18, 1942.

Exterior view, Manitoba Glass Factory, Beausejour, Manitoba, 1909–1911. John Watson, superintendent of the nearby Brickworks; standing, with unknown companion. [Below]

[The Manitoba Museum, Eva Williams Collection]



A drive through the Parklands/Mixed-Woods region today reveals little of the intense manufacturing activity carried on here in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During these years small industries of all kinds sprang up to provide goods and services needed by the thousands of newcomers who settled in the region.

The Manitoba Glass Works was one such industry, and one whose story will be told in the new Parklands/Mixed-Woods Gallery, opening September 2003. Founded in Beausejour in 1906, this company was western Canada's first glass container manufacturer. Its history is important for it reflects the rapid growth of manufacturing, and its

equally swift decline, due to technological change and the growing concentration of industrial production in central Canada.

The availability of a large deposit of silica-rich sand on the outskirts of Beausejour led to the founding of a brick making operation there in 1905. This inspired John Vass, a Polish settler and Beausejour's first blacksmith, to experiment with glass making. Intrigued by this idea, Josef Keilbach, a German immigrant who owned the sandpits next to the brick factory, carried out further tests and concluded that Vass was right. In June 1906, Josef Keilbach, his son Edward, Frederick and Louis Lentz, and Gustav Bohn founded the



Stanley mineral water bottle manufactured in Beausejour, c.1912. [Opposite left]

The Stanley Mineral Spring Co. Ltd. bottled ginger ale and mineral water in Winnipeg from 1912 – 1915. Although this bottle stood upright, its bowling pin shape was derived from the first carbonated beverage bottles of the late 1700s, which were rounded at the bottom and could not stand up. Known as drunken bottles, they were kept on their sides to ensure their pressurized contents did not escape. Later improvements to bottle closures made standing bottles for carbonated beverages possible.



George Chopping [Inset], reflecting in 2002 on the significance of the Manitoba Glass Factory, and close up view of artifacts which he excavated at the Manitoba Glass Works site, c.1978.

[Photo of George Chopping: Sharon Reilly / Photo of excavation site courtesy: George Chopping]

Manitoba Glass Company. The factory was financed by Keilbach and built over that summer and fall. Polish glass blowers were recruited from Europe and, on October 27, 1906, made Beausejour's "first perfect piece of glassware... (a deep green) cylindrical pint bottle."

By the following January, the factory was in full operation. At first the glassworks employed 30 men who manufactured only a single type and size of bottle. Production rose quickly to 20,000 bottles per week. A growing demand for glass containers of all kinds prompted the owners to diversify into a wider range of glassware. Financial pressures increased due to the expansion of the factory, and intensifying competition from central Canada forced the first of several reorganizations of the company. The local partners in the glass works found themselves having to look

to Winnipeg financiers to sustain the business.

The glass works moved to replace the traditional, hand-blown method of making glass used by the highly skilled Polish craft workers, with cheaper and faster semi-automated bottle manufacturing processes. American glass blowers familiar with these new techniques were recruited. Production was organized around 'shops', or groups of workers that included three journeymen glass blowers, and three apprentices – boys 10 to 12 years of age. Girls were employed to place the tops on sealer jars. The new containers manufactured at the Beausejour plant were intended to be functional, not beautiful, and to hold just the right amount of beer, carbonated water, milk, ink, medicine or preserves; and, they were expected to be made fast. One 'shop' was now able to



American glass blowers, Beausejour, Manitoba, 1909–1911.

[Photo: John Reifschneider / Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, John Reifschneider]

produce 3,600 bottles in an eight-hour shift.

For a time, Beausejour seemed destined for greatness, as hotels and other services sprang up to meet the demands of the town's growing population. However, newer methods of production were being adopted in the glass manufacturing industry to reduce dependence on skilled workers, speed up pro-

duction and generate higher profits. In a desperate attempt to remain competitive, Manitoba Glass re-capitalized with new investors, began upgrades on existing equipment and, in 1909/10, constructed a second factory. At its peak this operation employed 350 to 400 men, boys and girls; a large number of workers in what previously was a tiny village.



E.L. Drewry beer bottle, 1911. Bottles made by Manitoba Glass for the E. L. Drewry company carried clear markings which made them easier to identify. The base of the bottle shown here is marked 11-B, showing the bottle was made in Beausejour in 1911.



By World War I, automatic production dominated the industry in North America. Thousands of glass workers lost their jobs and the industry was controlled by a small number of large companies. Manitoba Glass failed to survive the competition when the Diamond Flint Company of Toronto and Montréal, which held the license for the Owens Automatic glass making machine in Canada, authorized the expenditure of \$20,000 to purchase land in the Winnipeg area to set up a glass factory. Threatened with a price war they could not win, the Manitoba Glass Company sold their land, factory and equipment in March 1913. Shortly thereafter, the new owners closed the Beausejour plant and shipped its equipment to Red Deer, Alberta, where the company had been offered a free site and free natural gas to establish its western factory. The collapse of Beausejour's most important manufacturing plant slowed the town's growth for years.

For decades the glass works site was left abandoned. Local residents salvaged bricks for chimney construction and

bottles as mementos. Some used glass shards from the site to decorate graves at a nearby cemetery. In the 1940s, steel from the building frames was salvaged for the war effort. Over the years, the site also was visited by more serious bottle collectors who helped to make 'Beausejour glass' known once again across North America. These included Saskatchewan collector George Chopping, who first visited the site in 1975, and subsequently spent some 1,200 hours digging there.

In 1978, a systematic collecting effort to collect and document materials from the Beausejour site was made by Chopping. Although initially reluctant to take time from a hectic schedule to visit the site of the former glass factory, Chopping quickly became fascinated by what he found. One weekend visit led to another and, in the end, Chopping spent some 120 ten-hour days excavating and salvaging bottles, glass shards, and bits and pieces of tools and other equipment left behind when the guts of the glass works was moved west. Chopping incorporated his findings on the Manitoba

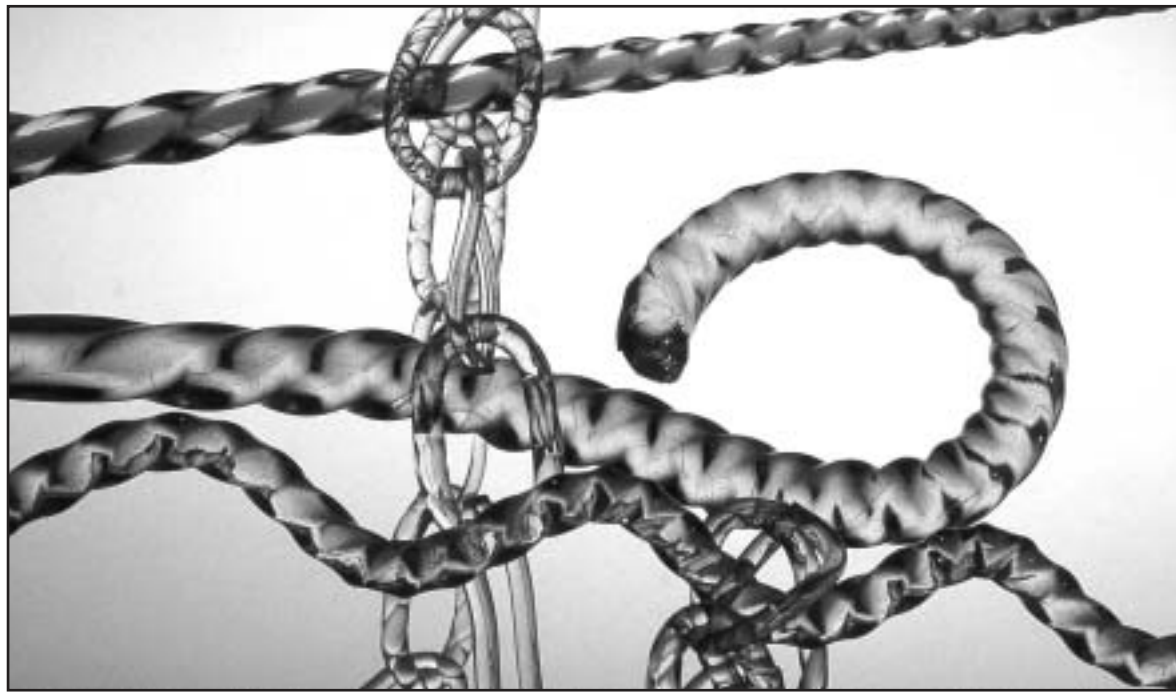
Retired glass blower John Reifschneider.

Reifschneider worked at the Manitoba Glass Company as a young man and returned to visit Manitoba in 1973, wearing his Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada union membership ribbon. [Photo: Nita Spangler / Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba]

The glass blowers were highly trained journeymen who took great pride in their skill and strength. The factory was hot, the work was repetitive and its pace fast. Both the Polish glass blowers and the Americans who eventually displaced them were confident of their skills and were prepared to make workplace demands. At one point, when wages were withheld due to a cash shortage, the Polish glass workers reportedly sabotaged the 'lehr line', which carried the newly-made bottles through the tempering oven, and demanded payment. A local of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada was set up in 1910. The price for work was set annually, not by each company, but by the union in negotiation with the companies representatives.

Glass whimsies, including corkscrew style cane, glass chain, candy cane style cane, cane with brown streak running down centre, c. 1906 – 1908.

Glass blowers like John Reifschneider, who also took many of the photographs of the glass works, were highly skilled craftsmen. Although obliged to blow crude glass bottles to make a living, they were capable of doing much more intricate work, and fashioned beautiful and fragile glass 'whimsies' like the chain and canes shown here. These items were made by the glass blowers in their spare time and sold for up to \$20 a piece during their trips to Winnipeg.



Glass Company into his book, *Bottles of the Canadian Prairies*. This period also saw the formation of 'Glass Fax', a group of local glass collectors and researchers who, in the late 1970s, organized a display of Beausejour glass at The Manitoba Museum.

In 1987/88, a group of Beausejour residents and others interested in the history of the glass works, including Adele (nee Keilbach) Yakimischak, a granddaughter of glass works founder Josef Keilbach, and her husband Orest, initiated a movement to preserve the site and to interpret the glass works' history. The Manitoba Glass works Historic Site Incorporated was founded and the group purchased the land where the factory once stood. This group and the Manitoba Historic Resources Branch carried out extensive research. In August 1989, the former Manitoba Glass Company location was designated a Provincial Heritage Site.



Louis Vogel with the Manitoba Glass Works commemorative plaque, August 6, 1989.

As a young boy Vogel carried drinking water to the workers at the glass factory.

[Photo: Adele (nee Keilback) Yakimischak]



Orest Yakimischak, President of the Manitoba Glass Works Historic Site, Inc., addressed the crowd gathered for the designation ceremony.

On August 6, 1989, the Manitoba Glass Works was designated an Historic Site by the Province of Manitoba.

[Photo: Adele (nee Keilback) Yakimischak]



Boys and men employed at the Manitoba Glass Works, c.1910.

[Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba]

Boys 10 to 12 years of age worked long hours in the glass factory until automatic equipment replaced them. Even the young boys working at the factory learned to fight for their rights, going out on a week-long strike in 1911. The 17 year old farm boys who were brought in to replace them were unable to withstand the intense heat of the glass furnace, and the youngsters won an increase in wages of 25 cents per day, bringing their wage to one dollar per day. Even the younger boys often passed out in the severe heat and had to be taken outdoors to revive.