

# The Smithfield Heritage Restoration Project

Opportunities and challenges for heritage conservation in rural Saskatchewan

By Richard Krehbiel

## SUMMARY

Preservation and restoration of the abandoned 1903 Smithfield stone manor house began in 2005. Reflecting on the project as a case study, this article examines its historical significance and concludes that the rural municipal planning framework under which Smithfield received municipal heritage site designation is adequate to support such projects, including implementation of innovative energy and servicing technologies. However, if Canadians wish to preserve the deteriorating stock of rural built heritage, retirement savings tax relief and incentives for conservation technologies would encourage more financial commitment to a purposed future for rural heritage buildings.

## RÉSUMÉ

La préservation et la restauration du manoir de pierre Smithfield, construit en 1903, ont débuté en 2005. Dressant une étude de cas de ce projet, l'article aborde son importance historique et conclut que le cadre rural et municipal d'aménagement qui a permis la désignation de lieu patrimonial accordée à Smithfield est adéquat pour appuyer de tels projets, y compris le recours à des technologies novatrices sur le plan de l'énergie et des services. Cependant, si les Canadiens souhaitent préserver le parc d'immeubles du patrimoine rural bâti, qui est en voie de détérioration, il convient d'envisager des allègements et des incitatifs fiscaux pour des technologies de conservation, ce qui favoriserait des engagements financiers pour l'avenir du parc de bâtiments patrimoniaux dans les zones rurales.



## INTRODUCTION

As Canada continues the trend to urbanization, rural built heritage and the history it stands for is being lost by default. The Smithfield Restoration Project in southeastern Saskatchewan is working to restore and repurpose an Edwardian stone farm house that symbolizes the earliest period of large-scale agricultural development in the province. The provincial municipal heritage site designation system has provided an appropriate planning foundation but despite considerable local benefit, the lack of government priority for rural architectural heritage and absence of incentives for preserving existing structures has proven challenging.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Smithfield is a three-story Edwardian field stone manor located on rural agricultural property in southeastern Saskatchewan. Agricultural development of the area began when "a party of Canadian Scotsmen went in 1872 and made the Moose Mountain Settlement"<sup>1</sup> and lawful disposition of the land was achieved under Treaty 4 in 1874. Following the Dominion land survey in 1881-82 the area experienced a period of immigration from eastern Canada and Scotland that preceded the more diverse mass immigrations of the first decades of the 20th century. It is thus an architectural representation of the historically formative group of well-capitalized, highly skilled,

primarily Scottish agriculturalists and stockmen that set the foundation for settlement of western Canada.

Smithfield's provenance has been detailed elsewhere by Hryniuk *et al* in their 2008 *Legacy of Stone: Saskatchewan's Stone Buildings* and by local restoration enthusiast Leigh Robinson. In summary, the manor was completed *circa* 1903 by James Mitchell Smith from Forfarshire (now Angus) County in eastern Scotland as the residential component of a highly successful grain, draft horse, and cattle operation.

The extensive land holdings were broken up after Smith's death in 1928, but his widow, Betsy Ramsay Smith managed the core grain farming area until her death in 1971. The distinctive stone barn, with its "soaring interlocking posts and beams set into a massive 16-foot high, 80-foot-square base of rough dressed granite"<sup>2</sup> was demolished in 1981. The house was abandoned in 1988, prior to which considerable structural damage had been incurred by reckless installation of oil heating, running water, and a septic sewer system. Floor registers, doors, and a decorative wrought iron railing from the widow's walk were stolen and rapid deterioration due to weather, vandalism, and moisture inevitably followed.

### PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION

Beginning seasonally in 2005, the author carried out extensive site clean-up, roof repairs, patching of basement walls, and window covering, with the preliminary intention of protecting the site against further deterioration. An irreparable summer kitchen 'add-on' was removed and the stones stored for possible reconstruction. This process of stabilization and physical protection continued annually through 2015.

A related aspect of the project was thoroughly researching the history and genealogy of the first two generations to occupy Smithfield. Interestingly, this identified Smithfield as a "portal" for at least three other contemporary families whose progenitors were workers brought from Scotland and who founded their own successions in Canada.

Based on professional evaluation of the main structural "envelope" in 2012, repointing of the exterior walls began in 2016 and continues at the time of this writing. This reflects the preferred alternative to

prioritizing cosmetic repair rather than more costly, mundane, and complex structural issues. New windows were installed in 2017, and interior restoration and doors installation will begin thereafter.

### PROJECT PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Statutory heritage property protection in Saskatchewan can be established by each of the municipal, provincial, and national governments with the municipal and provincial regimes being prescribed under The Heritage Property Act ("the Act"). After considering relative complexities, the municipal heritage designation was found to be most appropriate to the Smithfield project.

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Overall, local government holds considerable power under the Act to establish binding guidelines and controls "to preserve and develop the heritage characteristics of designated property"<sup>3</sup>. In other circumstances this has led to some reluctance to pursue heritage designation by land owners who fear loss of control over their assets. However, since no such guidelines and controls have been established by the RM of Brock, section 23 of the Act provides the alternative of application for approval to "alter, restore, repair, disturb, add to, change or move, in whole or in part, or remove any fixture from"<sup>4</sup> a designated property. This enables flexibility for installation of modern materials and technologies, such as heating systems, efficient windows, and insulation.

The designation process simply involved making written application and meeting three conditions: notice to the provincial heritage registrar and landowner (Percy View Farms, a family farm corporation who fully supported the application), posting an opportunity for public comment, and registration of the final designation on the Certificate of Title. The site was designated



under Rural Municipality of Brock Bylaw 2014-131 effective December 15, 2014.

Part II.2 of the Act establishes the Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation as a provincial Crown agency, with responsibilities for, among other support, the provision of grant funding to help conserve Saskatchewan's structural heritage. Its Built Heritage Grant program provided modest funding to the Smithfield project in 2016; however, decline in provincial resource revenues has brought some uncertainty to the future availability of this fund.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR RURAL HERITAGE PROPERTIES

Renovation contractor George Nash identifies three approaches to working with heritage houses: preservation, renovation, and remodelling. The Smithfield project will combine preservation and renovation of the exterior stone work and internal design with testing and implementation of alternatives for heating and servicing, all within Saskatchewan's municipal heritage property planning framework.

In that regard, decisions made in this project reflect issues that face other rural heritage opportunities, particularly the critical threshold planning question: is there any real hope for Canada's rural residential heritage in the first place?

Rural life is obviously not for everyone. However, for some, a basis for redevelopment of rural residential property is found in the concept of "amenity migration," defined as "the movement of people from cities to rural areas for non-economic reasons."<sup>5</sup> Planner Ray Chipeniuk notes that the economic development potential of amenity migration has received little attention from planners other than in the context of attracting retirees; however it is not unrealistic to suggest that negative urban pressures such as infrastructure deterioration and housing

costs, as well as potential longer term climate impacts, may encourage the growing pool of urban equity owners and 'mail box income' recipients to consider the alternative of rural resettlement through redevelopment of heritage properties.

Nevertheless, despite considerable general interest, (evidenced in part by numerous social media groups such as Forgotten Saskatchewan and the Manitoba Historical Society), there is little apparent national priority on rural heritage. For example, none of the 2017 National Trust of Canada's Top 10 Endangered Places is a rural residential property, and heritage places are not considered as a factor in rural revitalization by the *State of Rural Canada 2015* report or as a rural issue by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

The primary challenge is of course, financial. Assuming that the most likely demographic to consider renovating a rural property are retired or semi-retired, opportunity exists to divert saved retirement income into heritage projects for residential, investment, or legacy purposes. This is the approach at Smithfield.

However, an obstacle to such reinvestment is taxation of block Registered Retirement Savings Plan withdrawals. A partial solution may lie with Bill C-323, a proposed 2017 federal tax relief measure that would provide income tax credits for certain expenses incurred in the course of rehabilitating a historic property. The Bill has passed second reading in Parliament and if enacted, would generally encourage heritage property projects and contribute to local goods and trades economies. In addition, addressing the paucity of tax incentives for retrofitting with appropriate conservation materials and technologies would inevitably have a similarly positive environmental and economic effect.<sup>6</sup>

This would enhance the potential of rural heritage property development to address other priorities such as long-term carbon sequestration resulting from historic "overbuilding" methods.

Finally, rural heritage preservation for its own sake is unlikely to be feasible; therefore ongoing purposing options that combine residential and income-generating activities must be developed. A non-profit Smithfield Society has been incorporated to manage the project and provide a platform for such future strategies.

## CONCLUSION

To date, the Smithfield Restoration Project has shown that a significant but doomed rural heritage structure can be rescued through a committed process of site cleanup and stabilization, followed by self-financed professional restoration. Development of community good will and support, based on local history and heritage values, as well as contribution to the local economy and culture, is essential to restoration and future utilization potential. The municipal heritage site designation process was found to be easy to navigate but the lack of incentives and government priority, particularly in tax, retrofitting, and financing, presents substantial obstacles.

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When Smithfield was built, approximately 65% of Canadians lived in rural areas<sup>7</sup>. By 2015, 81% of all Canadians lived in cities<sup>8</sup>. As economic imperatives, culture, and convenience continue to draw Canadians into the urban environment, the connection to rural heritage necessarily diminishes with a commensurate evacuation of rural architecture. Yet in a world increasingly polarized by media and technological influences, preservation, and reoccupation of rural heritage properties has the potential to maintain much-needed perspectives on land use and community. As stated by geographer Cole Harris:

"... the spaces of early Canadian life have their continuing legacies in an ongoing engagement with sparsely settled land and with very different ways of being."

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## (ENDNOTES)

<sup>1</sup> Bryce, G. *The Scotsman in Canada*, 1911, The Musson Book Company Limited,

Toronto, Canada, p. 403 at <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/canada/vol2/canada2-33.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, L. G. 2008 "Barns of the Moose Mountains" *Architectural History of Saskatchewan*, Winter 2008 ed.; revised 2008 "Agricultural Cathedrals of Saskatchewan's Moose Mountains", *Heritage*, Vol IX, No. 3. p. 46

<sup>3</sup> The Heritage Property Act, Statutes of Saskatchewan, c. H-2.2, s. 11(4)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* s. 11(2)

<sup>5</sup> Chipeniuk, R. "Some Tools for Planning for Amenity Migration in Remote Rural Settlements: Lessons from Participatory Action" April 2008 *Community Development Journal*, Volume 43, Issue 2, pp. 222 - 238

<sup>6</sup> The Province of Saskatchewan applied provincial sales tax to renovation projects, including heritage restoration, as of April 1, 2016. Federal GST also applies.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, 1915 [http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-310-x/2011003/fig/fig3\\_2-1-eng.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-310-x/2011003/fig/fig3_2-1-eng.cfm)

<sup>8</sup> Canada: Degree of urbanization from 2005 to 2015 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271208/urbanization-in-canada/>

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