



**ROBSON TANNERY OFFICE
AND CLOCA BUILDING**

**100 WHITING AVENUE
CITY OF OSHAWA**

**PREPARED FOR HERITAGE OSHAWA
BY**

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2002

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SUMMARY

Until the demise of Robson - Lang Leathers Ltd. in 1977, tanning was Oshawa's oldest industry. This Cedar Dale location, acquired in 1898 from A.S. Whiting Manufacturing by James Robson, witnessed the industry's greatest period of expansion and success. The subject building was erected in the mid 1920s (before 1927) as the Robson corporate head office. It is in the Modern Classical style. The decision to use golden-yellow or buff brick with stone accents is uncharacteristic of most historic industrial construction. In near original condition, the building is a lone survivor of a much larger industrial complex. As a remnant site, it may contain archaeological evidence of the operations of Whiting and Robson.

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ROBSON TANNERY OFFICE AND CLOCA BUILDING

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PART LOTS 9-10, BROKEN FRONT CONCESSION, EAST WHITBY TOWNSHIP
NOW RP40R7891 PART 1 - 11, 12, 15, 23, 24, 29, 30

LOT HISTORY

Although lots 9 and 10, Broken Front concession, East Whitby township, were patented in 1798 by Isabella Shaw, the most significant development on the property was undertaken by Algernon S. Whiting. Whiting came to Oshawa in 1850 from Connecticut. Shortly after arriving, he organized the Oshawa Manufacturing Company to make farm implements. In 1858, Whiting and E.C. Tuttle became partners and in 1862 established the Cedar Dale Works. On July 16, 1862, they bought an acre of Lot 10, adding other parcels of lots 9 and 10 as needed. Most of the land was acquired from the Conant [Conat] family.¹ⁿ

The Cedar Dale Works manufactured scythes, forks, and other hand implements and tools. John Cowan, who came to Oshawa in 1866 to join his brother William in the dry goods business, undertook the management of the Works in 1867. He soon bought out E.C. Tuttle and the firm became Whiting & Cowan. Cowan withdrew after five years and with his brother formed the Ontario Malleable Iron Co. Ltd. Whiting & Cowan became A.S. Whiting Manufacturing Company in 1872.

When Whiting died in 1876, he was succeeded in the business by his son-in-law, R.S.

Hamlin. In 1886, the business was sold to "Mr. Chaplain of St. Catharines" who used the Cedar Dale location as a branch plant. The operation was closed in 1898-99. On

¹ The American Conants were early owners of a fleet of vessels on Lake Ontario. They had extensive real estate holdings in the Oshawa area. *Oshawa: The Manchester of Canada, 1898*, p.33.

December 2, 1898, A.S. Whiting Manufacturing Company sold the property and vacant buildings to Oshawa tanner, James Robson, for \$10,000.

ROBSON LEATHER

Two early nineteenth century tanneries were established in Oshawa by Thomas and William Bartlett. Following their deaths, James Robson and a partner, William Lauchland, bought (in 1865) the South Oshawa Tannery on Cedar Dale Creek. James was born on a farm near Whitby in 1842 and learned the tanning trade as a youth. When Lauchland retired in 1893, the business ownership was transferred to James. He soon took in his sons Charles (born about 1873) and Frank (born about 1871) as partners.

On December 2, 1898, James bought the subject property and vacant buildings at Whiting Avenue from A.S. Whiting Manufacturing Company. This proved opportune as Robson's South Oshawa Tannery was destroyed by fire in August 1899.²

In February 1901, James divided the ownership of the property between himself and sons, Frank W. and Charles F. Robson. The business was known then as James Robson & Sons. When James died about 1904, the interest was transferred to Charles F. and Frank. In November 1915, Frank and Charles Norman Robson restructured the ownership of the property under the name of The Robson Leather Co. Ltd.

EXPANSION

The original building occupied by Whiting Manufacturing was described as "a small structure which had a capacity of less than 50 hides a day."³ A drawing of the Cedar Dale Tannery about 1905-09,⁴ shows an industrial complex with several, one to three storey, brick buildings. A depiction dated about 1915, indicates that some original buildings were removed and others constructed in their place.

² T.E. Kaiser, *Historic Sketches of Oshawa*, p.155.

³ "First Big Industry in Oshawa Built at Suggestion of Simcoe." *The Oshawa Times*, June 24, 1967.

⁴ This drawing appears as letterhead, dated 190_. The name James Robson has been stroked out, suggesting this dates after his death in 1904.

The decade of the 1920s was a significant period of expansion for the tanning company. Construction activity during that period included the office building now known as the CLOCA building at 100 Whiting Avenue. By 1927, Robson Leather was enjoying "great prosperity," particularly with its chrome patent leather shoes sold under the trademark of Black Beauty. They sold all varieties of leather used in the manufacture of the upper part of shoes. The July 5, 1927, issue of the *Shoe and Leather Journal and Footwear, Consolidated*, describes Robson Leather as "Oshawa's oldest industry":

Today the plant covers an area of about five acres, employs approximately 300 workmen and turn out 2000 sides a day. Antiquated methods have given way to the skill of the chemist, the rumble of the tanning drums and the whirr of busy machinery.

The Second War proved lucrative for Robson Leather when it was contracted to supply the Canadian forces with boot leather. In 1963, the firm merged with James Lang Leather Co. of Kitchener to become Robson – Lang Leathers Ltd. with branch plants in Oshawa, Cobourg, Barrie, Kitchener, and London. An aerial view in *The Oshawa Times*, February 28, 1967, indicates a large industrial complex at Cedar Dale. The office building was the first reached by the driveway entrance.

After a long strike, the Robson – Lang Oshawa plant closed in May 1977. The following May, the company holdings were transferred to a trustee, Dell Realty (Windsor) Inc. awaiting their final disposition through another Robson company, Americana Holdings Ltd. On November 8, 1980, fire destroyed most of the structures at the Cedar Dale location.

CURRENT OWNER

This is now a 41.94 acre parcel owned since 1984 by the Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority (CLOCA). Like many other nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial locations, there is a legacy of contamination in the area. Toxic chromium, cyanide acid, and heavy metals have been found in the soil and in Oshawa Creek where it crosses the property to the rear of the subject building.

ARCHITECTURE

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION

The office building is believed to have been erected in the mid 1920s (before 1927), during a period of expansion at the Robson Leather, Cedar Dale location. It appears in several images published in 1927 and is prominent in the large oval label used by the Robson – Lang corporation.

STYLE

Modern Classicism was a popular style in the 1920s. As part of a period of post First War restraint or a "chased simplicity" in architecture, it was in contrast to the flamboyant Edwardian Classical and Beaux-Arts styles from earlier in the twentieth century. Erected in the mid 1920s, the Robson office building was influenced by the Modern Classical approach:

Here again are large public buildings following the classical theme. They have symmetrical main facades, flat or nearly flat roofs, a monumental order of pilasters (but no columns) across the front, and a prominent pilinth and entablatures, all executed in white stone or artificial cast stone. Sometimes the classical motifs of pilasters and entablatures are extremely simplified, so that the surface of the building is a grid of horizontal and vertical lines. Smaller public buildings are often faced with brick, with contrasting stone trim. The execution is quite different [than Beaux-Arts] in that the classical features have been flattened or linearized, rather than being as something three dimensional.⁵

For an industrial site, this is an unusually stylish building in an uncharacteristic colour of golden-yellow or cream brick with white stone. It predates the austerity that followed the economic depression triggered by the failure of the stock market in 1929. There are many similarities to the 1928-29 Oshawa Masonic Temple at 91 Centre Street South.

⁵ J. Maitland; Hucker and Ricketts. *A Guide to Canadian Architectural Styles*, p.132.

FORM

This is essentially a two storey, three bay, rectangular block, facing north - northeast. The side (west) wing was added after 1967 but is sympathetic in style, form, and materials.

MASONRY

The masonry is a golden-yellow or buff colour brick trimmed in smooth stone (on closer examination this may prove to be cast concrete with some wood sections). The perimeter (sill) band appears as smooth stone that forms a continuous plinth or base course for brick pilasters positioned on all facades. Each pilaster culminates in a Doric capital in stone, giving the illusion of columns supporting a horizontal entablature. The entablature is on all sides. Above it is more brick with raised areas that visually extend the pilasters to the roof. The entablature on the north facade originally contained the Robson Leather signband.

ROOF

The roof is flat and now capped in metal. No chimneys exist and none are visible in the 1927 site plan drawing. In 1927, there was a flag staff on the roof above the main entrance.

WINDOW OPENINGS

All window openings are flat, in wide and narrow widths, with masonry lugsills. They appear to have moulded wood frames, but no trim. The openings on the lower level have stone (or concrete) heads; the upper windows are headed by the entablature. Only the openings on the front facade are symmetrically placed. Some of the sashes of the lower level have an upper transom area. All sashes have been replaced and one opening on the east side is enclosed with glass blocks.

DOORCASE

The main entrance is a flat roofed, enclosed, brick portico that matches the main building in detailing. The portico is flanked by a narrow window opening on each side. The wood

doors are double leafed, with glass panels. Above the doors is a large, multipaned transom. There may have been some alteration to the signband of the entablature to accommodate the letters CLOCA (Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority).

There is a second entrance on the south facade that may be a renovation.

FOUNDATION

This is believed to be a concrete foundation with a brick base course. There are basement window openings. The foundation of the portico incorporates some stone blocks.

SETTING

The former Robson office building is in its original location, but has been left in solitude by the destruction of the surrounding industrial site that it served. The landscape is in the initial stages of regeneration as meadow and scrubland. Nearby, two streets with the historically significant names of Frank and Robson are lined with the working class houses of former employees of Whiting Manufacturing and Robson Leather.

CONDITION

The building is in near original condition, with the possible exception of replacement window sashes and changes to the signbands. The addition to the west does not detract from the original style or form. There is some evidence of brick damage, notably on the south facade. This may have been caused by aggressive cleaning.

SIGNIFICANCE

Until the demise of Robson – Lang Leathers Ltd. in 1977, tanning was Oshawa's oldest industry. This Cedar Dale location, acquired in 1898 from A.S. Whiting Manufacturing by James Robson, witnessed the industry's greatest period of expansion and success. The subject building was erected in the mid 1920s (before 1927) as the Robson corporate head office. It is in the Modern Classical style. The decision to use golden-yellow or buff brick with stone accents is uncharacteristic of most historic industrial construction. In near

original condition, the building is a lone survivor of a much larger industrial complex. As a remnant site, it may contain archaeological evidence of the operations of Whiting and Robson.

APPENDIX

Legal description and site plan, January 21, 1873. *Durham Land Registrar's Office*

Drawing of Cedar Dale Tannery appears as letterhead, dated 190_. The name James Robson has been stroked out, suggesting this dates after his death in 1904. The Robson office building is not in the view.

"Evolution of a Leather Industry." 1915. Robson office building is not in the view.

"Older Than The Dominion." *Shoe and Leather Journal and Footwear in Canada, consolidated*. July 5, 1927. Robson office building is in centre of drawing.

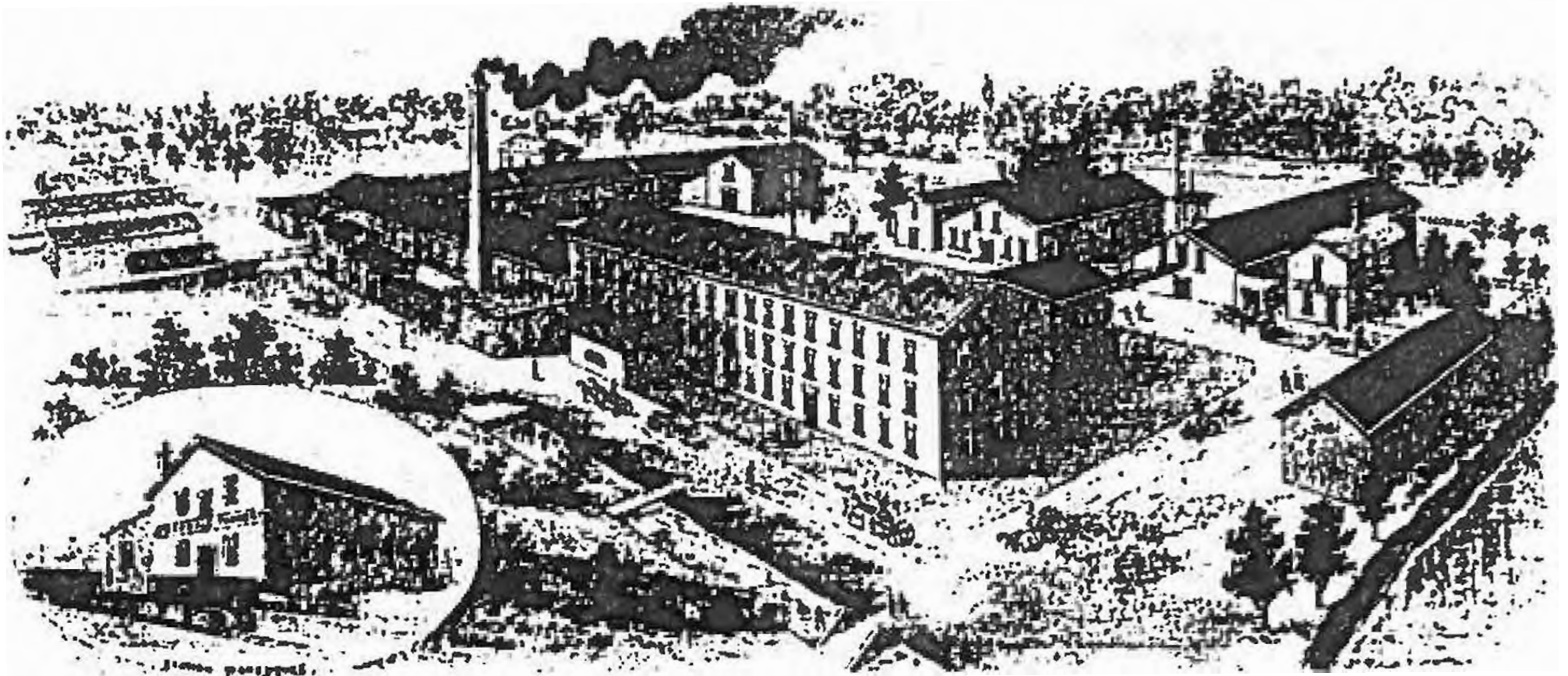
Aerial view of Robson-Lang Leathers, *The Oshawa Times*, February 28, 1967. Robson office building is right of centre of drawing.

Sources

Photographs September 2002

Cover	East facade
1	Entryway, east facade
2	Entryway, east facade
3	East and south facades
4	South and east facades
5	Southwest corner detail
6	South and west facades

FRANK W. ROBSON.



CEDAR DALE TANNERY.

EVOLUTION OF A LEATHER INDUSTRY

A Great Enterprise that has Developed from a Small Beginning. The Policy that has Made Robson Leathers Famous

IT is a far cry from the unpretentious little tannery that nestled by the Cedardale Creek and that was started by the late James Robson in 1865 to the spacious modern premises and plant and the elaborate up-to-date equipment that produce

ROBSON LEATHERS

to-day. The day of the horse-power bark mill, outside vats and laborious hand methods have

five acres and two hundred and fifty men to complete the output of 1,800 sides a day.

GOOD SIDE UPPER LEATHER

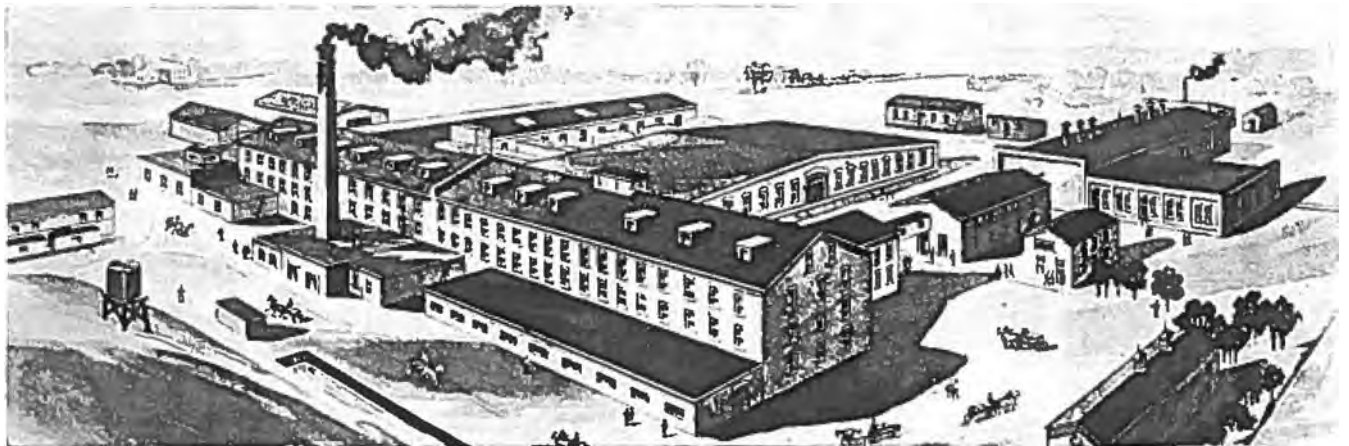
From a small line of ordinary black bark-tanned upper leathers, the range of goods has developed so as to embrace a general line of side upper leather in the most approved finishes, including a patent leather that is known for its quality not only in Canada but abroad.



given place to the skill of the chemist, the rumble of "drums," and the busy whirr of machinery. Where the industry once called for the limited area of a small wooden building employing a few hands, it now requires a premises of nearly

QUALITY FIRST

Nevertheless the foundations of the present large and prosperous enterprise were faithfully laid in the little old tannery, where **QUALITY** was made the prime consideration in turning



THE ROBSON LEATHER COMPANY'S PLANT

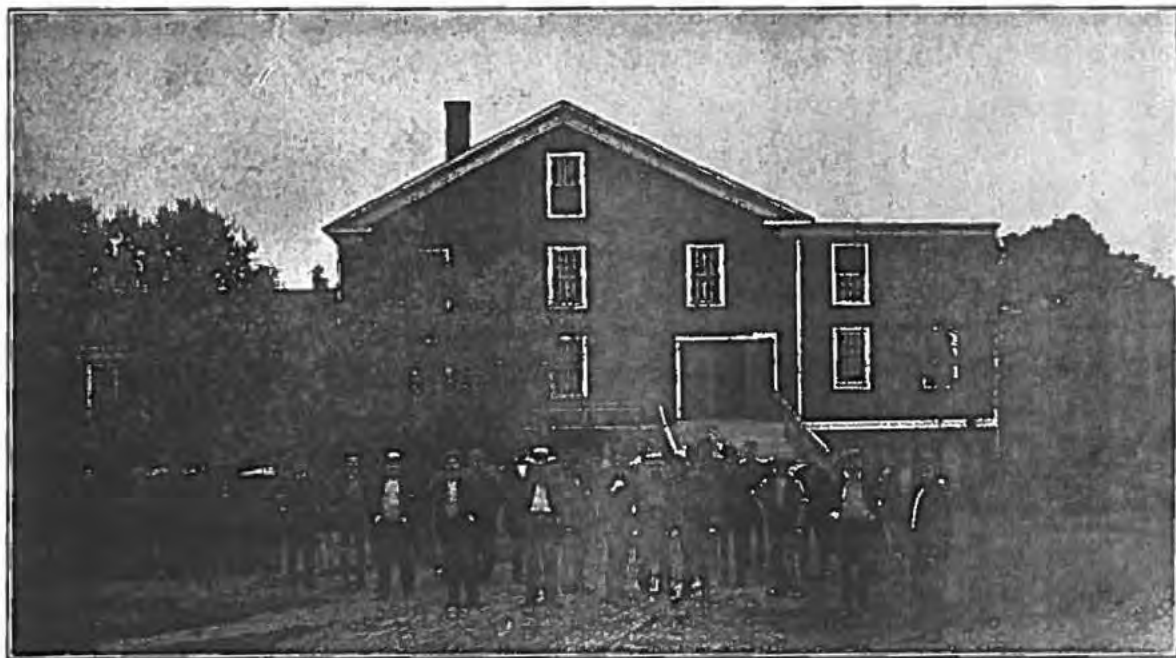
Older Than The Robson Leather



Mr. Charles Robson
President

Just before Confederation, the late James Robson started a little tannery by the side of the Cedarvale Creek, near the present town of Oshawa, Ontario.

Tanning methods in those days were very laborious—the power if any, was “horsepower,” the vats were outside and the hands were limited. For sixty-two years this plant has been known as the Cedarvale Tannery, but its growth in size and consequent output has been continuous. In the old days a small wooden building was sufficient to handle the business, but today the plant covers an area of about five acres, employs approximately 300 workmen and turns out 2000 sides a day. Antiquated methods have given way to the skill of the chemist, the rumble of the tanning drums and the whirr of busy machinery.



The original tannery on West Mill St., in 1865

The Robson Leather Co.,

the Dominion

Company has Served Canada for 62 Years

When the late James Robson died some twenty-two years ago he left the business in the hands of his two sons, Messrs. Charles and Frank W. Robson, both of whom had been actively interested in the business which was then known as James Robson & Sons. Both of these men went into the tannery immediately on leaving public school, and their entire time and energy was devoted to the development and success of the business.

James Robson manufactured a small line of ordinary black bark-tanned upper leather but the range now includes a general line of chrome tan side upper leather in every wanted color and finish, including the well known brand of Black Beauty Patent.

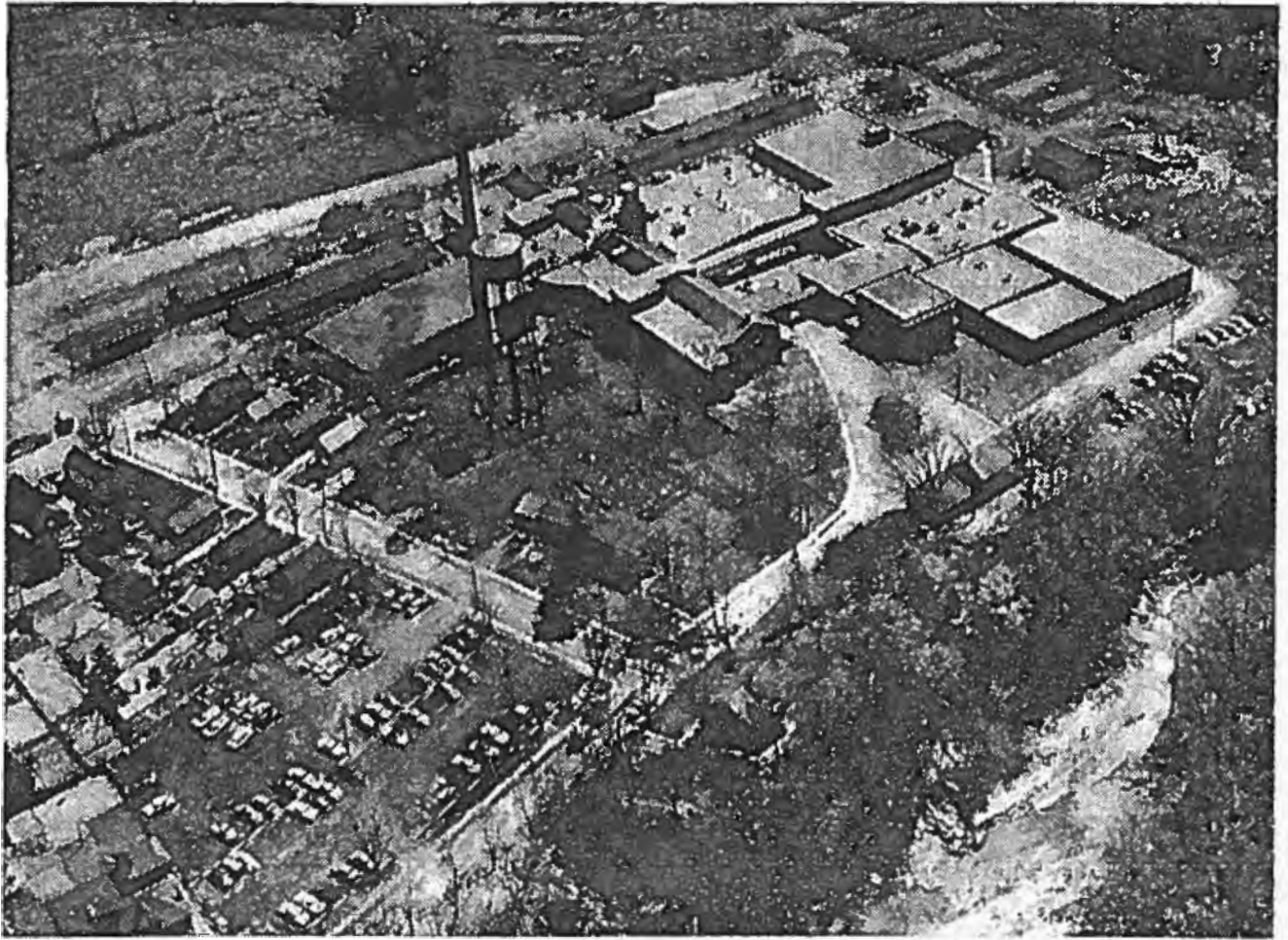


Present Offices and Plant of The Robson Leather Co. Ltd., Oshawa, Ont.

Exact Size (for framed picture)

Limited Montreal - Oshawa - Quebec

0003
0001
#32



ROBSON-LANG LEATHERS IS ONE OF CITY'S OLDEST FIRMS
... They Also Employ One Of City's largest Labor Forces photographic Survey Photo

SOURCES

Conveyances Abstract and related documents. *Durham Land Registrar's Office*

East Whitby census, 1871 to 1901. *Barrie Public Library*

Robson Leather Co. Files. *Oshawa Community Archives*

Shoe and Leather Journal and Footwear in Canada, Consolidated. July 5, 1927.
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"Robson Leather Co. Dates Back to 1830." *Oshawa Daily Reformer*, June 30, 1927.

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