

Awning firm's work is never boring

David Parker, Calgary Herald

Published: Friday, August 27, 2010

On a nice sunny day we spent around five hours showing off Heritage Park to our U.K. guests and could have spent much longer if we had allowed more time to explore Gasoline Alley Museum. It offers a wonderful step back in time, but what intrigued me were not just the automobiles, gas pumps, Husky Service Station and the huge collection of early advertising signs, but the whole historic atmosphere.

Knowledgeable volunteers dressed in period clothing helped but so did other things I noticed such as the awnings recreated from the 1917 era.

They and others around the park were designed and manufactured by Calgary Tent & Awning, which should have a good feeling for the period as it has been a successful business in Calgary since 1928 and would have made many of the retail awnings of that time.

Its first location was at 17th Avenue and 5th Street S.W. near Western Canada High School where it made its start by sewing canvas feed bags and leather bridles. A British sailmaker named Fred Strong introduced more canvas work and it was soon into awnings, tarps and tents.

For many years the manufacturing plant was behind the Stampeder Hotel in the Manchester Industrial area and made a move to its current 10,000-square-foot building on 28th Street N.E. in 1987.

President and owner Marty Way joined the firm as a salesman in the industrial division in 1979, rose to the position of general manager and bought Calgary Tent & Awning in 1997.

He showed me the 1914 Chandler's Guide which was used to create the Heritage Park awnings that he says were the highlight of a Calgary tour by members of the Industrial Fabrics Association International.

Today his permanent staff of 14 work on the design and manufacture of a wide range of custom textile products from commercial and residential awnings to tents, teepees and yurts.

Way says that much of the business is in supplying items that others do not know how, or just don't want, to make.

A puzzler for a time was how to provide a boot for Ganesha, the zoo's big male elephant that had injured a foot that needed covering for post-operative rehabilitation to keep the wound from being infected.

Several attempts were made before the operation to get the animal conditioned to wearing a boot was successful; he ripped off the first ones but eventually, with the aid of a seatbelt buckle and canvas sewn onto a durable rubber mat sole, it was accepted and solved the problem.

Many customers of Calgary Tent & Awning require graphics on their canvases and Judy Rebernak, who has been the company's graphic artist for 21 years, is kept busy applying designs to everything from colourful retail awnings to horse coolers for Spruce Meadows; advertising banners to chuckwagon tarps.

Custom design is what makes the work so interesting -- such as the retractable blinds the shop made for the bobsled track at Whistler to keep the sun at bay. Residential as well as commercial awnings need accurate measurements before manufacturing and installation but it's made easier today with the use of lighter aluminum instead of steel for framing.

Awnings are a big portion of the business but Way says there is a growing need for canvas products such as boat and skidoo covers, parkade ticket-spitter covers, industrial shelters, outfitter's tents and pop-up shelters -- a big change since the company's feed bag start.

Rashida Keshavjee has been appointed Operation Eyesight's director of program planning and policy of international programs. A specialist in international community and project development for the past 20 years, she has been an instructor and lecturer at Mount Royal University since 2008, led research projects and written curriculum for the Aga Khan Development Network in France, and led and managed a social development program in Madagascar for five years.

Based at the Calgary world headquarters, Keshavjee will work collaboratively with Operation Eyesight's directors in India and Africa.

Would you believe that the price of a pint of Guinness was only \$3.75 in 1986? That was when the Rose & Crown on 4th Street S.W. opened and that's the price it is charging at its birthday celebrations tomorrow.

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