

Special Commemorative Pullout Section

Marking the 20th anniversary of Beardmore closing

The New Tanner

Thursday, September 14th, 2006

Twenty years ago, Tuesday, September 12, the Beardmore tannery closed its door forever after 146 years of being Acton's largest employer. The New Tanner examines the impact of that closing in these pages and offers a glimpse into the lives of some of its employees when Beardmore was a big player in many lives here.



The Beardmore tannery complex spread over 160 acres

Closing hit Acton like shock wave - Mayor

By Frances Niblock

A lingering bad smell was the first sign 20 years ago that something was wrong at Acton's largest employer, the Beardmore tannery.

Until that summer, Canada Packers officials had been good about dealing with the inevitable smells from the leather tanning process that wafted over Acton on a regular basis.

But on June 12, 1986 it became clear why the smell complaints weren't being returned - Canada Packers announced the facility - once the largest tannery in the British Empire - was closing, putting 329 people out of work.

On closing day, September 12, 1986, 105 workers were still jobless, and 224 had found other work or taken early retirement, thanks to a Federal Labour Adjustment program that allowed employees 54 years

or older with 10 years seniority to earn 65 per cent of the income until they hit retirement age.

The day became known as "Black Thursday" - the day that transformed Acton from an industrial town to a bedroom community. The closure news hit Acton like a shock wave - Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette said there was no warning and the news stunned everyone.

"It was devastating, but look how far we've come. Acton has a new arena, we have a new firehall, we have the plaza and we're going to have a community sports park. I think the new housing has injected some life and strength in our business community," Bonnette said, adding that many thought the Town would not recover.

Acton's adopted "Leathertown" theme began in 1842 when Abraham Nelles built a tannery in Acton, drawn to this area by

the abundance of hemlock needed in the tanning process.

In 1865, the Beardmore Tanning Company, owned by George Beardmore, a Hamilton tanner since 1844, purchased the business and became an integral part of the Acton village life.

Beardmore repaired buildings, installed new equipment, built employee housing, operated a co-operative store, and built tennis courts, a bowling green, a golf course, boathouse and an outdoor arena on Frederick Street.

Canada Packers purchased Beardmore in 1944, operating under the Beardmore name until the tannery closed in the fall of 1986.

At its peak, the tannery employed about 20 per cent of the Acton population of 6,500, paid the highest wages in the area and put \$8-million annually into local pay

packets and \$311,000 into Town coffers as taxes.

In June, when company officials announced the closure they blamed the elimination of federal import quotas on shoes for the move, but officials noted that the factory was old and expensive to operate as the shoe industry switched to more fabrics and plastics.

While many predicted that Acton would not recover - it did and in fact has prospered and now celebrates the Leathertown theme with an annual street party.

The 160-acre tannery property in the middle of Acton is owned by Maple Leaf Foods, created by a merger of McCain Capital Corporation and the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan Board.

It is zoned industrial, and now that the environmental cleanup on the site is complete, its future is a hot topic of discussion.