

# 'Mixed blessing' when Beardmore tannery was sold to Canada Packers – Bill Nelles

By Maggie Petrushevsky

The changes in the tannery's operation under the Beardmore family and under Canada Packers Inc. were a mixed blessing, says Bill Nelles, the man who was once supervisor of plant services and pollution control systems at the tannery.

"Canada Packers updated the plant and implemented new technologies as they came along," he says. "But if you needed something you had to go through 16 people to get authorization to get it. Before, you asked the colonel (Beardmore) and he said yes or no on the spot."

Nelles remembers the Beardmore family doing a lot for the town. For instance, the tannery groundskeeper also maintained Acton's lawn bowling greens. Canada Packers kept up a lot of the traditions but it "wasn't the same."

One of those kind-hearted gestures which may not be well known was how the company continued to care for its retirees in a time before Canada Pension.

"When you retired you got a job as a security guard," Nelles says. "Two guys did the watch on 12 hours shifts. You did 12 hour shifts on the gates and the two night watchmen each walked 12 miles every night covering their half of the yard."

The company also made a point of coordinating installation of new equipment and technology with retirements so that only rarely was anyone put out of a job because of modernization, he says.

"Of course, there's also the matter of needing to keep things running until new equipment was delivered," he says, "so it worked to their advantage too."

When Nelles joined the tannery workforce in 1949 it employed 750 people, including plenty of women. When it closed the workforce was down to 350.

Beardmore was an essential service during World War II and many women worked there including lots of mothers. They were allowed to come in at nine o'clock when their children went to school and leave at four to be there when the young ones arrived home.

"They didn't ease them out when the men came home (from the war)," Nelles says. "They were kept on if they wanted to stay."

In the beginning women may have been kept out of the heavier work but that changed in its later days, he says. If women were to be equal to men they had to do the same heavy work as their male co-workers.

Nelles, a descendant of the family that built Acton's first tannery in the



Bill Nelles, a descendant of Abraham Nelles who built the first tannery in Acton sometime probably in the 1830s, employed by Beardmore for 37 years. He's a lifelong resident of Acton.

1830's, agrees that Acton was certainly a company town in the 1800s.

"They even owned a general store downtown then, where you bought your groceries and supplies and they were deducted from your wages," he says.

Even after the war the tannery still ruled the roost, only more subtly. The town had only a few manufacturing plants after the war, and they all worked together to control wage and benefit

increases for their employees. Naturally, as the largest employer, the tannery's role was significant.

There had been a real division between labour and management under the Beardmore family. After Canada Packers took over, that began to change.

Like many other businesses, Beardmore suffered badly during the Great Depression and when Canada Packers bought the tannery, the banks actually owned

the business, not the family, Nelles says. Canada Packers upgraded all the facilities during and right after the war, Nelles says. Even though the old stone outer walls remained, everywhere, things changed.

For example, the tannery used to use one 55-ton boxcar of coal a day in the summer and two of them in the winter for heat, steam and power. There were steam engines powering machines all over the place as well as converting electricity to usable power.

"Remember we had 25 cycle power in those days," Nelles says, "and the machines from Europe were designed for their 60 cycle system. So we had to convert it."

During his time at the tannery they went from open drains, to closed drains, to filtration to a system where "you could almost drink the water because it was so pure when we were finished with it," he says. He points out that there was no technology for pollution control when the tannery first opened its doors in Acton. In the end, they were using a million gallons of water a day for their processing.

He was still in school when the tannery dam went out allowing its waste water to flood down through neighbouring properties and contaminate the town's in-ground reservoir at a

spring on a farm south of Acton.

In 1946 the tannery built a dam for its filtration plant and filled its lagoon as soon as the dam was completed. But the earth had not settled enough when the pond was filled so it "broke out."

"You can still see where it drowned all the trees," Nelles says. "It just washed over the top and into the reservoir at the spring."

He remembers town residents coming to farmers for drinking water because the town had none. He can't recall how long it took to correct the situation.



Colonel Alfred O. Beardmore, left, often attended Beardmore picnics at Prospect Park in Acton and other places along with hundreds of Beardmore employees. It was a great time had by all.

## Former head says Ineptitude at hdqtrs. played part in Beardmore closing

The former head of Acton's Beardmore tannery, Peter Dunham kept his comments short when asked about the anniversary of the plant's closing.

"I was very saddened when I learned of the closure of the Beardmore plant in Acton," he said, "particularly so for the hundreds of good and faithful workers who laboured there. However they can take pride in the knowledge that their quality products were valued all over the world, not only in Canada and the USA but also in South America – Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala, in Europe and the UK, and as far afield as China and Australia. In retrospect I think of what could have been but for the ineptitude of staff at headquarters. I can only wish the very best to all the Beardmore family."

Dunham first joined Beardmore in 1953 and worked on the sales desk. He ended his career with them as the tannery's president and general manager from 1972 until his retirement in 1985.

Dunham was also president and a director of the Tanners' Association of Canada and served as a member of the Canadian trade delegation to Poland, Russia and Czechoslovakia during the cold war.

He has lived in Guelph since his retirement in 1985.

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