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Belleville has long been known as a favourite location for cheese lovers. Jessie Cunningham, 83, knows about the popularity of and the demand for locally produced cheese: she once worked for the Black Diamond Cheese Ltd. that used to be located on Pinnacle Street.

The company was originally known as Belleville Cheddar Cheese Ltd. and was founded in 1933 by Robert F. Hart who started his own cheesemaking operations from a basement under the building that once housed National Grocers (currently occupied by The Brick).

The Belleville woman was hired to work at this office in 1939 as an office secretary-cum-manager whose job included overseeing customer service, preparation of invoices and general administration.

"This area used to be a great railway and cheese centre. It gradually changed but at one time there were quite a few cheese factories around here. Two of them were our own Black Diamond Cheese Company and the Foxboro Cheese factory. Our Black Diamond Cheese in those days were real gems which felt too good to eat," she says.

Demand for Hart's company cheese came from all over the world and it was all because of Hart's creativity which led him to revolutionize the way cheese was exported to countries across the globe.

Prior to Hart's experimentation with his product, the practice was to export cheese before it had been aged.

Hart developed method to ensure customer satisfaction with his goods. He adopted a method that fully cured his cheese first and waxed it to prevent it from drying it out. This creativity brought him huge satisfaction from his customers, which in turn generated outstanding growth in his export business.

"Those days you could get a five-pound cheese for a dollar and 50 cents. It was about 30 cents a pound. We used to send our cheese to our customers by CN Express, which would cost them another 30 cents to be delivered. So, for one dollar and 80 cents you, even if you live elsewhere, could get this beautiful Black Diamond Cheese and enjoy it," adds Cunningham.

She recalls Christmas season as the busiest time of the year for the company.

"Around this time, lots of businesses in the area liked to send our cheese as a treat to their customers. These businesses would send me a list with about 100 to 200 names and addresses on it and an order for cheese to be sent to each of these people. That used to keep us extremely busy."

Cunningham remembers a particularly regular and loyal customer of the company's cheese from Rochester.

"This man owned a restaurant over there. He used to have a standing order with me to send him a five-pound cheese once a month. He liked it so much. He never missed his cheese and never missed a payment," she laughs.

Cunningham says she worked for the company for six years and was no longer there when in 1947, a local businessman named Stanley L. Joss took over the control of the firm. Five years later, the company's name was changed to Black Diamond Cheese Ltd. The name was said to have derived from the aging process of the company's cheese that turned black the mould, which formed on the outer rind of the cheese when hot wax was poured over it. 'Black' was for the colour of the cheese while 'diamond' was to allude to the superior quality of this particular cheese.

The factory buildings and offices of the Black Diamond Cheese Ltd., which became a division of the Brooke Bond Foods Limited, were later moved to a location north of Highway 401 in, what was then, Thurlow Township.

The company is now part of the international firm, Parmalat Canada.

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