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Emhart

Moving to Trenton

Belleville bids farewell to Emhart

By JACK EVANS
Staff Reporter

She's one of Belleville's grand old ladies of industry— but she'll be little more than part of the city's history in a few weeks. One of Belleville's key manufacturers for nearly 80 years, the industrial complex on the banks of the Moira River is moving to Trenton to newer, more modern, facilities.

But at one point, its products earned Belleville the respected reputation of being Canada's lock-making capital. The plant, now known as Emhart Canada Ltd. — International Hardware Division — has undergone several name changes over the years. But today, with a workforce between 130 and 135, the plant is as busy as it was in the 1930s when the Corbin Lock company employed about 145 men and women.

For president and general manager Bill Wherry, the move to a Trenton plant poses a special administrative challenge, one which requires long hours and many meetings. The idea, he says, is to make the move with the least possible disruption and still meet delivery deadlines for customers.

The company conducted an extensive search for a suitable site in Belleville but was unable to find one that met its requirements. Finally then did it look to Trenton. And, says personnel officer Lorraine Morin, most employees already live in the Trenton and Frankford areas or in Belleville itself. Most will continue to work at the new plant, she explained.

The company's departure from Belleville's industrial scene leaves vacant a prime piece of real estate, the future of which is still a big question mark. While it is zoned industrial, the property — which comprises several acres — could well be used for

something else. That would erase from the site most traces of what had been for nearly eight decades a key part of the city's economy.

But the site's corporate connections have historical roots that reach back past the turn of the century. Indeed, the first links with commerce were established in 1835, when prominent industrialist-developer-politician Billa Flint, one of Belleville's first mayors — built his home on the property. Today, protected by historical designation, the two-storey brick structure houses company offices.

The site's connection with lock-making, however, dates back to 1910, when the Springer Lock Company started producing locks and various other fixtures, establishing the city as something of a pre-eminent Canadian manufacturer.

In 1931, the company was acquired by the American Hardware Company and became Corbin Lock. It continued until 1956, when Corbin Lock — the name still lingers in many minds — and Belleville Lock, which was located on Pinnacle Street, merged with the Peterborough Lock Company to form International Hardware. A 1963 corporate re-organization added "of Canada Ltd." In 1979, the plant became Emhart Canada, International Hardware Division.

Despite the frequent name changes, most production processes have changed little over the years. The foundry still melts bulk bronze and brass ingots for lock casings, door knobs and other associated hardware. Parts are still machined, stamped, assembled and polished. A burnishing operation still cleans casted parts with an acid solution.

Although the company will be gone — and the property's future is still unknown — for generations it will still be affectionately known as "the old lock plant."