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Since the first quarter of the 20th century Belleville has had its share of good luck in becoming home to many well-known industries in Canada. However, in the case of one of them, the city ironically owes its good fortune to a devastating fire that completely destroyed that young enterprise one January night five decades ago. It was, after all, an event that might have prompted the owners to begin their venture afresh in this city.

As the fury of the Second World War died down and drew to a close in Europe, two men, one from Chicago, Illinois and the other from Dayton, Ohio, got together and began making plans to put their experience in the confectionery business into starting a business venture producing Cheezies, a snack food rapidly growing in popularity in the U.S. at the time.

One of the men was W.T. Hawkins. Looking around to establish their first plant, Hawkins and his co-founder, Jim Marker, born in Dayton and now a resident of Belleville, directed their attention towards both north and south of the border.

"For all we know, we might have ended up in Mexico but there the main language used at work there is Spanish. Besides, you could instruct or supervise but you couldn't work there because one had to be a Mexican to be employed there. So, we decided against it and began to look closely at Canada," said Marker, now 82. With relevant tools and machinery in one truck, Marker headed straight to Canada.

Taking into account the strategic location of the community of Tweed along the rail-

way lines between Toronto and Montreal, Hawkins and Marker settled in with their plans and started the production of what is famously known today as Hawkins Cheezies in 1949. This particular brand of Cheezies gained its fame through its makers' claim of a product that was preservative free and made with real aged cheddar cheese.

"Things started well for the company in that community. We became an employer to many there, just regular folks, you know. The work involved was not high-tech. It did not need highly skilled workers. They worked hard and at the end of the day they earned themselves a wage just like everyone else."

At the time, the company employed about 125 people, mostly women, to work at the production line.

But as the brand new year of 1956 began to roll in, devastation shook the fledgling business as fire razed to the ground the building that served as the first home to the Hawkins Cheezies factory in the country.

"The fire in Tweed was bad. It almost broke us. We lost a lot of tools and machinery in that one night. Fortunately, it was just that and not lives."

Marker was at home when he received the devastating news that night from the night watchman.

The fire was suspected to have been

caused by sparks from the coal trains running past the building where the plant was located, he said.

"The sparks fell on the burlap that was used for insulating up near the eaves. There was this water station nearby and when the trains start up again to go, they generated sparks, which fell on our building. So, on that cold Jan. 6, 1956 our factory went up in flames."

The company suffered about \$250,000 in damage that night. However, the event did not shake the spirit and optimism of the owners. Unfazed and in a show of optimism and renewed hope, the owners of the company, by then with Shirley Woodcox as the third partner, moved to the 20,000-square-foot of floor space in the Graham Building at 105 Pinnacle St. in Belleville and 22 days later, production of Cheezies began again at the new plant.

The company began making other products such as potato chips, midget donuts, popcorn, popcorn balls, caramel coated popcorn and packaged nuts but through the decades their famous Cheezies remained the company's number one product. Although other snack food companies have produced cheese products, the Cheezies trademark is owned and used exclusively by W.T. Hawkins Ltd. Today, many Canadians know that the world champion cheese curl snacks are Hawkins' Cheezies, which are made in our very own Belleville, Ontario.

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