

Mead Johnson Company

①
→

Intel April 12/03
Saturday p. D2.

Many in this community might recall a popular weight loss product called Metrecal that flew off the retail shelves in the late 1960s into the homes of those who wished for a slimmer appearance here and everywhere in North America. The product was an achievement of Mead Johnson Company, which became a subsidiary of the Bristol-Meyers Pharmaceutical Group in 1967, and was produced in the manufacturing plant located on Dundas Street East in Belleville.

Linda Peoples, who began working for the company in 1962, still remembers the immense popularity of Metrecal.

"I remember Metrecal came in two or three flavours. The company's lab people used to come and get some employees to go and taste them. We didn't know what we were tasting and they'd ask us which one we liked the best. I remember thinking that Metrecal didn't taste medicinal at all, especially the one with the chocolate flavour. It tasted just like chocolate milk. No wonder it was popular," she recalls.

Peoples says that many took the product as meal replacement. Following this, the company developed Boost bars, which was not a product for weight loss but to provide enough nutrients for people on the go.

But products like Metrecal came in much later on the agenda of Edward Mead Johnson, founder of Mead Johnson Company in Evansville, Indiana. His company was originally established for developing and marketing quality products that meet the nutritional and lifestyle needs of children. The company's plant in Belleville produced world famous Pablum, Enfelac, Tempra and Prosobee before branching out to adult nutritional products such as Isocal, Sustain, Sustacal amongst others.

The city plant's operation began in 1925 with 15 employees which expanded to 350 by the early 1990s, recalls Jim Mullen, a former director of operations at the local plant. The company's liquid department of the plant opened in 1968. Health and safety regulations inside the plant were strictly maintained, he

adds.

"We were selling our products all over North America and other countries overseas. So we had to be very careful to comply with their health and safety rules and regulations. We strictly enforced good hygiene among our employees. They had to wear uniforms, gloves and hairnets while inside the manufacturing plant. We simply could not afford to relax our health and safety regulations," he says.

Peoples recalls being hired as a steno clerk at the company right after leaving Quinte Sec-

ondary High School at a wage of \$36 a week. Beginning five years later she became a secretary for different managers in the company before becoming an administrative assistant till the company's closure almost six years ago.

"It was such a super place to work. I never bothered to look for another job in all my 36 years of working there. I remember when we were graduating out of high school, Mead Johnson, Nortel and Ontario Hydro were considered the three best employers in the com-

munity. You just had to send in your resume to these companies," says Peoples.

Computers came to challenge her at work in the late 80s.

"We used to have this low-grade computer software called Display Write. Word Perfect came later. It was quite hard to get the machine loaded in the morning. Thankfully, we had a computer technician on staff and we got help almost right away," continues Peoples.

Part of her job included looking after accidents in the plant, she says thankful that there were not many such incidents.

"The most severe one that I recall was this woman whose uniform sleeve got caught in the production machine and pulled her arm in. Thankfully, she didn't lose her arm but she was injured and had to be off work for three months or so before returning to work."

Peoples remembers organizing boat cruises for the company employees and their wives to 1,000 Islands near Kingston.

"One year, we brought Island Queen (cruise boat) to Belleville. We brought it on a Friday night and since we had too many people to make just one trip we had to make two. It was here for two days. On Saturday afternoon, we got people from the Hastings Manor and took them for a cruise around the Bay for an hour or so. I think they enjoyed that".

Mullen, too, recalls the company sponsored hockey and baseball teams and the company employees' involvement in the corporate challenges organized by the city's Chamber of Commerce.

"We tried to be good citizens in the community and I think we were appreciated for that," Mullen says.

In October of 1996, Mead Johnson Company, one of Belleville's pioneering industries, shocked the community by announcing its decision to close down its seven decades old Dundas Street plant.

"We all worked together really well. When I see my former co-workers somewhere today, I still feel the warmth that we had shared. When that plant was shut down, I felt it was such a shame because it has been here so long and it was gone," says Peoples.

Intelligencer April 12, 2003 p. D2