

General Foods Marks Milestone

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When the companies that formed General Foods, Limited, were merged in 1949, a new program was instituted at Cobourg. That year, 13,000 square feet of space were added to facilities, and unknown to many; it was the herald of a major expansion move.

In 1955, Kool-Aid manufacturing was brought to Cobourg; in 1956, Jell-O; in 1962 LaFrance Bluing and Good Seasons Salad Dressing and 1963, all Post Cereal products, Minute Rice products, Calumet Baking Powder and Swans Down Flour.

Coupled with this came a host of new convenience foods developed in the company's research laboratories. Today the General Foods Cobourg complex produces 46 different products including the original Certo and bulk pectin.

"It's been an exciting 50 years for both General Foods and Cobourg," H. C. Gibson, manager of the GF plant said. "We think the next 50 years will be even more so."

Cobourg Business

Douglas turned to Richard T. Mohan to operate the plant.

A brilliant executive, Mohan was a lecturer at Queen's University, Kingston, who had worked for Douglas for several years. His success made this appointment a "natural".

Douglas' insight was well rewarded - Mohan was later to become president of General Foods, Limited.

By 1921, the pectin was ready for the consumer market under the trade name Certo. Mohan sent his salesmen across Canada to demonstrate its effectiveness and the salesmen went so far as to prepare jams in the grocery stores to prove their point.

Acceptance was immediate and overwhelming. Underlying Certo's success was the decision in 1927 to change the name of the company to Certo Corporation.

In the meantime, the health of Douglas began to deteriorate and the company searched for a means to ensure growth should he be unable to carry on. Officials finally settled on the Postum Company as the one most likely to benefit Certo Corp. and in 1929 the self-generated merger was completed. That same year Robert Douglas died.

Mohan called the 12 senior employees of the original Canadian operation to his home. Each was handed an envelope in order of seniority.

They were asked to take the envelopes home and open them. Inside was a personal cheque from Douglas and shares in the company.

As Jim McDonnell, one of the originals said, "Douglas left something to all of us old-timers."

As part of the Postum Company, progress and growth continued with new products and new facilities being added on a regular basis.

On September 12, 1969, General Foods, Limited, reached a major milestone in its history with the completion of a half century of operations in Cobourg.

During the past 50 years, facilities have grown from a small 160-foot by 66-foot, building to a multi-million dollar complex containing more than 500,000 square feet of space, a modern \$1.5 million research establishment, a manufacturing plant employing more than 800 persons, and a warehouse of more than 100,000 square feet.

This 50-year relationship with Cobourg began in 1919 when the town's industrial commission undertook to bring industry to this small Ontario community.

Their objective was to provide employment for war veterans returning from Europe after the Armistice of 1918.

Robert Douglas, a creative Scot, was persuaded to open a ranch in Canada of his Rochester-based York State Fruit Company.

York State was described "the world's largest vinegar manufacturer", but its impact on Cobourg and Canada would be in another area - manufacture of pectin, the gelling substance used as the basis of jams and jellies.

To Douglas, expansion in Cobourg opened other vistas, particularly as a means of entering the great British Empire market. York State came to Canada as Douglas Canning Co.

Meanwhile, he was exploring possibilities of producing pectin - made from the cores and skins of fruits - for use at home.

Cobourg provided the best possible site. A short 70-mile ferry ride from Rochester, it is located in the heart of a major apple belt, providing raw materials to manufacture products.

Today, General Foods owns 94 acres in Cobourg, north of the railway tracks and running along Ontario and William Streets. Even a few months ago, it acquired an additional six acres when the company bought the Whitefield property on Ontario St. A thin strip of GF-owned land joins the main block through to Elgin St., east of the Ganaraska Conservation Park.

It all began in the old munitions plant buildings on Ontario St. just north of the tracks.

The first commercial pectin was produced in 1919 for the Canadian and Commonwealth markets at Cobourg. Then in 1923, "Certo" pectin moved into the consumer market, and that's what you may remember your mother using when she made her jellies.

By the mid-1920's employment never went over 75 at peaks.

The original Douglas Packing Company came to be known as Douglas-Pectin Limited, and in 1929 it was bought out by the Postum Company which later amalgamated with other firms to become General Foods.

By the end of World War II, suddenly dog food markets were becoming big, and the first manufacturing of Gaines dog food in Canada was begun at Cobourg in 1945.

In 1954, a Research department was begun here, and today its staff has 40 people.

In 1956, the Jell-Operation was moved to Cobourg from downtown Montreal, and employment began to move up quickly. A few years later, in 1963, there were major plant expansions to handle Post cereals, Minute Rice, Swans Down, Calumet and LaFrance products, all familiar products on the food store shelves.

Tang and Awake came to Cobourg in 1964 and have been growing rapidly ever since. Post Honey-comb and Minute Breakfast and Kool-Aid all brought expansions in 1965. At the same time, came a major expansion in the Cobourg Research Centre.

In 1966, Gaines added its soft-moist pet food facilities to make Gaines-burgers and Top Choice here.

Shake'n Bake was a new product in 1967, requiring production space along with Start flavor crystals. A complete new rice mill was also needed that year, due to the success of Minute Rice across the Canadian market.

In 1968, Cool Whip began its plant operation. In 1969, as the company celebrated 50 years at Cobourg, came larger warehouses; in 1970 more expansion of facilities and in 1971, still more production of Minute Rice and Gaines petfoods.

Then last year, boiler facilities were expanded to permit a substantial growth in plant capacity, in preparation for Thursday's announcement.

....where it all began



First office building still stands

erry

Apples, empty plant, ferry brought company to town

It was a threesome of circumstances which puts General Foods' 1,000-employees in Cobourg today.

Back in 1919, when the beginning company Douglas-Packing came here from the U.S., it was because of the nearby supply of apples to provide the pectin, the availability of an idle wartime munitions plant, and a ferry across the lake to Rochester, New York.

"I would put the supply of apples and the availability of the plant on about equal footing in making the decision. The ferry across Lake Ontario was just an extra positive feature," R.G. "Dick" Parker, retired manager of the Cobourg plant, recalled a few days ago. The pectin, of course, was the essential gelling ingredient every housewife had to have as she made her jellies.

The U.S. company wanted a plant in Canada to get inside the tariffs of the British Commonwealth.

Mr. Parker came here when the plant did, and has been here ever since. By 1948, he was plant manager, and he retired in 1962 when H.C. "Hoot" Gibson took over.

Cobourg was in the heart of the apple country in

those days. There were also many smaller canning plants in the area. Later they were bought out and closed down as larger firms took over and expanded their markets nationally. There was a good demand for pectin both by manufacturers as well as the housewife.

Dick Parker reminisced this week about the beginning days in Cobourg.

"I grew up in Fairport, New York," he said. "It was just a little place then, about seven miles outside Rochester. Today, it's right in the city."

"That's where Douglas-Packing had its plant, I got a job as a chemist. In fact, I supervised the very first batch of pectin that was made at Fairport."

"I came over to Cobourg for the first time on June 5, 1919, to take a look at the empty plant, and to see what we would need for the lab. I came back again to stay on September 5, and on September 27, my wife Margery and I were married in Fairport and we came back to Cobourg and have been here ever since."

"The proudest moment of my life was in 1952 when I became a Canadian citizen," he said. "It took me a while to get around to it. But I knew then where I belonged."

"When I retired I took a visit back to Fairport, but it didn't take me long to realize that Cobourg is my home."

Mr. Parker is president of the board of Cobourg District General Hospital, and a very busy member of Cobourg Golf and Curling Club. For many years he and his wife lived on Queen St. in town, before buying an attractive loghouse on the west side of highway 45 on the Cobourg side of Baltimore.

The man who brought the company to Cobourg was R. T. Mohan, its first plant manager. Mr. Mohan was a Canadian, and grew up at Brockville. He was working in Fairport, New York for Duffy-Mott, having gone there from Canadian Cannery at Hamilton. Douglas-Packing hired him from the Duffy-Mott firm. Soon he was making plans to put Douglas Packing into Canada.

The first office building used by the company still stands just off Ontario St. It's a tiny structure with columns at front. A few years ago, there were plans to tear it down, but the current manager Hoot Gibson wouldn't hear of it, and he found a new use for it. It now holds the LaFrance blueing operation.

There were empty buildings along Ontario St., owned by the Imperial Munitions Board. Nitrate of soda had been stored in the old buildings, and it was then taken a few blocks south in Cobourg to be put into shells being manufactured in a plant where the Bird-Archer plant is situated now, near the waterfront.

In 1919, the plant was empty, and Douglas-Packing bought it.

Mr. Parker recalls, "We bought apples all along the lakeshore, and used the apple pulp to make the pectin. From the juice we made vinegar. We sold the pectin in large quantities to canners, but we also bottled it for the housewife. We did not sell the vinegar to the public, but shipped it in bulk to Canada Vinegars," he said.

The company started in Cobourg with 50 to 75 employees, with a seasonal peak in late spring as supplies were being readied for the canning season. The company came to be known as Douglas-Pectin.

In 1929, Douglas-Pectin was bought out by Postum in the U.S., and the Canadian plant went in the deal as well. Other amalgamations took place in the American parent.

Baker Chocolate, and General Foods was organized.

As General Foods expanded in the U.S., additional lines were added to the Canadian company, and the number of products and volume at the Cobourg plant rose steadily.

While Mr. Parker was manager, Kool-Aid was added, and an orange drink "Sun-Up" was brought in.

"Sun Up went well," he recalled, "but nothing like the way Tang did when it was developed, and just took off, really took off."

In 1938, Mr. Mohan moved to the Toronto office of General Foods, and Dudley Spragge became manager. His daughter, Judith, is Mrs. J. M. Rolph. Mr. Parker was made plant superintendent. In 1943, Mr. Parker became assistant plant manager, and in 1948, succeeded Mr. Spragge as manager.

Mr. Parker remained manager until "Hoot" Gibson took over in 1962.

Mr. Gibson has now become capital projects manager. He was born in Canada, but joined GF at Battle Creek, Mich. 31 years ago. In 1946, he transferred to the Windsor plant, then to Toronto head office in 1949 and to

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