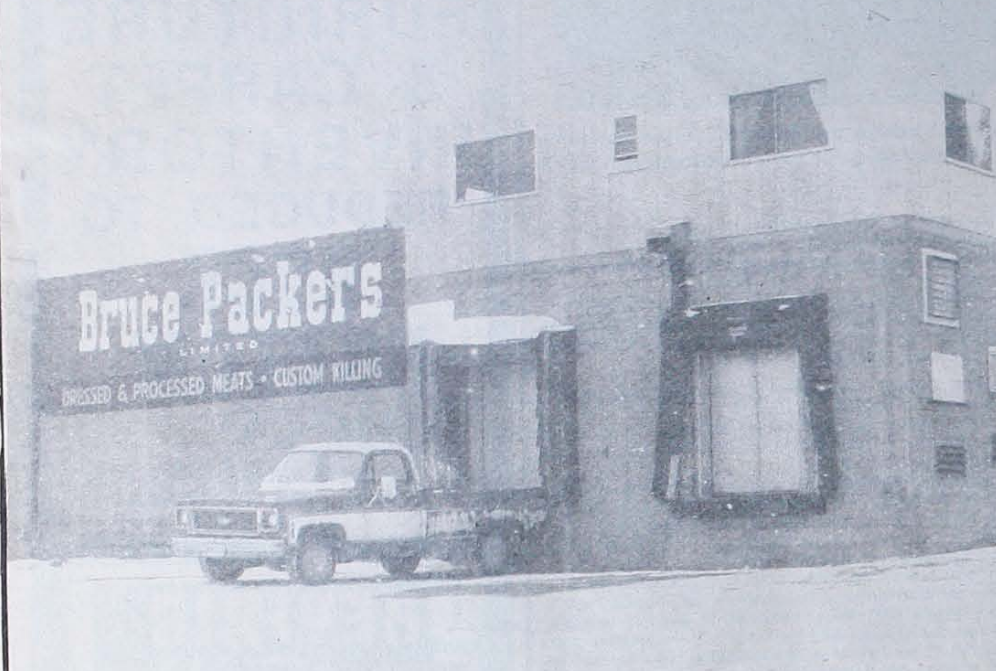


# Local meat firm continues to grow



Since Larry Bender took over the Bruce Packers Ltd. plant, just north of Paisley, in 1971, the number of company employees has increased from 18 to close to 40.

When Larry Bender took over his father's, Theodore Bender's, meat packing plant in 1971, the company was slaughtering about 3,000 cattle and 3,000 hogs per year.

In 1987, Bruce Packers Ltd. on Bruce County Road 3, just north of Paisley's village limits, was slaughtering 5,724 cattle a year and approximately 7,200 hogs.

On top of this, Bender, 46, the owner of the company, said there has been a tremendous increase in the amount of unprocessed meat the company has purchased from other packers in recent years. In 1971, the company bought very little meat from other packers, the owner said.

(All meat purchased has been done so to be further processed under the Bruce Packers' label, Bender said).

Since 1971, Bruce Packers Ltd. has been doing more business and steadily improving each year.

"Sales (in terms of dollars) have increased every year, partly due to increased prices but mostly due to increased business," Bender said.

"If you looked at 1971 and 1987 there would be a dramatic difference in total sales per year," he said. "I attribute this to good service, to continued effort by myself and by my employees."

Bender also attributes his company's success to its attitude of not turning business away.

Before Bruce Packers Ltd. was born in 1952 (approximately), Theodore Bender had a butcher shop in Paisley plus an abattoir on the present company site. It was in 1952 that the older Bender decided to get rid of the butcher shop and go strictly into custom killing.

Larry Bender began working at his father's meat packing plant as soon as he got out of high school. He worked for several years with the company, doing everything from working on the killing floor to driving on the road making deliveries before he eventually became Bruce Packers Ltd.'s owner.

In a way, it is surprising that Bender's company has done so well because meat packing is a highly competitive industry.

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# Benefits to being small

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"Contrary to what many people may think, wholesale meat prices are changed on a daily basis according to supply and demand," Bender said.

Adding to this competitive atmosphere among companies is the fact that meat is a perishable commodity. It must be sold within a short period of time.

Thus sometimes competition between companies becomes very intense when several packers try to unload similar products that have accumulated in storage areas because of lack of demand.

In a way Bender has been able to prosper because he enjoys the advantages of being a medium-sized meat packing company.

"I attribute a fair amount of my success to the fact that we're diversified and don't concentrate on specializing in one product (such as chickens, pork, beef) like many slaughterhouses do," Bender said.

"Although this may not be as profitable during certain periods, it also prevents me from taking huge losses at times of low demand," he said.

Unlike other smaller slaughterhouses that must meet provincial inspection guidelines, Bruce Packers Ltd. is a federally inspected meat plant. A federal government inspector is on duty five days a week at the plant.

"Because we have federal inspectors, our standards have to be the same as Schneider's or Canada Packers," Bender said. "The advantages surface when we're selling products to larger organizations because some insist on federally inspected meat moving through their stores," he said.

But although Bruce Packers enjoys the advantages of larger meat packing companies, it also benefits from being a smaller company as well.

Bender thinks because his company is privately owned, there is a little more interest in keeping the company efficient and profitable. He feels some of the larger companies have a tendency to become top-heavy with management.

He also believes his overhead costs are lower than the bigger companies that are located in urban centres.

Bruce Packers is in the middle of an area noted for its livestock, which means the company's raw material is close at hand. And although Bender's market is not concentrated, it also means there is little direct competition because there aren't that many slaughterhouses located nearby.

Finally, Bender thinks he serves local stores with better personal service than larger more distant companies



Gary Nickel hauls a long plate of beef into the cutting room at the Bruce Packers Ltd. plant, just north of Paisley.

located in cities to the south do.

Bruce Packers Ltd. is a wholesaler in a full line of fresh meats which includes beef, pork and some lamb. It also has a custom killing business. And recently, it has been getting more and more into processed meats such as sausages, ham, bacon, bologna and wieners.

Bender said processed meat has been the biggest growth area in his business in the last five years. He said any future expansion of Bruce Packers' business would probably move in that direction.

Bruce Packers Ltd. has 350 regular customers. Bender's three refrigerated trucks serve an area from Tobermory in the north to Kitchener and Stratford in the south and from Goderich in the west to Meaford in the east.

Once a week, a truckload of meat is also shipped to Toronto.

Although the company's customers include Knechtel's supermarkets, EMA, Zehr's, Dutch Boy supermarkets in Kitchener, IGA and National Grocers, a large number of customers are not stores. Bruce Packers sells a lot of its meat directly to restaurants, hotels, catering companies, taverns, abattoirs, nursing homes and even churches.

Although located in a large livestock producing area, Bender has no choice as to where he buys his hogs. He has to buy them through the Ontario Pork Producers marketing board. He buys all his hogs from the Producer's Harriston outlet.

He does however purchase his cattle directly from farmers on a private contract basis. Although he buys cattle in an area that stretches from Warton to Listowel, 80 per cent of the company's cattle is purchased within 20 miles of the plant, Bender said.