

Corby closure deals the area a lasting blow

By Nancy Gummow

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The corporate decision to close its 132-year-old shop has left the community reeling.

One hundred and forty-nine days after Corby wielded the axe, people are coming to grips with the devastating loss of one of the region's oldest industries.

In one fell swoop, a proud tradition was wiped out, forcing more than 180 people on the unemployment line, about 35 of which have since found jobs.

Ten more are on long term disability.

No longer are some of Canada's finest spirits distilled, blended and bottled in Corbyville. Instead, operations shift to a Hiram Walker complex near Windsor.

Hiram Walker and Corby are jointly owned by Allied-Lyons PLC, a British food and beverage conglomerate.

But the corporate move leaves a gaping hole in the industrial weave of Quinte's community.

"We looked at Corby as part of our historical fabric," said Belleville and District Chamber of Commerce manager Ron Broadbridge. "It's something that has been here a long time."

Tradition. Pride.

These are two words synonymous with Corby history around central-eastern Ontario.

All that remains of a once rich heritage is roughly 190 acres of deserted property along the Moira River, north of Belleville.

Bottling warehouses, newly abandoned after plant workers finished in September, are slowly being drained.

Equipment will be sold off within the next eight-10 weeks. Office staff will remain until October's end to tie up loose strings.

The last remaining workers put on a brave front, but physical and emotional stress shows on their faces. Their smiles are forced, their laughs half-hearted.

"The initial reaction was shock," said Lorne Meeks president of the now-defunct Distillery Workers' Union. "There was a lot of tears and plenty of disappointment."

Time may heal some wounds, but Quinte's stagnant job market won't be as kind.

"I think it will be very tough for them to find work within the next one or two years because there's not that much around," said Meeks. "It's like starting all over."

Many workers told The Intelligencer they'd planned to retire from Corby.

And some people had as much as 35 years of experience with the company wiped out.

Corbyville operations vice-president Elmer Cain said time hasn't made the company's decision in May any easier.

"It wasn't an easy decision then and it isn't any easier now," he told The Intelligencer. "I understand how the workers feel but this is the right business decision."

That bottom line comes despite the fact that Corby Distilleries Canadian net earnings rose last fiscal year to \$18.5 million from \$12.1 million a whopping 53 per cent increase.

Those figures come after Association of Canadian Distillers statistics show a drastic decline in the nation's spirit market.

In Canada, domestic spirits including brandy, gin, liqueurs rum, rye, and whisky dropped last year to 11,112,170 one-litre cases from 18,136,401 cases in 1980. The more than seven million case drop represents a 38 per cent market decrease.

"That along with higher taxes and a change in lifestyle, plus the drinking and driving program (forced the plant to close)," said Cain.

The Canadian spirits market is the most tax-burdened alcoholic beverage, higher than domestic beer and table wine.

Consider this: an \$18.35 bottle of Canadian spirits bears 84 per cent in taxes, with Ontario taking the lion's share.

About \$10.77 goes to the province, thanks to sales tax and a 138 per cent markup. The feds get another 25 per cent, or about \$1.28.

The distiller? He's left with his \$2.93 selling price 16 per cent of the bottle's shelf cost.

Domestic beer conglomerates, on the other hand, receive \$9.95 on a product retailing for \$24.35 a 45.3 per cent share.

"The industry has been in some decline for some years now," said Distillers vice-president Doug Rubbra. "Big domestic firms are combining their plants now."

"The Corby closure was very regrettable but can't be blamed on the people running the company. They have to protect their bottom line."

Economics and human suffering aside, many are wondering who if anyone will help pick up the slack.

A Corby in-house committee will study the company's best use for the abandoned land.

No actual offers have come through, but several out-of-town firms have inquired about the property.

And municipal officials are wondering who will fill their sudden \$169,000 tax void which Corby paid the township annually.

"It definitely puts us in a predicament," said Thurlow Township Reeve George Beer. "We'll have to work hard to alleviate the loss to local people and the tax base."

Some estimate tax bills could shoot up \$50-\$100 per household, but no one really knows.

Corby brass have toed the company line with promises they'll maintain a presence in the Quinte community. But even they're not sure in what form.

And though it will continue to support the special Quinte Arts Council Wisers' Deluxe series, no one knows what will happen to the popular J.P. Wisers Reception Centre, on the Corby site.

That air of uncertainty clouds Corby's final days in the Quinte community.

Many hope as time wears on a lot of questions will be answered.

BEWARE OF "GOOD ENOUGH"

We were interested to read the following in another publication as it expands so well on our new "Quality Means Business" theme. We thank the Canadian Owners & Pilots Association Flight Safety Bulletin for permission to reprint this poem and recommend reading it more than once.

*My friend, beware of "good enough."
It isn't made of sterling stuff.
It's something any man can do;
It marks the many from the few.
It has no merit to the eye;
It's something any one can buy.
Its name is but a sham and bluff,
For it is never "good enough."*

*With "good enough" the shirkers stop
In every factory and shop
With "good enough" the failures rest
And lose to those who give their best.
With "good enough" the plane breaks down
And we fall short of high renown,
My friend, remember, and be wise,
In "good enough" disaster lies.*

*With "good enough" have ships been wrecked.
The forward march of armies checked.
Great buildings burned and fortunes lost.
How can the world compute the cost?
In life and money it has paid
Because at "good enough" we stayed.
Who stops at "good enough" shall find
Success has left them far behind.*

*There is no "good enough" that's short
Of what you can do and you ought.
The flaw which may escape the eye
And temporarily get by
Shall weaken underneath the strain
And wreck the ship or car or plane.
For this is true; you should not bluff...
Only the best is "good enough."*

Anon.