

Leather: Still A Way of Life in Acton, Ontario



In this day and age, when both tanneries and shoe manufacturers are closing at an alarming rate, it is difficult to remember how significant they have been in the past. Tanning rivals the oldest profession as one of the earliest interests of mankind.

In North America the leather industry has a history dating from the first colonists. For example, the pilgrims established Plymouth colony in 1620, losing over half their number in the first year, but by 1623 their first tannery was in operation. Similarly, the French, and Dutch established tanneries very early in their colonist periods. The first Canadian tannery was established in Levis, Quebec in 1651. This pattern of growth was repeated as the colonies spread.

The revolutionary war was a tremendous boon to the North American industry. As supplies of English leather were cut off the need for locally tanned leather increased. Furthermore the Continental Congress required each American soldier to be provided with two pairs of shoes, a leather or woollen coat and a leather cap.

Armies also required saddlery and accoutrements in leather.

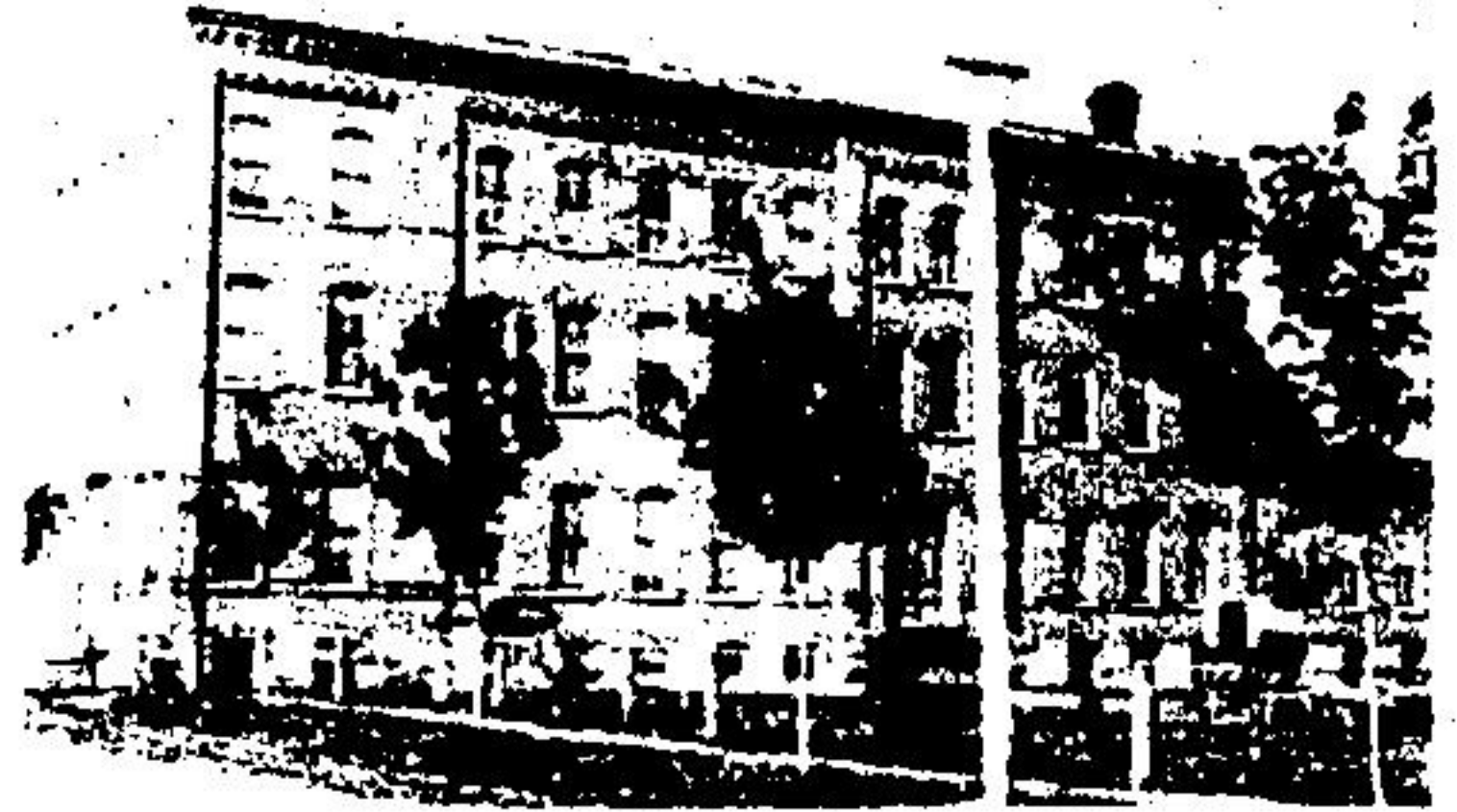
As a result, existing American tanneries flourished and Massachusetts in particular saw the early beginnings of what were to become enormous leather and footwear industries. Salem and Peabody together were to house over 300 tanneries while Lynn and Brockton were to become alive and dominated by shoe manufacturers.

Naturally the War of Independence had many other implications and produced numerous other changes, not the least of which was the colonization of Upper Canada by swarms of United Empire Loyalists. Like many other communities founded in this era, Acton was initially an agricultural site, developed by the Adams family. Tanning is the second oldest industry in Acton. The first was the traditional mill which was started by the Adams family in 1818. By 1874 when the village was incorporated, Acton had already had several tanneries including one which was forced out of business, a phenomenon with which we are all too

familiar today. At the time the main products were harness and sole leather and the process required six months to a year in order to tan and finish the leather.

The tanners used to stock tremendous quantities and manufacturers used to place their entire yearly requirements well in advance, making production scheduling a somewhat different problem than it is today. Hemlock bark was used in great quantities and this was plentiful at first as farmers in the area teamed it in all winter long. Eventually bark was brought in by train at much greater expense and for a while the local tanneries appeared to be destined for doom as new companies opened further north to accommodate the need for bark. The development of extracts and later chrome tanning eliminated this tendency and eventually resulted in the closure of these northern tanneries.

In any case the economic history of Acton has been thoroughly intertwined with that of leather in this country. The site now occupied by Beardmore and Company has housed a tannery since 1844, including two which burnt down between that year and 1872. The company was acquired by George L. Beardmore in 1865 and has retained the family name ever since. In 1868 the W.H. Storey Glove Works opened as Acton's third industry, manufacturing a variety of leather gloves for domestic consumption and shipping products all across the country. The Storey family also operated a tannery in town for a number of years. Over the last one hundred years the town has seen a number of glove and shoe companies operate



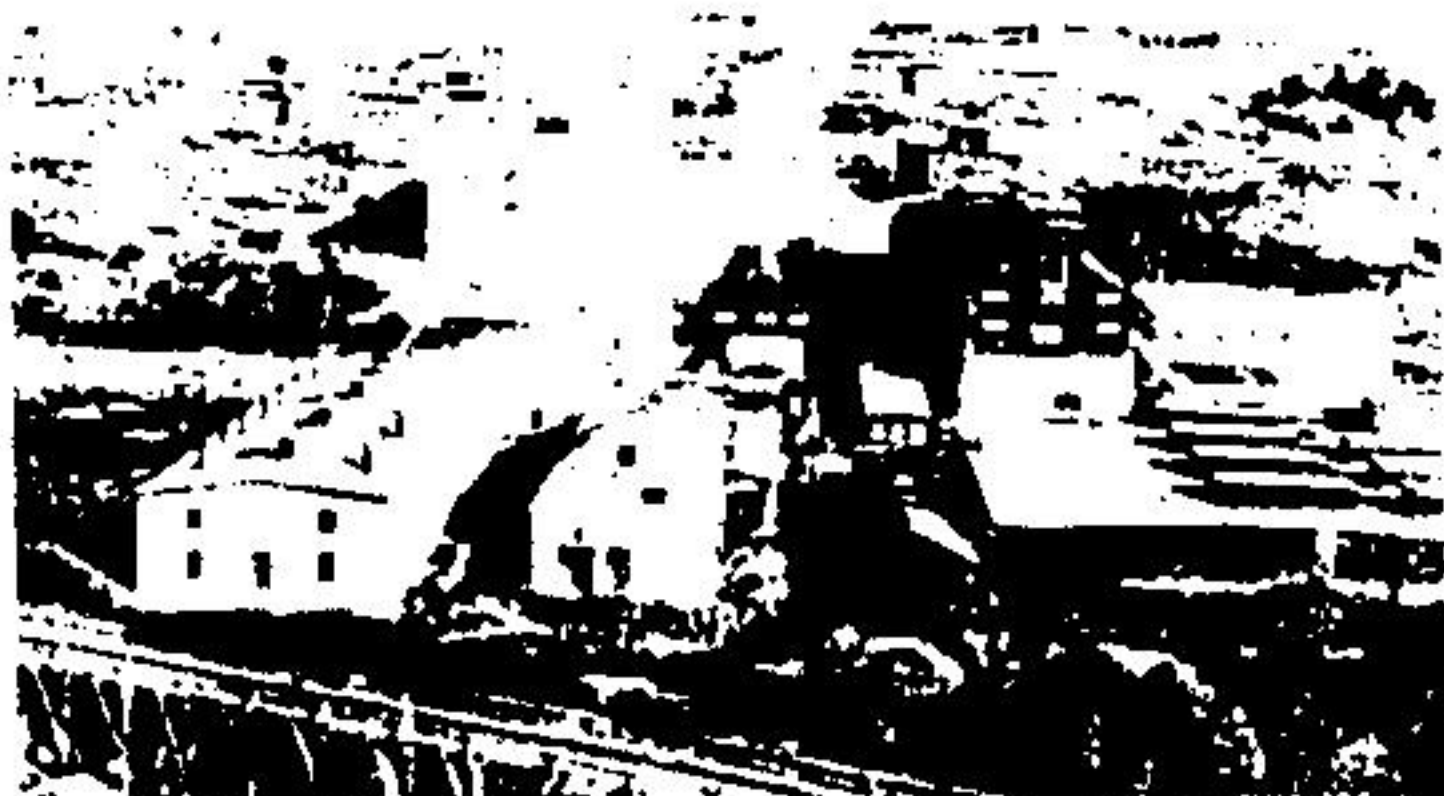
successfully at first, providing much needed employment only to ultimately fall or wind up operations.

Hewetson Shoe once operated a plant there and smaller companies such as Corona Shoe and Hamilton Shoe enjoyed brief periods of success. The glove industry continues to provide employment today. Superior Glove offers an excellent example of a vertically integrated company retanning its own leather and specializing in the manufacture of industrial gloves. The company has shown steady growth in the past in a very competitive market.

On the other hand, (no pun intended), the Marzo Glove Co. specializes quite successfully in the manufacture of fine quality leather gloves and ski mitts, with emphasis on deerskin items. The White Tanning Co., located a short distance outside of town, primarily produces glove bellies and continues to find markets for its products. Frank Heller and

Company has specialized quite effectively in the production of split leather and has shown steady growth over its history. Finally, of course, there is Beardmore and Company, Ltd., a division of Canada Packers, which local residents used to proudly proclaim the largest tannery under one roof in the British Empire. Of course, the British Empire, as such, no longer exists but Beardmore continues to play a very significant role both as a leader in Canadian leather industry and as an employer in the town.

Over the last several years, the leather heritage of Acton has become the basis of an attempt to develop a tourism facet to the local economy. The adoption of the "leathertown" pseudonym and logo and various special events, and the development of the olde Hide House operation seem certain to serve as the basis for the continued development of tourism operations and attractions in the future.



Tourists Discover North-Halton

The 401 highway divides the Regional Municipality of Halton into two distinct sections. The North Halton area is one of Ontario's most naturally beautiful areas, boasting the Niagara Escarpment Bluffs, numerous lakes and streams, rolling hills, and beautiful forests. The towns and villages in the area - Milton, Campbellville, Eden Mills, Rockwood, Acton, Limehouse, Glen Williams, Norval and Georgetown, - compliment this natural beauty with a common Heritage theme. The Ontario Agricultural Museum, the Radial Museum, an evolving leather theme town, Apple farms, crafts and boutique villages, and Country Inns collectively constitute a Heritage microcosm of Central Ontario.

More than ever before, tourists and residents of the nearby urban centres of the Golden Horseshoe are discovering North-Halton as the perfect place for a week-end retreat, or just an afternoons drive through the country. As more and more people begin to seek temporary relief from the fast pace and pressure of city life, the warmth, theme, beauty and excitement of the North-Halton Heritage Area will continue to provide a relaxing sanctuary.

the olde Hide House

The Town of Acton's Leather Heritage dates back to 1865 with the opening of the Beardmore Tannery which by the turn of the century had become the largest in the British Empire. Today several local companies operating in various aspects of the Leather Industry maintain Acton's role as "Leathertown".

Built in 1899 with half a million bricks and massive wood beams, our 30,000 square foot building served initially as a warehouse for hides. Today, restored and renovated it now provides the atmosphere which, combined with the leather expertise and extensive industry contacts acquired over four generations, has enabled us to develop and present Canada's largest leather goods store.

Some of our policies are also quite unique. Our relatively low overhead situation and ability to buy and sell in volume allows us to price our merchandise 20-30% below traditional retail levels. In addition, during the summer months we slash prices up to a further 25%. We believe in natural products and have avoided man-made imitations such as vinyl and ultra suede. Over 95% of our merchandise is Canadian made.

In December of 1981, a new stage of our evolution began with the opening of Jack Tanner's Table, a full service restaurant equally dedicated to providing good value and customer satisfaction.

The final step in the development of the olde Hide House project occurred with the opening of the Artisan Village. This addition firmly establishes the olde Hide House as one of Canada's most unique and exciting tourist attractions.