

329 could lose jobs if tannery can't find buyer

By SANDY CAMPBELL
Herald Staff

If a buyer isn't found for Acton's Beardmore Tannery before Sept. 12, there will be 329 employees without jobs. Canada Packers Inc. announced June 12 it is closing the tannery and consolidating its leather operations in Aurora, Ontario.

The removal of import quotas on men's footwear, the phasing out of quotas on women's footwear and costly environmental controls played a part in the decision, said E.J. Roberts, Canada Packers Group vice-president.

Only two or three Acton employees will get work at the Collis Leather Plant in Aurora, said Murray Stewart, Canada Packers' public relations manager. There will be 273 plant workers and 56 salaried workers (foremen and office workers) who will have to find jobs.

A relocation committee will be formed to help Beardmore employees find work. The committee will be made up of representatives from Manpower Canada, Ontario's Ministry of Labor, Canada Packers and social service groups in Halton, Mr. Stewart said.

When Canada Packers' Toronto plant consolidated, a relocation committee was effective in finding jobs for employees, Mr. Stewart said. Beardmore is making the announcement of the closing now to give employees plenty of notice, he said.

"Operations at Beardmore have been unsatisfactory for some time," Vice-president Roberts said. The removal of quotas has increased

competition from abroad. Beardmore produces leather for the garment and footwear industry. Textiles and plastics are used more today, hurting the traditional leather goods industry.

As housing in Acton moved closer to the tannery, dealing with environmental concerns became more difficult, Mr. Stewart said. There is continuing pressure to reduce the odor from the plant, he said.

There has been a tannery in acton since 1844. Canada Packers purchased it in 1944. The equipment is up to date, but the building is costly to operate and maintain, Mr. Stewart said.

The Beardmore tannery is 750,000 square feet and sits on 473 acres. There are other businesses on the property paying rent to Canada Packers that will be affected by the close, Mr. Stewart said.

Canada Packers will be meeting with those businesses in the near future to make arrangements, Mr. Stewart said. There is always the possibility the plant will be sold.

"I hope it will be purchased. We've had no offers yet. We are chatting with a potential buyer," Mr. Stewart said. Customers of Beardmore will be supplied by the Collis Leather Plant.

Coun. Rennie

Town should avoid 'panic-talk'

There's a danger being negative and jumping to rash conclusions, said Coun. Gerald Rennie. The Acton councillor was responding to comments told to him by The Herald from some of his constituents.

"Regional government had nothing to do with Canada Packers' decision," he said. "Even if you find someone to blame it's not going to change anything."

Coun. Rennie met with Mayor Russ Miller and fellow Acton councillors Norm Elliott and Rick Bonnette Saturday to discuss the an-

nouncement by Canada Packers. "Naturally there's a certain amount of concern, but it's pretty early to be making predictions of what will happen," he said.

"I think it's unrealistic for comments about the town turning into a ghost town. That's panic talk. I don't think we need to talk like that," he said.

Mayor Russ Miller has already been in touch with the Region to alert social agencies, and to make sure any available jobs in Halton will be open to Beardmore workers. Attempts are being made by the Region to talk to industry about

Gerald Rennie



locating in Halton and that's an ongoing process, he said. People might have to commute to find work in Halton, but commuting

isn't a bad thing, Coun. Rennie said. The councillor said he reacted to the news of the closing as if there was a death of an ill member of the family. He said there was shock, surprise and anxiety, although rumors about the plant's future had been circulating for many years.

"People should try to seek constructive ends rather than self-demonstrating ends. Acton will survive in spite of this." "I caution against negative feelings. It will require energy, optimism and hard work, he said. People won't turn into poverty stricken paupers - this is the 1980s," he said.

Region to help workers

The Region's Business Development Officer Brent Kearse says more jobs are opening up in Halton, which could help the employment situation in Acton.

Mr. Kearse has been reacting to the Beardmore announcement by talking to a variety of government departments, looking for ways to help the workers at the tannery.

Magna International in Milton is one industry requiring help, along with some other plants in Oakville, he said.

There are re-training programs offered with federal and provincial funding, including a Sheridan College program, Mr. Kearse said. The provincial Ministry of Industry, Technology and Trade is willing to put a seminar in place, he said.

His department is also contacting other ministries to see what can be done to attract a new industry to the site. For example, opportunities for re-zoning the property or going after the same type of industry (because of the available leather expertise from the labor force) are possibilities.

There were two inquiries last year from leather-based industrialists and one was from a show manufacturer, but there are no guarantees, he said.

Of the 12 smaller industries sub-leasing to Beardmore, they will be given to December 1986 before being asked to vacate the premises, he said. Halton Region is hoping to keep their business within the region. Of the businesses renting from Beardmore the square footage totals 90,000, he said.

Beardmore is the second largest tax contributor in Halton Hills next to William Neilson Ltd. in Georgetown. The tannery is also the 15th largest industry in Halton in terms of number of people employed, he said.

Using a formula to calculate the ripple effect of jobs lost or new ones created, Mr. Kearse figures that up to 700 jobs could be affected by the 329 workers who will be out of work Sept. 12.

In the past the Ontario government has allowed some economically depressed areas to offer incentive packages to new industry. This could be allowed in Acton's case, although, it will be interesting to see if they lump Acton in with Georgetown, which wouldn't help the situation, he said.

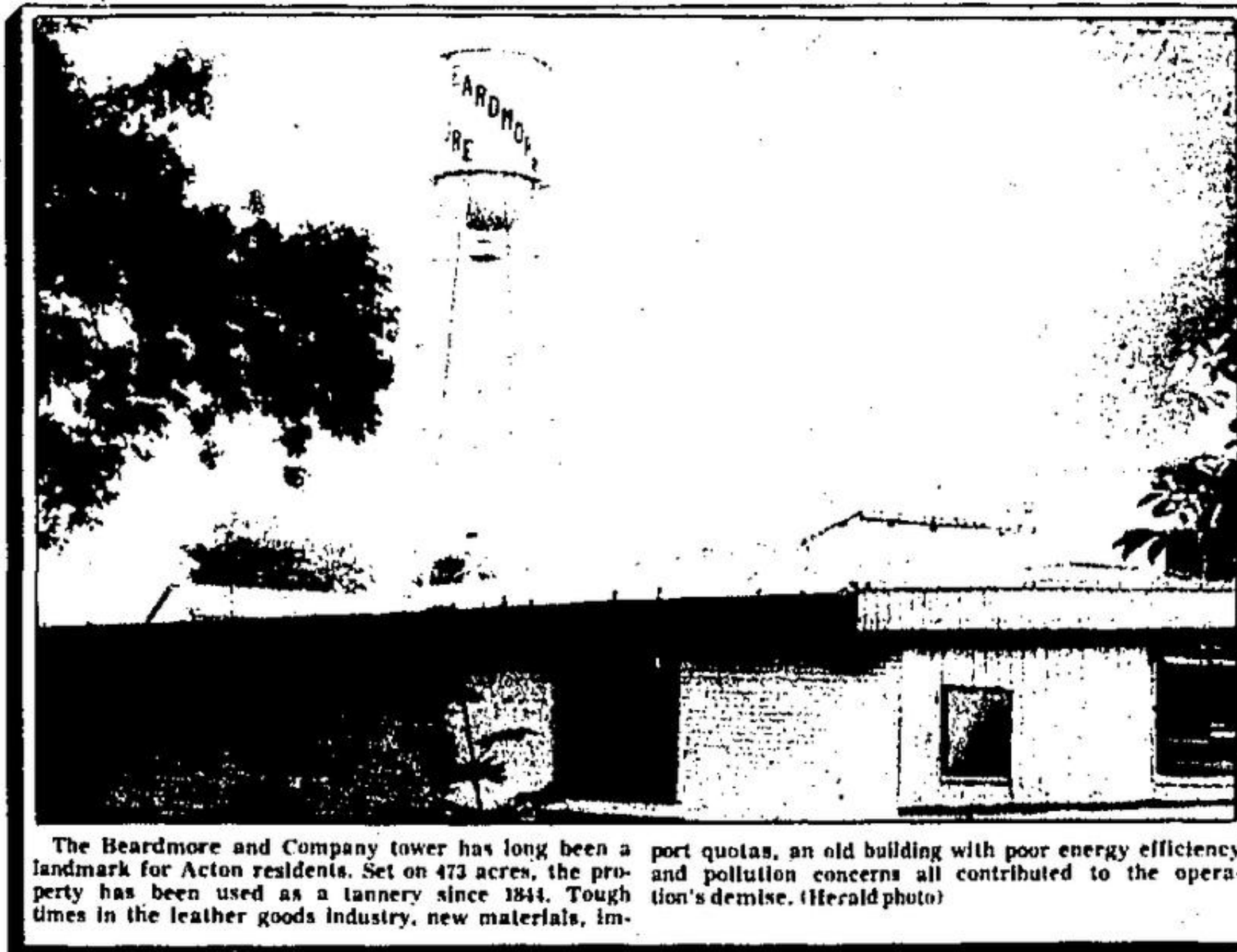
He stressed that Chairman Peter Pomeroy and Halton Hills Mayor Russ Miller were very much behind his department doing everything possible.

Meanwhile, MP for Acton, Otto Jelinek, wants to know if the closure is because of federal import duties which were lifted last November, his press secretary Marilyn McCrea said.

Mr. Jelinek has asked International Trade Minister James Kelleher to do a study to see if quotas were the main reason, Ms. McCrea said.

The first step is to verify if the plant closure is because of quotas. Mr. Jelinek wants to see what the study shows, Ms. McCrea said.

Depending on the circumstances, there may be "options Mr. Kelleher can offer" to help compensate for the loss of the plant, Ms. McCrea said.



The Beardmore and Company tower has long been a landmark for Acton residents. Set on 473 acres, the property has been used as a tannery since 1844. Tough times in the leather goods industry, new materials, im-

Merchants fear slump in sales

Acton merchants offered their opinions about the news of the Beardmore tannery announcement Thursday.

"The decision will have a very severe impact on the town," said clothing store owner and developer Paul Nielsen. He said that about 80 per cent of Acton's business on the main street comes from walk-in local traffic. With a potentially diminished payroll, the town will be seriously affected, Mr. Nielsen said.

"If it closes you can bury the town," said department store owner Mel Briant. "I think a lot of businesses will close. There will be a big effect," Mr. Briant said.

Because there are already a number of commuters who buy their goods out of town, Acton merchants are finding it harder to compete, he said.

"I think it's a case for municipal government and a citizen's group to organize and do something, to attract another industry," he said. Bill Youdt of Guardian Drugs said that people from Beardmore will now be cautious in their spending habits and he suspects real estate values will drop.

Now is the down point, but there may be some light at the end of the tunnel if people can get together to replace the aging tannery, Mr. Youdt said.

A lot of young people will be out of work and they'll have to travel now to find a job, said Joe Poirier of Acton Motors. He feels the government is partly to blame and said he remembers when the Conservatives closed down the production of the Avro Arrow (CF 105) in 1958.

"When you come down to it, Acton's going to be a ghost town if they keep going like that," Mr. Poirier said.

"I don't blame Canada Packers. They have to do it the most economical way in order to make money. That's the way it works today," said developer Bob Hilton.

From his view as a businessman, the demise of the plant could provide an opportunity to build more homes because there will be a new surplus of water, he said. The unpleasant smell will also be eliminated, he added.

He predicts that there could be temporary glut of houses on the market and that people out of work could panic and sell their homes.

"A lot of people have been there for years. The older ones, what are they going to do?" he asks.

Labor force numbers tell a graphic story

Numbers tell a graphic story about how the local workforce will be hurt by the announced closure of the Beardmore tannery.

According to the 1984 Halton Industrial Directory, Beardmore is the largest employer in Acton. Two years ago it reported a total labor force of 375 part-time and permanent employees.

In comparison to the rest of Acton, there are only a total of 704 other jobs listed in the industrial directory.

The next largest industrial employer in Acton is the finishing leather business at Frank Heller and Company Limited. It employed 163 people in 1984, according to the directory.

Indusmin Limited is the third largest industrial employer in Acton with 60 workers, while Superior Glove Works employs 63 people.

Acton Chamber to discuss Beardmore

The announcement of the Beardmore tannery closing will be on the agenda of the Acton Chamber of Commerce when it meets Wednesday.

There will be a discussion about Beardmore, but there's nothing the Chamber can do to reverse the decision, said President Reg DeCola. "It's a corporate decision," he said.

Nevertheless, the Chamber hopes a buyer or a user for the facility can be found, he said.

The Chamber has not been meeting with any politicians about the plant closing, he said. The group works with different levels of government on a regular basis trying to bring more development to town, he said.

In 1984, Beardmore was the top employer for both Georgetown and Acton.

Varian Canada Inc. had 349 employees in 1984 while Smith and Stone had 329 workers.

The directory is two years old and there have been many changes in hiring since then. The above statistics are only meant as a guide for comparison purposes.

The directory is put out by Halton Region.

Workers at the Beardmore plant in Acton are more shocked than angry at the decision to close the tannery Sept. 12.

Many who talked to The Herald Friday haven't had a chance to consider the long-term affects of the shutdown. But there was a general feeling that it was only a matter of time before the plant would be closed.

"Most people were expecting it (the closure) after the government took off the quotas last November," said employee Chris Rowsell, 26.

"The older ones are going to hurt the most. I might go back to school," he said. It's hard to start from the beginning with a new company for no more money, plus paying extra for gas and upkeep of a car, Mr. Rowsell said.

"You can only blame the government plus the age of the plant. It's not energy efficient," he said.

Fred Andrews has worked at Beardmore for 25 years. In fact, the anniversary of when he started will be the date the plant closes if a buyer isn't found: Sept. 12.

"I don't know what you call it, but you sure's heck don't call it luck," he

The following is a history of the Beardmore tannery, extracted from an account by local historian and regional councillor John McDonald. The article is from the book *Halton Sketches*; a series of historical accounts by Mr. McDonald, published in 1976 by Dills Printing and Publishing Company Ltd.

By JOHN McDONALD
Herald Special

Beardmore and Co., which has always been Acton's major industry, was founded in 1844 at Hamilton by George L. Beardmore and his younger brother Joseph. Both men learned the tanning business in England, in a plant near Liverpool. In partnership they built the first stone tannery in Canada at Hamilton in 1844.

A few years later Joseph Beardmore died, and after a serious fire in the tannery in 1854, in which all stock was lost, elder brother George moved to Toronto where he engaged in business as a leather merchant. He did not undertake production only on a small scale in a little plant on the Grand River, until he acquired a plant in Guelph. He continued production operations in Guelph until 1865 when he purchased a tannery in Acton.

The first tannery on the site of the present Beardmore facilities was built in 1842 by Abraham Nelles who was succeeded by Edward and Henry Smith, who increased the capacity of the tannery.

This concern was bought in 1852 by Coleman and McIntyre of Dundas, who built a large stone addition to the old building, and confined their operations exclusively to the manufacture of sole leather from Spanish hides. During their ownership the building was burned down, and rebuilt.

It afterwards became the property of McGloshen and Atcheson who carried on business for several years, then sold it to Sessions, Toby and Co.

After lying idle a considerable length of time, the entire property was purchased by George L. Beardmore in June 1865. Mr. Beardmore placed the buildings in a thorough state of repair and equipped them with the most modern tanning machinery of the time.

In 1872 the buildings were razed by fire and through Beardmore's determination were rebuilt and business was as usual within one year. The insurance of \$17,000 covered only a small portion of the loss. This time the buildings were of stone.

An expansion to the Beardmore firm was made in the 1880s when a small wooden plant was purchased, also in Acton, which had previously been used for producing cordovan leather. The purpose of this addition was to turn it over to the manufacture of harness leather.

In the "nineties", Beardmore and Company saw an opening for further development and branched out into the production of belting leather in the same plant.

In 1893, George L. Beardmore died and the business was carried on by his four sons. The eldest son W.D. Beardmore, entered the business with his father at the early age of 16 years and worked his way up until, in 1870, he was admitted into partnership still a young man. In May 1915 he died and brother George W. Beardmore became the senior partner.

The main tanneries of Acton have a combined floor space of nearly a million square feet. The Company's farm and employees' houses covered an area of over 500 acres. Due to the depression and the need to end any duplication of costly services, the Toronto offices of Beardmore and Company on Front Street were consolidated with the Acton offices in November, 1936. A small sales office remained in the city.

Beardmore and Co. have always been very community conscious and

always made provision for the welfare of their employees. This relationship has always been a company tradition, but I cannot help note that a strike in April, 1900 was held for two weeks after wages were reduced from \$1.25 per day to \$1.10 due to poor economic conditions.

At one period Acton could certainly have been considered a Beardmore "Company town". As one scheme to reduce employees' living expenses, Beardmore and Co. built homes for their workers and rented them for \$6 to \$8 per month. Sixty houses were built and rented by Beardmore during the early 1900s.

The Beardmore private residence known as Beverly House was located at the corner of Church and Maria Streets and is now the site of Diplomat apartments.

This was representative of the kindness of Col. A.O.T. Beardmore who served on Acton Council for a period of time. In 1945 the Legion purchased its former building on Main Street directly across from the Dominion Hotel.

It is ironic that on the last day of its one hundredth year Beardmore and Co. was purchased by a large meat packing company. On December 31, 1944, Canada Packers bought the assets of Beardmore and Co.

During 1959 and 1960 the use of new synthetic materials as a substitute for hemlock bark forced another Canada Packers' holding firm since 1952 to close its operations in Huntsville. Upwards of 50 employees, and their families, from Anglo-Canadian Tanners were relocated to Acton as each department closed.

Beardmore and Co. is not only one of the largest tanneries in Canada but is reputed to have been the largest tannery in the British Empire.

'Older ones will suffer the most'

He said many of his fellow workers are upset and in a daze, especially the older ones.

Everyone is hoping Canada Packers Inc. can find a buyer during the next three months, he said. "Anything's possible, you never know," Mr. Andrews said.

Both Mr. Andrews and Harry Looyenga, 23, are a bit surprised the company made their announcement since the sole leather department was very busy with orders.

"I thought they'd keep it open because it's the only one (plant) in Northern America that does sole leather," Mr. Looyenga said.

Bad management, government and cheap imports from Argentina are to blame for the company's announcement, Mr. Looyenga said.

A father of two children, he said he will look everywhere for a job. Some of his young friends have just bought houses, he said. He knows of some co-workers from Newfoundland who have told him they'll head back home to their Maritime home province after Sept. 12.

Ben Rody, 61, is waiting to hear more from the government about

changes in the pension plan so he can take an early retirement. "When you're over 60, places don't want you," he said.

John Okruh has finished 34 years of working for Beardmore. He said he doesn't care what happens because this is his retirement year. He is sympathetic towards the younger workers, though and he said Acton could turn into a "ghost town".

The people who are going to be hurt the most are the families where both the husband and wife work at the plant, said Mr. Rody. Some have big expensive mortgages to keep up, he said.

Mr. Rody blames the government quotas, the expense to keep up an aging plant and environmental pressures (he said the plant has been fined twice for pollution) for why Beardmore is closing.

The front gates of the Beardmore tanning plant may close for good Sept. 12 if a buyer cannot be found for the operation.

