

CREELMAN BROTHERS

put Georgetown on the world map

Story by Dawn Livingstone
Photos courtesy Esquesing Historical Society

For nearly a half a century, a company located in a tall impressive building on Georgetown's Main Street (where Curves and Canada Trust are now located) produced knitting machines that were famous in factories and homes around the world.

To a much lesser extent they would also be known in later years for selling a very early typewriter, which had been introduced around 1893.

Born in 1851, Richard Irvine Creelman lived nearly his whole life in Georgetown. His father Robertson was one of 16 men listed as initial subscribers to the Georgetown Esquesing Union Sunday School Society in 1843. Richard was educated at the prestigious Rockwood Academy, and in 1872, along with his brother Robertson, established his first business here in Georgetown.

They demolished Elijah Travis' mill, which had been located at the north end of Main Street, and there they built a large red brick three-storey factory for the production of their knitting machines. Richard involved himself with the knitting area of the business, while Robertson established a stationery department. However, Robertson stayed only until 1890, and then left to set up his own stationery business in Collingwood.

In the early 1890s, Creelmans added a typewriter branch to their now-progressive company, and for a number of years sold a new popular typewriter, called the Blickensderfer. Apparently The Creelman Brothers Typewriter Co. had one of the first typewriter shops in Canada. While the typewriter branch was lucrative, it would be for their knitting machines that the Creelmans would be best known.

As happened so often in the Main Street area where fire seemed to take a devastating toll over the years, it hit the still-new building in March of 1886, originating in the office area, destroying most of their paper files and several machines. The restorations were going to be considerable, so the business was approached by the Town of Ingersoll, which offered a tempting bonus and loan if they would move to that locale. Fortunately, Georgetown remained their home. They rebuilt, and throughout their years gave employment to a good number of local people.

The invention of a machine to do knitting opened up a whole new world of possibilities, and the Creelmans were fortunate to have the ability and determination to look towards the future, and realize the potential that lay ahead. It wasn't long before word spread, and the efficiency of the Creelman Knitting Machines became a well-known pioneer in the industry.

Richard spent much time traveling to foreign countries, and lived overseas for three years, establishing contacts. An 1888 company letterhead states their office and manufactory is located in "Creelman's Block, Main Street, Georgetown" and their "European Office" is in "Antwerp, Belgium." Their machines were to be found in knitting mills, large and small, located across Canada, and in a great many countries around the world.

In 1893, The Toronto Daily Mail newspaper did a feature on the Town

of Georgetown. A part of a piece on Creelmans read "...and now have the most complete knitting machine plant on this continent. The firm attributes its success to its ability to design original practicable and patentable improvements of superior merit. Its facilities for turning out valuable machines at the lowest possible price has enabled it to not only hold its trade but secure a large foreign trade in spite of all competition."

While the company was known for its industrial machines, it had also established a very popular line of home knitting machines, at very affordable prices.

One machine, "The Banner" was advertised as their very best for family use and moneymaking, and could be used on a strong kitchen table. In a 10-hour day it was possible to make 24-36 pairs of rib socks by hand power or 36 to 48 pairs of rib socks by electric power. Equipped with its own stand, the machine sold for \$90—less if you used the kitchen table! These home machines and their parts are still actively bought and sold on the eBay website.

Early photos of the inside of the factory itself show a mass of machines and presses powered by an assortment of overhead belts, and cables, and it is hard to imagine in this day and age that this little factory could produce such world-famous and sought-after machines. It is also hard to imagine that electricity didn't come to that factory until 1903.

By 1930, Richard's health was declining and he was no longer able to carry on his business. It is assumed neither his son or daughter wanted to do so, and so, a resolution of the shareholders decided to

voluntarily wind up the company and close its doors. Probably by that time more modern methods were being employed in the manufacturing business, and so it was time. On October 10, 1930 the company ceased to be, and Georgetown lost a major asset.

Richard Creelman had married in 1897, and he and his wife made their home at the north end of Main Street, not far from the downtown factory. Theirs was a beautiful large stately home, with large gardens, and I feel perhaps they may have done much entertaining in this once lovely residence. Today, their home still stands, no longer set back from the roadway, nor sporting the beautiful gardens, and is an apartment building, located on the corner of Carruthers Road. On June 22, 1932, Richard Creelman was buried and with him went another chapter in our local history.

Through the years, many businesses have used the downtown Creelman building, and it contained several apartments.

In 1967, it was by then owned by clothier Syd Silver, and it was his intention to tear it down, and replace it with a more modern set of stores.

In May of that year, it was partly in the process of being demolished, although two of the apartments were still occupied. Fire hit the uninsured building early one morning and finished off the structure, leaving 17 people to escape with their lives, and nothing else, thus putting the very final close to the Creelman story.

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