

30 years later: Beardmore & Co. – gone but not forgotten

By: Harry Rudolfs

It's been 30 years this week that the Beardmore Tannery shut its doors.

This history of Acton is inextricably linked to its most significant and long-standing employer, Beardmore and Co. Tannery (1865-1986). Almost from its inception, the town seems to have had an affinity for the tanning industry. Abraham Nelles built and operated the first tannery and that was followed by a consecutive number of tanneries and glove works that chose to locate here.

The Beardmore story begins in 1865, when George Lissant Beardmore, a British immigrant and Hamilton tanner came to town and bought the former Nelles Tannery. The location was perfect for the growing business. The Grand Trunk Railway (later CN) ran through town on its way to Guelph, and eastern hemlock, whose bark was essential to the tanning procedure, was initially plentiful and nearby.

The tannery special-



ized in horse halters and cut soles and expansion was rapid. Located on 200 acres it was said to be the biggest tannery in the British Empire at the turn of the 20th Century. It also held title to another 200 acres that included Fairy Lake from where it drew large amounts of water for its industrial processes. The number of hides that went through the plant were astronomical. Statistics from 1920 indicates that over one million "sides" were processed that year alone.

The plant was massive. Thirty-seven of its 200 acres were under roof. Two night watchmen each walked 12 miles per shift patrolling the voluminous buildings and grounds. The company

had its own fire department. At its peak, the facility employed over 1,000 people. The company steam whistle blew several times per day announcing shift changes and could be heard all over town.

Beardmore originally operated a community store and supplied employees with discounted housing. Some of the homes on Crescent Street were originally barracks buildings from Camp Borden, were reassembled here and rented to plant workers.

Beardmore also gave back to the community. The lawn bowling greens were state-of-art for their time. The family was credited with the construction of an outdoor arena, a

golf course, tennis courts and a boathouse. Col. Alfred O. Beardmore started the tradition of company picnics at Prospect Park and the annual Christmas parties with generous gifts for employees' children.

The family connection to the business ended when Canada Packers bought the plant in 1944. Control of Canada Packers eventually passed into the hands of Maple Leaf Mills, a (Maple Leaf Foods) and eventually purchased by Wallace McCain and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan in 1995.

Beardmore was also a

place of employment for the children of the tannery workers. Pete Miller's father was a stationary engineer in the power house. "It paid good money to us as high school kids. Before I finished high school I worked full time on the 4-12 shift as well as attending school those last few weeks. It taught me the value of work."

"I worked there for six summers—paid for university. Many others did the same," says Lawrence G. Duby, a retired Anglican priest who now lives in Waterdown, Ont. His father Les Duby was the last Mayor of Acton,

and was simultaneously employed as personnel manager at the plant.

"The unpleasantness depended on the department you worked in. Upper leather steam presses were very hot where I worked, but the beam house work was smelly and wet. Both taught the value of the dollar and teamwork," says Duby.

"The smell of finished leather and products made from it are special to me. It reminds me that Beardmore's was the primary business in town and put food on the table of most families. Newcomers often complained about



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