

Celebrate With Us ...

LEATHERTOWN FESTIVAL

... in Acton



This Sunday

Aug. 7, 1994 • 11 AM - 5 PM

It's our heritage: A little bit of leather lore

BY FRANCES NIBLOCK
The Acton Tanner

Acton's 150-year-old leather making history — and its current status as home to Canada's largest leather retailer — can be traced to the *Tsuga Canadensis*, the hemlock spruce.

Without the vast stands of hemlock forests in this region it's unlikely that a tannery would have ever been built in Acton.

The first Canadian tanner was the native Indian, who used the brains of deer, antelope or caribou, in combination with smoke from an open fire, to make supple leathers for clothing and housing.

The origin of leather-making using vegetables as tanning materials are prehistoric and leather manufacturing was probably one of the earliest arts practiced in ancient times.

More modern tanning in Canada developed in the early 1800s, with an influx of settlers, a steady supply of hides and tannin, found in the bark of hemlock trees. Its bark contains eight to 10 per cent tannin and when made into a tanning solution it produces a firm, solid piece of leather with a reddish colour.

Development of the Canadian tanning industry was tied to sources of hemlock bark, and a ready supply of the bark is what convinced Abraham Nelles to build the Acton tannery in 1837 or 1842.

In 1852 the tannery was sold to Messrs. Coleman and McIntyre of Dundas, Ontario.

That same year the tannery burned down and was rebuilt and later purchased by the firm of McClosken and Atcheson, who in turn sold it to Sessions, Toby

and Co.

George Lissant Beardmore purchased the business in 1865 and his family ran it until the company was sold to Canada Packers in 1944.

Canada Packers finally closed the Acton tannery in 1986.

As the supply of hemlock bark was depleted in this area, Beardmore collaborated with tanneries in the Muskoka area for timber rights and set up an early cartel to ensure members got the peeled bark they needed without competitive pricing.

In the beginning Beardmore tanned hides for sole leather, although George Beardmore also dealt in hides and oil and had several stores in Hamilton and Toronto.

Despite the fact that the Acton tannery was rebuilt in 1872-73 and production had increased dramatically, the supply of hemlock bark became critical and in 1876 Beardmore was proposing to move their operations to Bracebridge.

A tannery was built at Bracebridge and in 1877 George Beardmore offered a bonus to anyone who could find a tenant for the Acton building.

Later that year operations in Acton were phased out, however Charles Knees was employed by a Toronto leather dealer to tan horsehide for shoe leather in the Acton facility.

The Beardmores were back in business in Acton within a decade, making leather harness and belting.

Early in the 1800s, the Muskoka supply of hemlock bark was also exhausted and other sources of tannin were discovered, including chestnut trees and an extract imported from South America.

In 1922-23 Beardmore closed its plant at Bracebridge and concentrated production in Acton with the Acton Tanning Company producing harness and saddle leather, bag and waistbelt leather, belting butts and lace leathers.

Beardmore and Co. produced sole leather and cutsoles.

At this time Beardmore produced over one million sides of leather per year and the buildings, employee housing and company farm covered over 500 acres.

In the next decade Canada Packers enhanced leather quality by providing capital to improve the tanning process and developed a new leather for shoe soles.

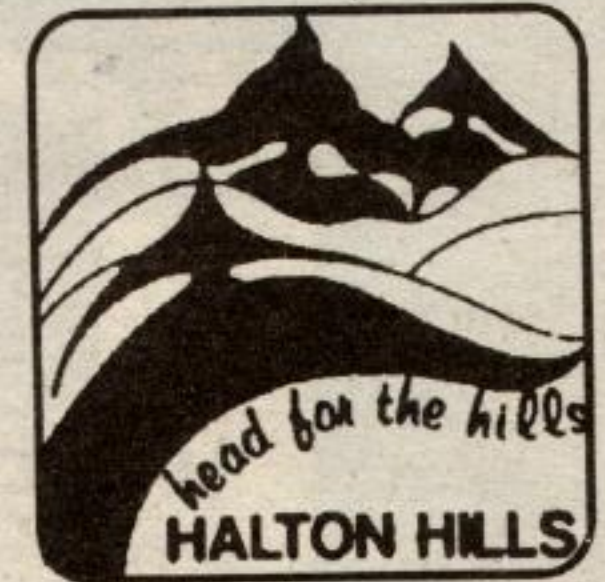
A decline in the use of sole leather caused shrinking markets and by 1959 there was a speculative rise in hide prices, which reduced the use of sole leather in Canada by 26 per cent in just eight months.

At this point Canada Packers closed a smaller tannery in Hunstville and concentrated operations in Acton.

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