



INDUSTRIAL FIRES IN 1965 LED TO DIVERSIFICATION IN TOWN'S INDUSTRIAL BASE —H. David Vuckson

A short version of this story appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on January 23, 2015. This is a much-expanded account of the Georgian China and Quinlan-Crawford fires and the subsequent additions to Collingwood's industrial base with additional reflections on some of the major 19th Century industries that came before in the north-west corner of Collingwood.

For a very long time the cornerstone of Collingwood's industrial base, by virtue of the very large number of its employees and the number of families in town who depended on it either directly or indirectly, was the Shipyard. Smart Bros. Farm and Canning plant and Kaufman Furniture were also major players in the local economy together with a number of other concerns throughout the town including the Collingwood Terminals grain elevator, the Collingwood Flour Mills (now Kelseys), Peerless Textiles (makers of blue jeans, overalls, etc.), Blue Mountain Pottery, Georgian China and several other similar ceramics firms, Martin-Baker Aircraft (makers of ejection seats for fighter jets), and Quinlan-Crawford Textile Products, to name a few.

In 1965, in the space of four days, there occurred a couple of devastating industrial fires on Highway 26/Balsam Street that indirectly became the impetus for expanding the town's industrial base and infrastructure to a significant extent. Georgian China was a relatively new industry started in 1948. Quinlan-Crawford

was on a property known in former years as “The Smelter”. The Quinlan factory had been bought in 1957 by Crawford Manufacturing Inc. of Richmond, Virginia. The new owners had greatly expanded the original building and the plant was widely known for producing hassocks, ottomans with interior storage space for LP records, etc., cushions and seat covers for cars. I well remember their seat covers. My father bought a set for our 1957 Ford. The material was clear, heavy plastic. In the winter you froze on them and in the summer heat you stuck to them.

On Saturday, May 29, 1965 a spectacular fire destroyed the Georgian China factory and just three days later on June 1st, the Quinlan-Crawford factory right across the street was ravaged by fire. Georgian China was adjacent to Harold Nixon’s Esso tank farm where there were three enormous storage tanks and a number of smaller ones. If the flames from Georgian China had reached these tanks the result could have been apocalyptic (think of the massive explosion in Beirut, Lebanon in 2020). Understandably, the people at Kaufman Furniture were rattled by these two fires so close to their plant and wondered if they were next. As you will see shortly, the water main infrastructure in that northwest corner of town was inadequate and in serious need of upgrading. Kaufmans had a fire brigade with a contingency plan to pump water from Black Ash Creek which bordered their property, in the event of a fire at their business where there were massive amounts of combustible lumber and sawdust, stains/paint and packing materials. With Kaufmans being located so close to the spot where Black Ash Creek emptied into the harbour, they had an unlimited supply of water available to them if needed.

Having lost our beautiful Carnegie Library to an arson fire two years earlier, speculation about arson was predictably widespread in town, especially with the two fires happening just days apart and on opposite sides of the street from each other. Investigation by the Fire Marshall’s Office found no evidence of arson or a connection between the two fires. It was, apparently, an unfortunate coincidence. It was pointed out that both factories contained large amounts of combustible materials used in their manufacturing. In fact, for days after the fire at Quinlan’s, the Fire Department had to send a truck once a day to extinguish

sparks that were coming from deep inside bales of packing material. Some portion of the factory—perhaps the newer addition—was not seriously damaged and on Monday, June 7th, some of the sewing machine operators were able to resume their work. It was reported that machinery and retail stock were being shipped from Richmond, Virginia and meanwhile, the firm was seeking a temporary location in Collingwood to continue production.

In both of these fires, the water volume and pressure in that part of town were inadequate and this seriously hampered the efforts of the Fire Department. In addition, at the Quinlan fire, the town's aging pumper truck—a 1942 International—was malfunctioning. I personally saw water pouring out of the underside of the truck itself rather than going into the fire hoses. When I later commented on this to Sam McLeod, a neighbour of mine who was a fireman, his exact words to me were, "Don't ever go near that thing because it may blow up!". Because of the problem with the old pumper, the Fire Department's 1959 Ford-Thibault aerial ladder truck had to be used as a pumper.

The owners of Quinlan-Crawford were definitely not impressed with the combination of a 23-year-old malfunctioning fire truck and inadequate water volume and pressure. So unimpressed were they that their Vice-President and General Manager, Stuart Livingston, wrote a letter to Mayor Alick McDonald and the Town Council which was published by Editor J. T. MacMurchy in the pages of the June 10, 1965 edition of the *Enterprise-Bulletin*. It is evident that Jack MacMurchy had given some thought about whether or not to publish the letter and in an editorial comment preceding the letter stated, "This newspaper believes it [the letter] should be made known to the citizens of Collingwood".

The letter stated that Quinlan-Crawford Ltd. now had to decide whether to rebuild in Collingwood or move to some other town and that they were definitely planning to continue in business. They preferred to rebuild in Collingwood but required a number of assurances from the Town of Collingwood in writing: 1) adequate water mains were to be installed to their property before completion of a new building; 2) adequate water pressure was to be available; 3) adequate sewage facilities were to be installed directly to the proposed new building; 4)

any other recommendations regarding facilities that their Insurance Company felt necessary to prevent a similar fire were to be supplied; 5) a definite date of completion for this work. Their Board of Directors was to meet on June 15, 1965 to decide if they would remain in Collingwood or look farther afield, something that was already under investigation. Stuart Livingston set a deadline for a reply from the Mayor before June 11, 1965.

The new 12-inch water main would begin at Hurontario and Fifth St. where it would tap into the high pressure from the water tower in Central Park and then run along Fifth to Walnut St., north on Walnut to First St., and then west on First to Hickory St. where it would tie in to the existing 10-inch line that fed that part of town. This new water main would benefit not only the rebuilding of Quinlan's and ease fears of a fire at Kaufman's, but it would also be a factor in attracting the new industries that would, in the next few years, locate in that north-west part of town, especially on High Street. There is an unlimited supply of water in Georgian Bay, but for the town to grow its industrial base, a serious upgrade of the water infrastructure was needed. It may seem hard to believe in 2020 with all the development that has taken place along High Street, but half a century ago, most of the land bordering that road was more or less a semi-rural area on the western edge of the built-up part of the town. High Street was a dirt country road little more than one lane wide in places as it made its way from the big bend on Highway 26/First St. (now a major four-way intersection) on its way south to Campbell St. where it ended at Smart's Farm.

While all this drama was taking place, the Town of Collingwood was also involved in a lawsuit with Barton Feeders Co. Ltd. who were claiming damages to cover losses they suffered as a result of the Town's failure to complete a contract for the construction of a horse meat packing plant in Collingwood (Barton ended up in Owen Sound). There was much opposition from the citizens of Collingwood to having a slaughter house in town. The regular Town Council meeting of Monday, June 14th was dealing with both of these issues and the meeting lasted until midnight. The heading in the *Enterprise-Bulletin* was: **Black Night For Council.** The citizens of town *did* want new industries and jobs but were selective in what type of industry they thought was appropriate. A meat packing plant in

Collingwood producing bacon was taken for granted in the 1890's but one producing horse meat seventy years later was not.

The outcome of the decision by the Town Council to agree to the ultimatum from Quinlan-Crawford was an application to the Ontario Municipal Board for an increased debenture for 1965 of an additional \$100,000.00 to be transferred from the planned expenditures for 1966 in order to construct the new water supply for the west end of town and satisfy the conditions laid down by Quinlan-Crawford.

Back in 1944, with an eye to the future industrial growth of Collingwood after the Second World War, the Board of Trade issued a booklet advertising industrial sites available in town with information about the "hardworking, intelligent and capable people of Scotch, English and Irish stock" that were responsible for the solidarity and stability in labour transactions in the town. It included information on the male and female work force, stating the wages paid in town. In 1944 the "average" wage for female labour was 32 cents per hour. For male labour, it was more detailed: "common labour" varied from 40 to 50 cents per hour, semi-skilled from 50 to 55 cents per hour, and skilled from 60 to 70 cents per hour. This was a time in history when the Classified Ads for employment in newspapers were rigidly segregated into two categories: "Help Wanted Male" and "Help Wanted Female".

The diagram accompanying this information showed the land around the harbour marked with the businesses that already existed. On the east side were the grain elevator and coal dock on the spit and the Bryan Mfg. Co. and the Shipyard on the south side. On the west side of the harbour were the Clyde Aircraft Manufacturing Co., the Imperial Oil dock, and the Esso Tank Farm. The site of Quinlan-Crawford was labelled "Smelter". What is now the site of the Cranberry Golf Course was also identified as "industrial sites" for it had once been the original (1904) site of the Imperial Steel & Wire factory (more on that later). All the remaining land around the shore between the tank farm and the Shipyard was largely undeveloped scrub land north of the railway tracks (now the Georgian Trail) and was labelled "Available Industrial Sites". Standing in that area between

the north ends of Oak and Cedar Streets was a tall structure with a range light to guide ships into the harbour.

In 1944 most heavy and long distance freight on land was carried by the railway, not by trucks, and it was logically assumed at that time that new industries would locate on this undeveloped waterfront land adjacent to the railway for convenience in bringing in raw materials and shipping out finished product by rail. The only industry that was added to the land shown on this diagram was Georgian China established in 1948 adjacent to the Esso Tank Farm. The balance of the land remained empty and when the Collingwood harbour was dredged in 1965, the material taken from the harbour bottom was pumped through a floating pipeline over to this land which subsequently became an industrial land fill and then, many years later in 1997, the Collingwood Arboretum and Harbourview Park.

The Clyde Aircraft Co. was one of several industrial concerns located on or near the site of what would eventually become Kaufman Furniture. Prior businesses in that area in the years before the First World War were the Charlton Saw Mill and the Collingwood Meat Packing Company (circa 1894-1913), famous for its bacon that was exported to England. In the 1970's, Steve Redman saw the ruins of the meat packing plant out behind the site of Kaufman's right at the water's edge south of Harbour St. East. The meat plant had its own wharf and a railway siding to bring in carloads of hogs and this gave the name "Hogtown" to the location of the plant and the name "The Hog Special" to the freight trains that came up the Grand Trunk/CNR branch line from Beeton to supply the slaughter house. In a photo of the buildings on page 233 of Christine Cowley's book *Butchers, Bakers & Building The Lakers*, the water can be glimpsed behind the plant. Another photo from the Collingwood Museum taken at the rear of the plant shows a long line of Grand Trunk Railway freight cars parked on the siding.

In its day, the Collingwood Packing Co. was a going concern and exhibited its products at the Great Northern Exhibition as late as 1912, then, soon after, suffered a fire on October 12, 1912 just months before it ceased operations. The 1912 fire may well have hastened the demise of the firm. The year after it first

opened, local architect John Wilson (1863-1952) was commissioned to design an annex to the factory (1895) and then a group of eight rough cast (stucco) houses (possibly for company employees) and extensive alterations to the factory, both in 1903. Ten years later, the firm was bankrupt and on August 6, 1916 the buildings burned down, according to David Williams in the Huron Institute Papers, Vol. III and confirmed as well by his handwriting on a photo from the Collingwood Museum.

John Wilson was also commissioned in 1903 to design the original 1904 factory of the Imperial Steel & Wire Co. on Harbour St. West, now the site of the Cranberry Golf Course (just a “stone’s throw east from the Cranberry Pro Shop” located in the former 1860 Stayner CNR Train Station, according to Steve Redman). This vast complex of buildings and two railway sidings covering about five acres burned down on Sunday, May 25th, 1919, and later became the site of the Town Dump (a “surface” dump, not a landfill). According to Douglas G. Skelding in his history of the Collingwood Fire Department, *Ordeal By Fire*, the nearest fire hydrant was 3000 ft. away [!] and the firefighters were helpless to prevent the total loss of the buildings, the loss being “well over a quarter of a million dollars”, a vast amount of money in 1919.

Imperial vowed to rebuild and a year later moved across the highway to build a new factory adjacent to the former site of the meat packing plant. Again, we turn to David Williams who recorded that his father, William Williams, in his capacity as Deputy-Reeve, turned the first sod for the new nail factory on the east side of High St. (a.k.a. Balsam St./Highway 26) on September 15, 1920. The new factory opened in November 1921 and despite the fact that Imperial was famous for its nails and wire fencing, it is said to have gone out of business circa 1925. Perhaps the interruption of their business in the two-and-a-half year gap between the loss of their first location and the opening of their new plant resulted in the loss of some of their customers. The buildings would sit empty and abandoned until 1940 when they were put to a new use during the Second World War.

We have an eye witness account of the 1921 Imperial Steel & Wire property during the many years it was an abandoned ruin following its closure.

Remarkably, in all the years it was abandoned, it did not succumb to fire and would come back into use in a very big way during the Second World War and for several decades beyond. Ruth Carmichael Bryan (1923-1975) in her collection of stories called *Tales of Collingwood* described “the old nail factory” as she saw it while on an adventure exploring the mouth of Black Ash Creek with her father when she was a little girl:

*Just by the old nail works, dad steered the bike to the side of the road and dismounted. He lifted me from the seat and dropped the bike against the side of the ditch...The nail works had been closed for many years. It was a shell of a building, the skylights broken, the frames rusted. Dad held me up to look through a window. It was a moment of thrilling horror for I expected to see at least one violently murdered corpse. But there were only the weeds and the soft witch grass growing through the cracks in the concrete floor, the tinkling sound of a sparrow running across the broken glass, and the breeze sighing amid the wreckage. (Page 19, from the story *Glory In The Flower*.)*

Predictably, no one bothered to pay the property tax on the nail factory to the Town of Collingwood during the Great Depression. Christine Cowley has recorded that the abandoned, derelict site was sold to Clyde Aircraft Co. for the back taxes in 1940. The Clyde operation was famous for producing war materiel for planes, guns, tanks, etc. during the Second World War, employing about 500 people making it the second largest industry in town after the Shipyard. After the war ended in 1945, under the leadership of A. R. Kaufman, the plant became the Globe Plywood Ltd., famous for producing knockdown laminated bedroom furniture suites for war-ravaged Britain. At the same time, my father quit sailing on the Great Lakes and got a job at Globe Plywood in 1946 earning 55 cents an hour. To the end of his nearly 92 years one of his hands bore the scars of an encounter with a saw blade at Globe that removed part of the tip of his index finger. For many years after Globe Plywood morphed into Kaufman Furniture (1948), people in town still referred to it as “The Plywood”. The showroom, named “Kaufman House” out behind the factory was believed to have been a renovation of the residence/office for the meat packing plant and the only part of that operation that did not burn down in 1916.

Regarding the wages in the 1940's as stated by the Board of Trade, I have a direct family connection to those wages. I had a summer 1966 job at Kaufman's between Grade 13 and my first year at university (there were no openings for an Office Boy/Messenger at the Shipyard that summer) cutting up sticks of wood for chair legs for which I was paid \$1.10 per hour, exactly *double* what my father earned there in 1946 when it was Globe Plywood. When the order for 15,000 bedroom suites for England valued at well over a million dollars had been completed in early 1947, there was a layoff looming and so my father took a job in the Shipyard beginning a 33-year career there in the Sheet Metal Shop until he retired.

We now return to the aftermath of the Georgian China and Quinlan-Crawford fires. As we have seen, except for Georgian China, the 1944 Collingwood Board Of Trade endeavour failed to attract new industries after the war for all that empty land around the harbour and along the railway. More and more, in the second half of the 20th Century, freight was being carried by trucks on modern highways, eliminating the need for factories to be beside the railway tracks. Ed Smart had sold his farm and cannery in 1964 and envisioned an "Industrial Commission" to attract new businesses to town. The personnel of the commission changed over time, but some of those who participated were Ed Smart, former Mayor Gordon Braniff, Jack Browne of Georgian China, Stan Wallace and Alex Webster, both of the Shipyard, Clare Trott (Trott's Furniture), and bank manager George Hacking.

In the mid-1960's, the area around Georgian Bay from Owen Sound to Midland was included in the "Designated Area Plan" by the Federal Government, whereby incentives were offered to industries to locate in these communities and bring much-needed jobs. Land was obtained for an Industrial Park in the east end of town. On the west side of town, more industrial land was serviced where Harding Carpets, Daal Specialties (seatbelts), and Goodyear Rubber (hoses) built factories and brought many more jobs. Overall, between April 1966 and December 1968, eight new industries set up in Collingwood on the east and west sides of town: TRW Electronics (originally known as Radio Condenser), Daal Specialties, Goodyear Rubber, Harding Carpets, Barton Distilling, Libbey-Owens-Ford, Goodall

Rubber and National Starch. A number of them were suppliers to the automotive industry, their products at that time being windshields, seat belts, hoses, belts and electronic equipment. The others produced a diversity of products such as carpets, whisky and starch. In April 1968 the CNR opened the Pretty River Spur from the main line near Collins St. to service the Distillery, the Starch plant and the L-O-F Glass plant, proving that the railway was still viable at that time for new industries. In September 1968 the Collingwood Industrial Commission stated there were approximately 800 acres of land within the Town available for future or large scale development and plenty of male and female labour was available. Land along the CNR rail line, then used for farming, could be serviced with water and sewers when required, harking back to the 1944 Board Of Trade venture along the waterfront.

As we have seen, a number of industries, some of them with enormous factory footprints, were established in the north-west corner of Collingwood in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries and then passed from the scene with changing economic conditions as the years went by. Similarly, a number of the new industries that located in town in the 1960's following the disastrous Georgian China and Quinlan-Crawford fires have also passed from the scene, although a few still exist in the east end of town today in the 21st Century. A strip mall with about 16 businesses facing out onto Highway 26 stands on the site of Georgian China today. Across the street where Quinlan-Crawford was located is now the site of Canadian Tire. The only thing that remains constant is the land—the buildings on them come and go.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.