



THE CRAMP STEEL COMPANY AND ITS SUCCESSORS, COLLINGWOOD

H. David Vuckson

Research for this story took an interesting turn. With just a photo from a 1906 publication and a few remarks by David Williams in the Huron Institute Papers & Records to go on, I relied at first on trade magazines for the iron and steel industry from the early 1900's. These provide a wealth of information about the formation of the Cramp Steel Company and its ambitious plans as well as voluminous details about the buildings and the machinery but not a local, eye witness element. Then, thanks to Carole Stuart at the Collingwood Public Library, I received documents compiled in 1998 by the late Don "Doc" Boone (1930-2011) who consulted archived issues of five former Collingwood newspapers: the (weekly) Enterprise and its Saturday companion the Messenger, the (weekly) Bulletin and its Saturday companion the Saturday News, and (after 1932) the combined Enterprise-Bulletin.

How many of you know that 120 years ago Collingwood had a steel mill? That's right, a steel mill similar to those in Hamilton and Sault Ste. Marie, although not on the scale of mills in those other cities, but, nevertheless, different only in degree, not in kind. It had different

official names and owners for a quarter of a century as various principal owners held title to it, but locals just called it “The Smelter”. The first time I began to investigate it was when writing my January 2020 story about the Old Boys Reunions of 1903 and 1938. At the time of the first reunion in late August 1903, the Cramp Steel Company, Limited was supposed to have just begun production and the plant was included in the itinerary of the Old Boys as they visited various major industries in town including The Charlton Sawmill, the Imperial Steel & Wire Company, the Collingwood Meat Company, and the Collingwood Shipyard. Despite grandiose plans and the best of intentions by the principal investors who put substantial amounts of money into the venture, unforeseen circumstances intervened and, in retrospect, the steel mill appears to have been closed throughout its lifetime more than it was open. Ironically, the only time it was really successful for any continuous length of time was in the years 1916-17-18 during the First World War when the items it produced were designed to kill people. Although the steel mill existed physically for about a quarter of a century, it was inactive for much of that time and is therefore not much remembered in the collective historical memory of Collingwood the way other industries were.

The Cramp Steel Company was organized in 1901 and seems to be one of Collingwood’s better-kept secrets insofar as it is seldom talked about in historical writings compared to the fame of the Shipyard. It took its name from the well-known Cramp shipbuilding family of Philadelphia, Walter H. Cramp being one of the principal investors. David Williams, in the *Huron Institute Papers & Records Volume III* recorded in December 1901 that the buildings of the Cramp Steel Co. were in course of erection. It must not have been easy to do that in an Ontario

winter for Williams also recorded in the same month, a photo of the “ruins of Cramp Steel Co. after a heavy rain”. Perhaps Black Ash Creek had overflowed and flooded the site because the steel mill property was located on both sides of the creek.

The 1903 *Report Of The Bureau Of Mines* states that Cramp Steel had been given about 80 acres in the (largely unpopulated) west end of town by the Collingwood Council, a portion of which land is said to have fronted onto the harbour [this amount of land does not square with statements in the Collingwood newspapers of the day which give the extent of the land as 25 acres]. Local statistics state that the property was shaped like a piece of pie: it was bordered on the south by the Grand Trunk Railway tracks going to Meaford, on the east by High St. to a point between Black Ash Creek and Harbour St. West and then southwest back to the railway tracks. Numerous railway sidings came into the property from the main line, crossing Black Ash Creek to the buildings on the creek’s east side. It is stated that the company had its own limestone quarry on the site which supplied stone for the substantial buildings. As for the land fronting on the harbour, a newspaper article stated,

The Company agree to commence operations on Jan. 1st, 1904...If they have not erected the blast furnaces in five years, all the property purchased from the Meat Co. and the water privileges will revert to the town (they had stated their intention to erect an iron blast furnace on a site adjoining the lake shore in the summer of 1903—this never happened).

The Town also gave a cash bonus of \$115,000.00 and some tax exemptions. The Cramp buildings were located adjacent (another

account says “near”) to the site of the Imperial Steel and Wire Company’s operation (Imperial’s *first* location was on the north side of Harbour St. West). These two steel companies were located in the general area extending from what today are the Cranberry Village (rebranded in 2018 as Living Stone Resort and Cranberry Golf Course) through to High St.—also known as Balsam St./Highway 26 and were bordered on the south by the CNR tracks. The report goes on at great length about the dimensions of the buildings which were “substantially made of concrete, stone, steel and wood, all sheathed in heavy corrugated iron” and about the extensive machinery and its capabilities. A photo of a portion of the site shows Black Ash Creek with the banks diked to prevent flooding. Building began in 1901, suffered a setback mentioned above, and continued on into 1902. An Ontario Business Directory of 1903 gives the address of their local office, “**Cramp Steel Co., Limited, First St.**” while the 11th Report of the Ontario Bureau of Mines (1902) gives the address of Cramp’s Head Office as “608 Temple Building, Toronto”, the 12-storey building located at the corner of Richmond and Bay Streets in downtown Toronto.

The publication *Mineral Resources Of The United States for Calendar Year 1901* stated,

...The Cramp Steel Company Limited is now erecting works at Collingwood, Ontario for the production of Bessemer and open-hearth steel and rolled iron and steel. The Bessemer department is to be equipped with two 5-long-ton acid converters, with an annual capacity of 100,000 tons of ingots, and the open-hearth department with two 15-long-ton furnaces (one acid and one basic), with an annual capacity of 30,000 tons of ingots. The rolling mill will be equipped for the

manufacture of rails, structural shapes, bar iron, shafting, etc., for which it will have an annual capacity of about 200,000 tons. The erection of two coke blast furnaces, each with a daily capacity of 250 tons of pig iron, is contemplated by this company.

The August 8, 1903 issue of *The Iron and Machinery World* announced the intended beginning of production at Collingwood's steel mill:

WILL MANUFACTURE WIRE RODS AT COLLINGWOOD—The Cramp Steel Company, representing New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Canadian capital, expect to begin the manufacture of finished steel products at Collingwood, Ontario, within the next few days. The mills were to have been in operation early this summer, but delays due to non-delivery of material made it impossible to carry out the original plans. The plans of the company are for a daily output of 500 tons. Since the passage of the bill authorizing the payment of a subsidy on wire rods it has been determined to devote the plants almost exclusively to the manufacture of this line of products. When the mills were designed they were so planned that rods could be rolled as well as bars. The semi-continuous system in use in the German mills was adopted, so that the mills could be run on bars until the government did something to make the manufacture of rods profitable. Though the Cramp Company own their own ore lands in North Ontario nothing will be done at present beyond the manufacture of finished products from billets. Contracts have been made with Dominion Iron & Steel [of Sidney, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia] for a continuous supply of billets.

Plants have been established by independent concerns in Collingwood which will consume a large part of the rods or bars the plant can turn out. The Imperial Steel & Wire Company have put up a plant near the

Cramp works, and are prepared to take most, if not quite the entire output.

Here was a convenient arrangement. The Cramp steel mill was planning to send almost its entire production to its neighbour, the Imperial Steel & Wire plant, referred to by locals as “The Nail Factory” (Imperial’s *first* location at what is now the Living Stone Resort and Cranberry Golf Course).

Despite the best of intentions, external forces intervened and things went sideways. A riot in Sault Ste. Marie and the tightness of the money market spelled bad news for the Collingwood steel mill. The business empire of Francis Clergue of Sault Ste. Marie included a powerhouse to harness the potential of the rapids on the St. Mary’s River, a paper mill, a mine and the Algoma Steel mill and his men worked a 12-hour day. Clergue relied on a vast government subsidy and the borrowing of money from New York to meet payroll. In September 1903 things came to a crisis. Clergue was overwhelmed by his overhead costs and the men were unpaid. This led to a riot on September 27, 1903. With Clergue’s collapse and the tightness of the money market, there wasn’t much confidence in the iron and steel industry. This combination of events echoed in Collingwood with the result that money was not available for operating expenses at the Cramp Steel Co. The firm had to ask the Town Council for an advance of \$60,000.00 on the bonus that the Town had awarded. The newspaper reported,

The situation is certainly a grave one for the municipality...Large sums of money have been drawn from investors in all parts of Canada and the United States to construct the works and if they remain idle, the credit

of the town will certainly suffer proportionately from the association...in every way the failure of the Company to operate will be a serious blow to the prospects of Collingwood.

The advance was granted in November 1903. The business was reorganized in 1904 as Northern Iron And Steel Company, Limited—Main Office—Collingwood, Ontario. Production did not begin in January 1904 as mentioned above. E. N. Gunsaulus, American Consul at Toronto, reported on November 19, 1904,

A rumor has had currency that the United States Steel Corporation has secured control of the Northern Iron and Steel Company whose plant is situated at Collingwood, Ontario. While it has been denied as premature, it turns out to have some foundation. Maj. J. A. Currie, president of the Northern Iron and Steel Company, states that overtures looking toward securing control have been made by a prominent official of one of the large American steel companies and negotiations entered into. The proposition contemplated the enlargement of the Collingwood plant by the addition of two blast furnaces and perhaps a steel-rail plant. In the meantime, however, further legal proceedings have been taken, in the name of Cramp Steel Company, to obtain an injunction restraining the transfer of the plant and assets of that company to the Northern Iron and Steel Company.

Apparently, these legal proceedings did not stop the transfer of ownership. A 1905 Edition of the publication *Steel And Iron* (Volume 76, No. 1) carried news about the change,

Cramp Steel Company Reorganized. *Plans for the reorganization of the Cramp Steel Company, Limited of Collingwood, Ont. in which a good deal of American capital is interested, have been successfully*

accomplished. The property of the company was sold under foreclosure proceedings by the North American Trust Company of New York and the new organization, the Northern Iron And Steel Company, Limited took its place. The stockholders of the old company were admitted to the new company on the payment of a small assessment. The Northern Iron And Steel Company, in order to quit its title to the property, applied to the Ontario government for a meritorious title. This has been granted.

The progress of Collingwood's steel mill seems to have been sporadic as evidenced by this comment in *The Iron and Machinery World*, circa 1905,

The Northern Iron and Steel Company, Limited, of Collingwood, Ontario, did no work whatever in the first half of 1905 on the furnace for which excavations were made in 1902, but upon which work was suspended in 1903.

The August 1905 Bulletin of the American Iron and Steel Association contained the same above statement. The 1907 edition of *Moody's Manual-Industrials* gave specific information about the business,

NORTHERN IRON & STEEL CO., LTD.—Inc. in Canada in 1904, as a reorganization of the Cramp Steel Co., of Collingwood, Ontario. **Capital Stock**—Authorized, \$1,250,000 6% non-cumulative preferred and \$1,250,000 common; par, \$100. No bonds, No details reported. **Officers** J. A. Currie, Pres.; Duncan Donald, Sec. Main Office: Collingwood, Ont.

Colonel J. A. Currie's name was associated with the steel mill right through until its final demise in the 1920's. The steel works were

reported to be open again at the end of August 1906 with sufficient orders on hand to run the plant for three months. The reporter said,

The steel works have a splendid future before them and with careful management, will prove a money maker.

This optimism proved premature for in October 1907 the solicitors of the Union Trust Company, liquidators, wanted the \$60,000 bonus the Town had advanced to the steel mill. However, optimism rose again in October 1908 when the first bar of iron was rolled,

The occasion was a red letter day in the history of Collingwood, as this great iron and steel industry that has been hanging fire so long may now be considered an accomplished fact, and cannot help but give an immense impetus to the commercial standing of the town...The manufacture of merchantable bar iron commenced on Monday and an immense amount of raw material is arriving daily.

Again, the optimism was premature for in May of 1910 the headline in the *Bulletin* read,

WILL THE STEEL WORKS START?...Rumours that the plant and buildings could be converted into a live concern have been in the air off and on for several years, but little attention has been paid to them.

Nothing more is heard until the fall of 1915 when men from Buffalo and Cleveland were in town to inspect the steel plant, and the headline asked the question, ***STEEL PLANT MAY WORK?***

Corporate takeovers, amicable and hostile, are nothing new. Despite the infighting for control in 1904-5, the Collingwood steel mill would many years later play a major role in supplying munitions during the

First World War. A fascinating 2012 article titled *The Rise And Fall Of An Ontario Business Dynasty: William Kennedy And Sons* (Owen Sound) by Keith R. Fleming, a professor at the University Of Western Ontario in London, tells the story of the Kennedy family's Owen Sound foundry business from its modest beginning in 1857 until it was sold out of family ownership in 1951. The firm continued on until 1997 and ended in bankruptcy as control passed among various multi-national companies, the bottom line on the balance sheets dictating survival or failure.

The Kennedy foundry supplied heavy industrial equipment to a variety of businesses and the firm's markets were international. They also began to produce their own steel when they installed a Bessemer converter early in the 20th Century. During the First World War, they received contracts from the Imperial Munitions Board for the making of shell casings. Mr. Fleming tells us that in 1916,

Kennedy's further increased its productive capacity at that time by acquiring the facilities of the Owen Sound Iron Works...and purchasing the open hearth steel plant and rolling mills of the Northern Iron & Steel Company situated fifty-eight kilometers to the east in Collingwood. Although the two furnaces in the Collingwood plant—they had a combined daily capacity of seventy-five tons—required a complete rebuild to become operational, Kennedy's cited the need to protect its market share in munitions as justification for the expense. It proved to be a shrewd decision, particularly once supplies of the expensive low phosphorus pig iron on which the Owen Sound plant's Bessemer converter depended grew increasingly scarce. As a result when munitions production at Owen Sound began to slip in 1917 the Collingwood foundry made up the difference aided by Kennedy's

installation there of its first electric furnace capable of producing fifteen tons of pig iron daily...

The fact that the open-hearth furnaces needed a complete rebuild in order to become operational shows that the plant was idle prior to its acquisition by Kennedys. Indeed, the *Vernon's Directories* for 1910-11 and 1912-13 appear to confirm this for they have no listing for the Northern Iron & Steel Company during those years. The fire insurance map shows the steel mill to be "Silent" in October 1911. In January and February 1916 it was reported that there was "activity" around the steel plant and it looked promising. Men were on the payroll while managers, superintendents and foremen were in place. Supplies were arriving daily including railway cars of scrap iron. On June 29, 1916 under the headline **THE STEEL WORKS OPERATING**, the *Enterprise* reported this encouraging news,

After lying dormant ever since its erection over fifteen years ago, the Northern Iron And Steel Plant is once more in active operation, and a veritable hive of industry.

It is well-known that the Collingwood Shipyard was making munitions for the war effort and now comes this information that Collingwood's steel mill was involved as well. It is unfortunate that the Grand Trunk Railway tracks ended in Meaford instead of continuing on to Owen Sound (Owen Sound had both Grand Trunk and Canadian Pacific rail service, but from a different direction)—there could have been a seamless connection for transporting supplies and product between the two facilities. The lack of a rail link between Owen Sound and Collingwood was not daunting for the Kennedys. Instead, in 1916, they shipped about 100 tons of scrap material from Owen Sound via the

steamship *S. S. Germanic* to be melted down in Collingwood. This arrangement did not last long, for the *Germanic* was destroyed by fire at the Collingwood dock in March 1917. In May 1917 Kennedy's advertised for workers,

MUNITION WORKERS WANTED. *Work for quite a large number of men on FURNACES, IN MACHINE SHOP, ON CASTING FLOOR, and in the YARD Serve your Country by making MUNITIONS besides getting highest wages paid. Wm. KENNEDY & SONS Limited, Collingwood.*

This duality of locations owned by Kennedy's did not last beyond the end of World War I. Fleming continues,

At war's end Kennedy's cancelled all production at its Collingwood foundry, an investment valued at approximately \$500,000, and abruptly dismissed the 350 workers employed there, a significant economic loss to the community...Shortly after Canada entered the [Second] war in 1939, T. D. Kennedy reminded Owen Sound Councillors that his company had dismantled its Collingwood plant at the end of the previous war to avoid paying taxes on an idle facility.

In January 1916 the steel mill office had been opened and Kennedy's sons had indicated,

We have no desire to take men on and then be compelled to lay them off in a short time. Instead we hope to soon be in shape to add a goodly list and keep them steadily employed.

In February 1916, to facilitate wartime production at the steel works, plans were announced to put in a new railway siding across High St. branching off from the railway track that used to go to the Collingwood Meat Co. and the Charlton Sawmill. Alas, the loss of wartime contracts

resulted in layoffs in December 1918, just in time for Christmas. It was assumed that the plant would be closed for some time since it was just an add-on to the firm's facilities in Owen Sound and was no longer needed unless they could come up with some other use for the place. The men went from working three shifts a day for the war effort to not working at all although in February 1919 the Kennedys obtained gold plated medals for all employees who had worked there for a year or more, expecting that the medals "should be prized as a souvenir of the great war".

In May 1918, the citizens of Collingwood were invited to a public meeting concerning the future of the Kennedy plant. Kennedys were asking for concessions under four headings: 1) fixed Assessment, 2) Fire Protection 3) The use of certain land owned by the Town, and 4) Reduction in the cost of Electric Power (they had installed electric furnaces in July 1917). The vote in July 1919 was overwhelmingly in favour of granting these concessions: 925 in favour, 18 against. Mr. Kennedy was grateful and was going to "at once commence to get the plant in shape". It is not surprising that Mr. Kennedy wanted fire protection considering that on May 25, 1919, just two months before this critical vote, the buildings of his neighbour, The Imperial Steel & Wire Co. (the "nail works") were totally destroyed by fire. To say that fire protection was inadequate is an understatement. This scenario would repeat itself many years later in 1965 when the one building remaining from the steel mill and then occupied by Quinlan-Crawford was destroyed by fire and two of the contributing factors were inadequate volume and water pressure for firefighting and an ailing pumper truck (see my December 2020 story).

Obviously, things went sideways again and Kennedy's plan did not come to pass. In fact, he sold the place. When it became known in July 1920 that the latest owner of the property, the Baldwins Company of Toronto, had purchased the steel plant and was intending to scrap it, presumably for the value of the scrap metal, there was much excitement in the town. It was then discovered with great relief (which turned out to be short-lived) that Col. Currie had inserted a clause in the agreement of 1904 that the steel mill could not be moved or scrapped for 30 years. The *Bulletin* reported on July 8, 1920,

THE SCRAPPING OF THE STEEL PLANT. *Considerable excitement was caused among our citizens by the announcement a few days ago that the Baldwins Co. Limited of Toronto had purchased the steel plant and were going to scrap it.*

A hurried consultation of the Industrial Committee of the council was held on Saturday at which on reading the agreements made between the town and Col. Currie and the Cramp Steel Co., it was discovered that the Colonel had caused to be inserted in the agreement a clause that made it impossible for the plant to be moved or scrapped for thirty years. The title for the land deeded to the Company by the town makes this agreement part of the consideration and the deed and the agreement are part of the Act of Parliament passed in 1904. Col. Currie, whether he controlled the plant or not insured that it remain in the town and be operated here so that the Baldwins or anyone else can't "scrap". In view of the many false statements foresight in this respect and also that in any of his business dealing he was fair and always looking after the town.

All the steel plant ever cost the town was the land on which it is built some twenty-five hundred dollars. People said that the plant could not be operated. Events have proved that it could and the Colonel has now the satisfaction of being justified in all he did in as far as the steel plant and the town is concerned. It is now up to the council to not sleep at the switch if someone comes along and starts scrapping the steel plant.

Currie's clause does not appear to have been worth the paper it was printed on because David Williams noted "*Wrecking steel building at Cramp Steel Works, (Baldwin's) October 1921*". Don Boone's research was more specific stating, "*Tearing Down The Open Hearth Furnaces & Buildings (Smelter) Oct. 3, 1921*". The photo shows a number of men on the roof and portions of the building already dismantled.

In June 1925 Currie, himself, perhaps representing the "recently-formed" Huronia Steel Company, purchased the idle steel plant from the Town of Collingwood for \$5000.00, the Town holding a mortgage that was to be paid off in 1927. During the term, Currie was to pay the property tax, the Town was to insure the buildings and if Currie defaulted for two months, the Town, with one month's notice could lease or sell the lands. In 1926 the publication *The Blast Furnace and Steel Plant* announced the following,

The Huronia Steel Company, Ltd., Collingwood, Ont., recently formed with a capital of 50,000 shares of stock, no par value, has concluded negotiations for the local plants previously operated by the Kennedy Company and the Electro Castings Company, and will remodel and expand for a new steel mill. Plans are underway for the installation of a large amount of new equipment for the production of rolled products, including bars for concrete reinforcement, steel shapes, etc. The new

equipment will include rolling mills and accessory apparatus, an electric furnace and power equipment. It is expected to provide facilities for the employment of more than 250 men.

As it turned out, Colonel Currie must have defaulted because the Town took over the property for unpaid taxes in 1927. The steel buildings were torn down and recycled and the machinery and other equipment were sold. One of the stone buildings that remained standing for many years was used by Clyde Aircraft for storage during the Second World War. Apparently, many houses in the west end of town had their roofs patched with corrugated steel sheeting “borrowed” from the smelter buildings during the Depression.

Vernon’s 1923 Directory for Collingwood listed a “vacant factory” just north of the Grand Trunk Railway crossing on the west side of Balsam (High) Street. This was the steel mill’s old Boiler House and Machine Shop that would later become Quinlan’s hassock factory in 1946 when Quinlans purchased about one third of the former steel mill property including this large building that was destroyed during the 1965 Quinlan-Crawford fire. The 1944 Board of Trade sketch of existing industries and available industrial sites in town shows the Quinlan building on a large site marked off on the west side of High St. and is labelled “Smelter Property” (the former location of Quinlan-Crawford is now occupied by Canadian Tire).

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment *Record Of Site Condition (RSC) #208189* of 2013 records the inspections made for the planned expansion of development south of Harbour St. West. Part of the site back toward the CNR tracks (now the Georgian Trail) used to be the town dump when I was young and older residents will remember that

the dump was always on fire, the method of choice for disposal of garbage at the time on the surface of the ground. Every year when I was young, for my birthday my parents would buy me a one-way ticket from Collingwood to Meaford on the passenger train and then drive to Meaford to pick me up. The train passed close to the dump, the smoke from the burning garbage being one of the scenic wonders of the 22-mile train ride. When Collingwood relocated the dump to an incinerator/land fill site far out of town, fill was brought in and the land was left vacant for many years.

The document indicates that the large site proposed for development on the south side of Harbour St. West had long ago been owned by a number of steel companies: Cramp Steel Company, Limited (1901) which became Northern Iron and Steel Company Limited (1904) [in 1907 there was a resolution to wind up the company and appoint a liquidator], International Steel Corporation (1913), The Canadian Western Steel Corporation Limited (1919), Baldwin Canadian Steel Corporation (1920), the Huronia Steel Company Limited (1924), and finally a Tax Arrears Certificate by the Town of Collingwood in 1927.

In the meantime the property grew trees and vegetation as nature reclaimed the land. Except for the area closer to the Georgian Trail that had been used from about 1938 onward as the town dump and the Quinlan-Crawford factory on High St., in modern times the property was inactive and undeveloped and largely grown over with trees and vegetation some of which were cleared in the 1970's. Some of the land's use as the Cranberry Golf Course Driving Range began in the 1980's. The street named Kari Crescent off Harbour St. West now encircles the area marked for residential development, some of which was once a part of the steel mill property. Don Boone said in March

1998 that the remains of the two open-hearth furnaces could still be found among the trees and brush about 600-700 feet west of High St.

Except for a few years during the First World War when the steel works was owned and operated by the Kennedys as a branch plant of their Owen Sound works, and paid its way and the wages of its employees, overall the place seems to have been doomed right from the start in 1901.

As with other former industrial sites in Collingwood (a prime example is the Shipyard property) that have in modern times been used to build residential and commercial properties, the “Steel Town-Collingwood” locations of a century ago between Cranberry Lake and High St./Balsam St./Highway 26 are now home to residences and commercial buildings with more to come as the town grows.

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.