



THE SMARTS WERE CLEVER BUSINESS MEN

H. David Vuckson

Some goods produced in Collingwood's long ago industrial era were recognized in many places in Canada. Blue Mountain Pottery, ships from the Collingwood Shipyard sailing the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence waterways, and furniture from Kaufman's are just three excellent examples from the 20th Century. In earlier times, the products of some of Collingwood's woodworking industries were known far and wide. This month, we turn to another long-gone, prominent Collingwood industry—the fruit and vegetable growing and canning business of Smart Bros. Ltd., a family-owned business for over 75 years involving several generations of the family. Their "Smart's Brand" and "Georgian Bay Brand" trademarks were known widely, the labels proclaiming "Smart Bros. Ltd. Collingwood Ontario, Canada". In Collingwood itself, the Smart family were also well-known for the unlikely combination of flowers and tailoring.

It all began in 1890 with the founder/patriarch, John Smart, Sr. (ca. 1829-1898). He was born in England and, while no official date of his birth seems to exist, there is a record of his baptism on January 17, 1830. He married Isabella Pearson in Toronto on October 13, 1861. John worked for the Northern Railway, the successor to the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway

that arrived in Collingwood on January 1, 1855. He had a number of jobs with the railway and appears to have risen through the ranks fairly quickly. *Caverhill's Toronto City Directory* for 1859-60 lists him as a "Carman", a person who inspects and performs light repairs on railway cars when they arrive at a railway yard. *Mitchell's Toronto City Directory* for 1864-65 lists him as a "Baggagemaster". The *Toronto City Directory* for 1867-68 lists "John Smart, Conductor, 89 St. Patrick St." in St. Patrick's Ward, Toronto, at a time when Bloor St. was the northern city limit. He appears to have moved his family to Collingwood by the time of the 1881 Census, but it seems that his work required him to need a place to hang his hat in Toronto as well. In 1883 he was boarding at 338 Front St. W. In 1886 he was boarding at 367 King St. W., and at the same time, is listed in the *Simcoe County Directory & Gazetteer* as living on Pine St. in Collingwood. He is believed to have retired from the railway about 1890 around age 60.

After his retirement from the railway, John Smart purchased 7 acres of good Simcoe County soil on Campbell St. in the south end of Collingwood and transitioned from being a railway conductor to now conducting the growing of vegetables. According to a report in the *Toronto Globe* newspaper circa 1910, the original name of the business before incorporation was "The Collingwood Fruit Farm". The land holding was soon increased by several more acres. Two of John's sons, Norman John Smart (1865-1932) and William George, known as "W.G.", (1868-1964), took over the business in their twenties, their father being in his sixties at the time. Prior to this the brothers had followed the careers of baker and grocer's clerk. At the time of the *Globe* article, the reporter stated,

Now it is the largest fruit and garden farm in Ontario, and its owners, Messrs. Norman and W. George Smart, are among the wealthiest, self-made farmers in the Province.

The land under Smart family control would eventually reach around 500 acres, one holding extending from Campbell St. right out to the Poplar Sideroad where orchards bordered the road opposite the Presbyterian Cemetery; another farm was located on Mountain Rd. Greenhouses were used to grow tomatoes and flowers. The motto of the Smart Brothers was “Grow Everything There Is A Demand For”. Varied crops such as cabbages, onions, pumpkins, asparagus, potatoes, rhubarb, apples, cherries, plums, pears and many more were grown on land owned by Smarts. Much of that land between Campbell St. and the Poplar Sideroad now grows a different kind of crop—subdivisions—as the population of Collingwood grows.

One major crop was cabbages. From the *Globe* article we learn,

The cabbage crop at the Collingwood Fruit Farm is an important feature. This season more than 150,000 plants have been set out and are developing into healthy vegetables. The cabbages are sold by the crate or dozen, but the majority are kept and manufactured into sauerkraut which is shipped in barrels to the lumber shanties in the north. Last year more than 1000 barrels of sauerkraut and 800 barrels of cucumbers in the brine were shipped into New Ontario. [In the early 20th Century the huge part of Ontario north of the Great Lakes and Georgian Bay was referred to as “New Ontario”.]

A canning factory was built at Smart’s farm on Campbell St. in 1911. From a “Looking Back” article in the former *Enterprise-Bulletin* newspaper of February 20, 2009, we learn that in those early years, Norman became head of the canning end of the business, and W.G. was in charge of the farm. With the advent of the canning factory on Campbell St., a means of shipping out product was needed. This was at a time when transportation of freight on land depended on the railways (Smarts also shipped product via ship). Collingwood had two railways coming into town—one from Toronto and one from Hamilton with the tracks of the Grand Trunk Railway from Hamilton via Beeton Junction (the former Hamilton and North Western

Railway) running along the eastern boundary of the farm. The Smarts applied to the Grand Trunk and a railway siding having a capacity of eight cars and with switches at each end for the main line was put in on the Beeton track circa 1912. This side track is listed in a 1927 CNR Employee Timetable and identified as being 3.3 miles *south* of Nottawa although I don't understand why it was located so far from the farm; however, I have been assured by a friend who is very knowledgeable about all things railway that the railways were very precise in their mileage measurements. Cases of canned goods were hauled to the siding by horse-drawn wagons in the early years before the advent of trucks. The railway was used not only for shipping out finished product, but it was also used for large-scale delivery of fertilizer. In an interview with W. G. Smart, Jack MacMurchy of the *Enterprise-Bulletin* recorded,

Fertilizer in those days, stated Mr. Smart, was strictly manure and some of this was purchased in Toronto at 70 cents per ton. During the course of a year as many as sixty cars were brought in by railway.

The *Globe* article further amplifies the sources of the manure:

Only barnyard manure is used on the place. Since they have no stock, this has to be purchased from other farmers and from people in the town of Collingwood, as well as parties in Toronto who ship by the carload. The average price paid for this fertilizer is about one dollar a ton. The manure is spread regularly on the land, certain areas being allowed to stand idle some seasons in order to be manured, at the same time having a rest. A compost heap is kept on hand at all times and after two years standing it is used in the greenhouses.

One can imagine how fragrant the air was along the railway line from Hamilton to Collingwood in those days, not only from the cars of manure, but also due to the fact that this particular branch line was used to transport hogs to the Collingwood Meat Company plant in the north-west corner of

the harbour. W. G. recalled that as many as seven carloads of hogs would pass the farm some days on their way to the meat packing plant. This gave rise to the train being called “The Hog Special”. By 1937, in the later years of the Great Depression, Smart’s siding is indicated in a CNR Employee Timetable as being 1.3 miles *north* of the Nottawa station with a switch at only the south end and a capacity of 3 freight cars. Since 1925, the downtown canning factory was the principal division of Smarts using the railway and had a siding right at the back door so the siding at the farm needed less capacity and was used much less.

Norman Smart died in 1932 and his son, Herbert Bassett Smart (1900-1940) who had worked in the family business from the age of 16, followed in his father’s footsteps and ran the canning factory until 1936. He died young at age 40 of acute Encephalitis caused by a ruptured brain tumour. Following Herbert’s death, his cousins Edward Marshall Smart (1900-1990) and John Lloyd Smart (1896-1964), sons of W. G. Smart, took over. Herbert’s son Robert J. Smart (1924-1990) also worked in the family business, both in the canning factory and at the farm for many years. He was living in the old family home of W. G. Smart at 234 Campbell St. fifty years ago when I tuned a piano for him.

There was yet another Smart, younger brother to Norman and W. G.—Henry R. Smart (1873-1960). With flowers from the greenhouses at the farm, this family member operated Smart’s Flowers at 56 Hurontario St. (west side) between First and Second Streets. His main passion was for tailoring which career he followed in the back of the flower shop as a “Merchant Tailor”. In fact, Henry gave his profession as “Tailor” at the time of his marriage in 1900 and in the Voters Lists in the 1930’s and 40’s. In 1975 Smart’s Flowers was sold to Rick and Susan Lloyd who ran it for 42 years until their retirement in 2017 at which time the business was taken over by Craig Ashton and Guy Laporte. It is now known as “Collingwood Flowers & Home Décor”. Another

son of John Smart Sr., Edward Vickers Smart (1870-1896), followed his father into a railway career, in this case as a brakeman, but died young at age 26 in Toronto from an accident that resulted in a fractured skull and laceration of the brain.

By 1925 the Smart Bros. operation had been so successful that it outgrew the canning factory at the farm on Campbell St. Property was acquired in downtown Collingwood at the north-west corner of Hurontario and First Streets. Eleven years earlier (April 1914), a large 3-storey + basement red brick warehouse building had been opened at the corner of First and Pine Streets by the firm of T. Long & Bro. Limited to supply their retail stores on the west side of Hurontario St. (now Loblaw's parking lot). Adjoining this building on its east side was the white 2-storey warehouse of Henry Poehlman selling wholesale fruit, groceries, grain, hay, and seed, opened in June 1911. At the rear was a tall grain elevator (12,000 bushel capacity) similar in appearance to those once so common on the prairies. By 1925 Henry Poehlman was about 60 years old and perhaps ready to retire. Smart's purchased his place of business and part of the white building became the offices of Smart Bros. The grain elevator was demolished and a brand new, steam-powered canning factory with the requisite tall brick smokestack and a steam whistle on the roof was built. A railway siding ran off the mainline right behind Smart's Cannery and Long's warehouse (later National Grocers) and continued across Pine St. to the coal sheds of Fred Kimmerly (later Girdwoods). Now, Smart's canned goods could be passed out the back door right into waiting boxcars for long distance shipment without the need for horses and wagons as on Campbell St. Horse-drawn wagons were eventually replaced by a fleet of trucks. A large sign out front of the First St. factory assured passersby that Smart's products were "Packed At Flavour Peak". Some of the labels stated that Smart's products were "Packed In Sanitary Cans".

School children earned pocket money after school and on weekends in the fields by weeding onions, cutting asparagus, etc. Many women worked in the cannery on First Street. Smarts held company picnics at Sunset Point as did the Collingwood Shipyard. Tug-o-War contests were a popular activity at these picnics; with so many women working at Smarts, the ladies had their own version of this contest.

Out at the farm, Underwood Creek (also known as the Oak Street Canal), from its several sources, flows through a forested area alongside what used to be the western border of Smart's farm north of the Poplar Sideroad and opposite the Presbyterian Cemetery. In this area the creek was dammed up to create a pond so that the water could be used for farming purposes. Water was pumped up into a wooden water tower and used to fill the machines that were used to spray the fruit trees. Young people cooled off and swam in the pond behind the dam when working at the farm. One day in the early 1960's I learned from my great-aunt Jean Hewson when I arrived for my summer work at the Presbyterian Cemetery, that "Smart's dam broke last night", resulting in an unseasonably large amount of water going down the creek, through town and out to the harbour.

In addition to processing fruit and vegetables from their own properties, Smarts also bought produce from other farmers and fruit growers. One summer in the early 1960's I helped pick cherries at Ted McNicholl's orchard out towards Nottawa. I went with him in the truck when he took a load of cherries down to Smart's. The canning factory must have been overwhelmed at the time because they told us they couldn't take any more and told Ted to take the cherries to the Cold Storage on St. Paul St. At peak times, Smarts employed upwards of 500 people, making them one of the largest employers in Collingwood. The Collingwood Museum article mentioned later in this story states,

For many years Smart Bros. Limited was the single largest employer in Collingwood, especially during the Depression years. The wages earned by the business's employees rivaled those at the shipyard and in some cases outstripped the going shipyard wage.

The reference to the years of the Great Depression echoes the fact that the Shipyard was largely idle through much—but not all—of the Depression years of the 1930's, producing little more than grass growing on the shipbuilding berths for much of that time, whereas food continued to be grown and processed simply because people need to eat whether or not ships were being built.

During World War II Smart Bros. Limited contributed to the war effort. In 1944 the Collingwood Board of Trade published a brief history of the origin of the business and told of its activities during war time:

The farm division operates 400 acres all principally engaged in the growing of fruits and vegetables. The bearing orchard consists of approximately 150 acres. The greenhouse division consists of 40,000 square feet under glass, and this concern produces all the tomato plants for contractors of this district who supply tomatoes for processing. The cold storage plant is also operated in conjunction with the farm and has a capacity of 6000 barrels of apples. The canned food division operates a plant in Collingwood which has a floor area of 50,000 sq. ft. This plant has produced since the outbreak of war, in excess of 1,000,000 cases of canned food. The armed forces and auxiliary services have been supplied with one-half of this produce, the remaining half being distributed among lumber, mining and construction camps, hospitals and civilian trade. The total produce of the farm division since the outbreak of war has been equivalent to 1125 carloads [railway freight cars] of fruit and vegetables which have been sold on the open market or delivered to the canning factory for processing.

The average number of employees of this consolidated industry would average two hundred. However, this amount is increased considerably at the peak of the harvesting and processing season to over 500 employees. The officers of this Company are as follows: President, W. G. Smart; Vice President, E. M. Smart; Secretary-Treasurer, J. L. Smart.

As for the steam whistle on the roof of Smart's cannery, the pull cord to operate it was long-gone when I noticed it in the 1960's—perhaps they didn't really need it when the nearby Shipyard whistle just across the tracks was so powerful it could be heard all over Collingwood. When I was arranging for various bells and whistles to sound at midnight on June 30, 1967 for Canada's Centennial, I went to Smart's and spoke to their engineer. He obliged by hooking up a cord to blow the whistle for that event, and in subsequent summers when I worked in the Shipyard as an Office Boy/Messenger, I noticed that a crowd of Smart's employees would gather on the roof for a ship launching and a man sat there with the whistle cord in his hand ready to add to the salute as another Collingwood ship first tasted the water of Georgian Bay. That whistle is now in the collection at the Collingwood Museum.

The Smart family were Methodist in their faith; following church union in 1925, the Methodist denomination became the largest component of the then-new United Church of Canada. While Ed Smart was a prominent member of Trinity United Church on Maple St., he helped out the First Presbyterian Church half a block away on one occasion. Rev. Peter B. Reid was the minister at First Pres. from 1950 to about 1956. The church had placed an order with a Toronto firm for a large number of chairs and needed them brought to Collingwood. Hoping to save the cost of shipping the chairs, Reid approached Ed Smart asking that when one of Smart's larger trucks had taken a load of canned goods to Toronto and would normally return empty, would they pick up the chairs and bring them to Collingwood?

Ed Smart wasn't too keen on the idea so Reid persuaded him by saying, "If you came to hear me preach and the church was full, you wouldn't want to have to stand throughout the service, would you?" Reid got his chairs.

John L. Smart died in 1964. His large brick home on the south side of 5th St. right at the head of Pine St., built in 1892-93, was sold to the Bell Telephone Co. and demolished. This was around the time we said good-bye to our manual telephones and the operators who said, "Number please" when we lifted the receiver. The new dial telephone switching equipment went into the new building where John Smart's house had stood. John's brother Ed Smart lived at 458 Ste. Marie St. in a house previously owned by the Manson family (piano dealers/music store), and, before them, was owned by my grand-uncle H. B. O'Brien from 1905 to 1915. My grandmother, H. B.'s sister, lived across the back fence on Hurontario St. and there was a gate in that fence. As a child, I was told that I could use that gate as a shortcut when coming home from Victoria School on Maple St. and I frequently used it, emerging into Ed Smart's driveway and then coming out onto Ste. Marie St. I was never challenged for doing this.

W. G. Smart died in 1964 as did his son John Smart. Ed Smart, John's brother, was in his mid-sixties and the decision was made that year to sell the business to Canada Vinegars in the hope that the business built up by Smarts would, with renewed energy and investment, continue on. However, as often happens when a family business that has endured for several generations is sold to strangers, despite the usual claims of "nothing will change" and "business as usual", these optimistic statements count for little in the world of business dealings, acquisitions, mergers and balance sheets. It all went sideways. Despite good intentions, Canada Vinegars had been sold to a company based in England and soon any hopes of continuing the legacy of a Collingwood industrial icon went out the window when, in 1966, the new owners closed Smart's operation. The canning factory on

First St. was demolished and eventually replaced with a 2-storey Woolworth's store that had a novelty for Collingwood—an escalator. The Woolworth Store was eventually replaced with the 2-storey Admiral Building, containing a 15,000 sq. ft. L.C.B.O. and offices, the parking lot for which occupies the site of the old Long Bros./National Grocers warehouse. As mentioned earlier, much of the vast acreage of Smart's farm now grows houses instead of fruits and vegetables.

In retirement, Ed Smart urged the Town of Collingwood to establish an Industrial Commission and to set aside land for industry in order to attract new industry to the town. He would eventually become Chairman of the Commission. The Commission's success resulted in the arrival of eight new industries in Collingwood in the second half of the 1960's.

The July/August 2011 issue of The Collingwood Museum's newsletter *On Track* features on page 6 an article titled *Unveiling the Smart Panel*. On June 8, 2011 an historic panel honouring the Smart family was unveiled in Harbourview Park. At this event were members of the Smart family, staff from the Collingwood Museum and representatives of the Collingwood Town Council. Also present in the park is a large boiler from one of the Smart greenhouses on Campbell St. The same issue of *On Track* also shows a photo of the steam whistle from Smart's cannery. One of the former farm buildings of brick on Campbell St. is now the Smart's Apartments. A "flyover" on Google Maps shows that much of the former farmland has been developed for houses right out to High St. West of High St., some of the land is apparently still in use for agriculture although new streets and housing are appearing there as well. Ed Smart's former home still stands proudly on its half-acre lot on Ste. Marie St.

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