



COLLINGWOOD NEVER HAD A PIANO FACTORY

By H. David Vuckson

The history of Collingwood from its earliest days in the 1850's records a multitude of industries that have come and gone. In its original state, much of Simcoe County was covered in vast stands of timber, predominantly white pine. To clear land for settlement, lumbering quickly rose to prominence in the early years. We learned in public school that Simcoe County's white pine trees, "straight as a pencil", were highly valued by the British Royal Navy for masts and spars in the days of wooden warships. The ships may have been known as "Hearts of Oak" but it was Simcoe white pine that held their sails.

Naturally, to deal with all this timber, sawmills were needed to turn it into a product for export and also for local consumption, especially in the days when all buildings were of wood construction and were heated with cordwood. Before Collingwood existed, the original settlement, "The Old Village" in the east end had a saw and grist mill at the mouth of the Pretty River. Later, Joel Underwood, an American lumberman after whom the Oak St. Canal was given its original name of "Underwood Creek" and who owned more than 300 acres of the Collingwood town site, erected a steam-powered sawmill at one of the

two mouths of the creek two years before the arrival of the railway which would soon provide a convenient way to ship finished product to market. Other sawmills followed, including a large one at the foot of Pine St. on land reclaimed from the harbour. This mill, whose various owners were Hotchkiss, Peckham & Co., A. M. Dodge and, later, Toner & Gregory, existed until 1903 when it was sold to the Town and demolished. (Unfortunately, stands of virgin timber do not last forever and as the county forests ran out, the land was put to agricultural use and the lumbering and sawmills declined.)

Collingwood became a boom town. It was a major transportation centre with two railway links—one to Toronto and a later, second line to Hamilton. In the harbour, wooden ships came and went with passengers and all sorts of cargo. It was predicted that Collingwood would become the “Chicago of the North” and for many years it seemed that prediction would come true. As late as May 1894, more than a full year into a worldwide recession, Fred T. Hodgson, one of Collingwood’s earliest settlers and promoters and prominent architect, in a moment of reckless optimism foresaw the day not distant when the town would have “around 100,000 inhabitants”.

Long before the Collingwood Shipyard had ever been thought of, the harbour hosted small scale boat builders, a fishing fleet, huge log booms for the sawmills, the first grain elevator and a railway freight shed. It was the era when most goods needed for daily life were manufactured locally. Collingwood had a brickyard, a tannery, breweries and distilleries, shingle and planing mills, furniture factories, flour mills, foundries, meat packing plants, makers of soap, boots, shoes, barrels and many others too numerous to mention; some of them would today be considered “cottage industries” with perhaps

four to twelve employees. As the years went by, manufacturing gradually became more concentrated in the larger centres where large factories employing large work forces had the advantage of economies of scale and consequently, local manufacturing gradually declined.

For those of you who have ever wondered why Rodney St. runs off Huron St. at the angle it does, this is because originally Rodney St. was waterfront and the road more or less paralleled the shore. The water in this area came right up to near the intersection of Simcoe and present-day Niagara Street. A number of industries were located on Rodney St. because of its proximity to the railway and the harbour.

The industrial plants of that era were steam-powered and they all had the requisite tall, ornate brick or plain metal smokestack belching black smoke into the sky. Unlike today, sights like this signified jobs, progress and prosperity, not pollution.

Given this illustrious history of entrepreneurial activity, I used to wonder why Collingwood never had a piano factory. In the 19th Century and throughout the first half of the 20th Century the piano was considered a major home appliance; it was certainly the equivalent of a home entertainment centre before radio and phonograph records became commonplace. Although Toronto and Montreal were the principal piano manufacturing areas (remember large factories/large work forces), numerous cities and small towns throughout southern Ontario in the late 1800's and early 1900's also had piano factories including Clinton, Uxbridge, Bowmanville, Strathroy, Berlin (Kitchener after 1916), Kingston, Guelph, Woodstock, Listowel, Ingersoll, Oshawa, Brantford, Windsor, London, Hamilton and Ottawa. Some of these places were smaller than Collingwood and some of them had more

than one piano manufacturer. When you consider the woodworking expertise that existed in Collingwood and the availability of two railway lines as well as water transport for shipping out product, aside from the capital necessary to set up the operation, it would have taken only an expert piano engineer to supervise a work force to assemble an instrument. Components such as cast iron string frames, keyboards, actions and hammers, pedals, hinges and other hardware were purchased from specialist suppliers by nearly all piano makers. A locally-made piano would not have been the equal of a *Heintzman*—the “cream of the crop”—nevertheless, good pianos (for their time) were produced in many communities. (Whether or not they withstood the test of time is another matter altogether.) Some makers served a fairly small local or regional market, while others exported their instruments to many countries all over the world.

Therefore, belatedly, in my youthful enthusiasm for local history, in the late 1950's I decided to give Collingwood a piano factory that never existed. I named it “*Vuckson & Wessenger*”, the latter name from a school friend. The fictitious factory was located on a railway siding on Huron St. just east of the CNR tracks going to the grain elevator. It produced upright, grand and player pianos. I even created a price list for the different models. Like so many of the small piano manufacturers over the years, this fictitious company may have survived for only a handful of years because it was difficult for the small players at this game to compete with the big factories in Toronto. Some of the big firms had vast advertising budgets and salesmen constantly on the road to promote their product.

In retrospect, it is certainly possible that some entrepreneurs in Collingwood did ponder the possibility of a piano factory and decided

that it just wasn't economically viable. Had such a factory really existed in the early days, the name "Collingwood" would have been displayed on the piano's name board in front parlours and public buildings in many places, spreading the town's name far and wide.

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