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## **COLLINGWOOD TERMINALS OPENED 90 YEARS AGO**

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*The original version of this story appeared in short form in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on April 11, 2014 under the title Terminals Once Helped Feed The World. The Collingwood Terminals opened for business 90 years ago (Sept. 1929) and is much in the news today as a decision has to be made about what to do with the neglected building. This is a much-expanded version of that original story.*

In 1928-29 my mother, then in her mid-teens, watched a majestic structure slowly rise out of open water at the outer edge of Collingwood's harbour—a fireproof, concrete, 2 million bushel capacity grain elevator named The Collingwood Terminals Ltd. With monumentally bad timing, the facility opened in mid-September 1929, barely six weeks before the great stock market crash in October that ushered in the Great Depression.

The Collingwood Terminals is the third grain elevator to stand in Collingwood's harbour since the 1850's and the only one of the three to have been built of concrete. The first one was constructed of wood by

the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway in 1855 and is said to have burned down—fire was an ever-present danger for wooden grain elevators. This relatively small wooden structure was replaced with a much larger wooden elevator in 1870 by the successor to the OS&H, the Northern Railway. The two railway lines into Collingwood (from Hamilton via Beeton and from Toronto via Allandale) were taken over by the Grand Trunk Railway in 1888 and from that time on until it was demolished in 1937, the 1870 elevator was known as the Grand Trunk Elevator. Sometime after 1937, on its site, the giant Sheer Leg Crane was erected in time for the World War II boom in shipbuilding. The Sheer Leg was used for lowering heavy boilers and engines into newly built ships and for similar operations on older ships that came to Collingwood for new boilers. It replaced a much older wooden version of this type of crane from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century that stood on the east side of Drydock No. 2.

Standing high on the horizon, both the wooden 1870 elevator and its 1929 concrete successor, in their turn, long served as a beacon to travelers whether by water or land. Countless people will tell you that when they drive over the crest of the hill at Duntroon, the sight of the Collingwood Terminals in the distance speaks of Collingwood and home. The same was said of the 1870 structure when David Williams, in his address to the Old Boys' Reunion in the summer of 1938, waxed nostalgic for *“the wooden elevator which stood from 1870 till 1937 as a landmark against the southern horizon for the sailors coming down the lake...Today [1938] the old elevator is gone. In its stead the huge pile of concrete known as the Collingwood Terminals substitutes for that which has been taken away, due to the march of modernism in construction”*. In 1944 Herbert J. Hamilton said of the 1870 elevator, *“What a marvel*

*that old elevator was to us boys and a conspicuous landmark from all around, Duntroon hills to the south and Christian Island from the north”.*

The Collingwood Terminals also serves as a landmark in visual flight patterns for commercial pilots. On a flight from the west coast in 2009, we were over Georgian Bay on our gradual descent into Toronto when I happened to look out the window and saw that my plane was passing directly over Collingwood’s harbour. I will never forget the sight of the Collingwood Terminals aglow as it reflected a blazing red September sunset.

The new concrete grain elevator was built in relatively shallow, open water much farther away from the Shipyard than its two predecessors were. An invitation was issued to witness the start of construction:

*“The Municipal Council of the Town of Collingwood and the Elevator Committee request the honour of your presence on Tuesday, October the second, 1928 at three-thirty p.m. to celebrate the beginning of construction of the New Two Million Bushel Elevator being erected at Collingwood for the Collingwood Terminals Limited and at Dinner, at the Y.M.C.A., at 6:30 p.m. Hon. J. C. Elliott, Minister of Public Works will officiate. J. R. ARTHUR, M.B., MAYOR W. H. WHIPPS, TOWN CLERK. An answer is requested.”*

Before more land was created around the elevator in later years, the area behind it was all water except for a wooden railway trestle on that north side with two tracks to hold boxcars that had been prepared with wooden “grain doors” for loading in the elevator’s breezeway or “Rail Shed”. The wooden trestle was later replaced with an embankment. Because all of the land around the Terminals is man-made, at the

beginning in 1928 there was just the railway track extending out from the inner harbour on top of the breakwall through the open water before veering off to the left on a rock embankment to reach the elevator. A photo of this even shows several hydro poles standing in open water to reach the construction site. Over many years, the water south and north of the elevator was filled in creating the spit as we know it today. Most recently, when the Collingwood harbour was dredged in the 1980's following the closure of the Shipyard, the dredged material was placed behind the Terminals as a base for what is now Millennium Park.

To construct the elevator's foundation, a pile driver pounded over 4000 wooden pilings down through the clay to reach bedrock. A cap was formed over the top of the pilings and this served as the base for the massive concrete foundation. The elevator consists of 52 silos in 4 rows of 13 each. The circular nature of the silos, diameter of about 24 feet, leaves a star-shaped space between each group of four silos and these "star bins" were also used to store grain. A 1928 photo taken at the time of constructing the foundation shows some of the wooden pilings and the horses and workmen standing in water. The depth of water varies from the workmen's ankles to about their knees. A photo taken on June 19, 1929 during the elevator's construction shows a dredge at work on the harbour side of the structure to create a deep channel for loaded ships to dock and a later photo shows two dredges at work in the same area. In addition to deep water for docking a loaded ship, the harbour also had to be dredged to create a turning circle for ships to turn around after unloading. The dredged turning circle and the approach channel from Georgian Bay can still be seen on the Google Maps Satellite View of Collingwood.

The Collingwood Terminals received its first ship with a load of corn on September 14, 1929. Also that year, a nearly eight-year-long drought began to settle in on the prairies and the dust bowl conditions that came with the drought severely limited the business of the Collingwood Terminals and the numerous grain elevators at other Georgian Bay ports. Prairie crops were severely affected, variously reduced in yield, fried by the sun, flattened by hail, eaten by grasshoppers and the precious topsoil blew away in massive dust storms. There was little grain to store and the Collingwood Terminals, opened with such high hopes, had to limp along through the Depression years along with the Collingwood Shipyard. Grain silos sat empty and grass grew on the two building berths in the Shipyard. World War II and the demand for ships rescued the Collingwood Shipyard, and the return of normal weather patterns rescued the prairie farms and the grain trade. Prosperity returned to Collingwood and its harbour industries.

Collingwood's new elevator was conceived and built with "Roaring Twenties" optimism because of the increase not only in the grain trade on the Great Lakes at the time but also because of the massive increase in the size of the steel ships carrying these cargoes compared to the wooden vessels of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We turn again to David Williams' 1938 speech: *"Many of the Old Boys and Girls will recall the days of the "windjammers" when ten, fifteen, or even twenty schooners at a time dropped their "hooks" in the harbour to await their turn under the "leg" of the wooden elevator..."*

Something much larger than the 1870 Grand Trunk elevator was needed as was a larger, sufficiently deep area of the harbour for turning ships around. John Sewell, in his five lectures on the economic and social history of Collingwood, states in Lecture Two that the Collingwood Town Council decided to invest in the new grain terminal:

*“An agreement was entered into with a private company, Collingwood Terminals Limited. The company agreed to invest \$100,000.00 and the Town provided \$800,000.00 as a loan. This was an enormous sum for the Town, whose debt at that time was in the order of \$400,000.00. The agreement was signed and within a few months of construction beginning, the stock market and the economy collapsed. The elevator was completed...just in time to feel the full brunt of the Depression...shipping activity plummeted. By December 1936, only \$22,000.00 had been paid toward the capital of the large loan for the new elevator.”*

The Collingwood grain elevator was once an important link in Canada's ability to feed the world. In non-drought times the prairies were called “the bread basket of the world” and, prior to the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 which eliminated obstacles to navigation along the St. Lawrence River, much of the prairie grain passed through the grain elevators of Georgian Bay and then continued on its way by rail to Montreal, other St. Lawrence ports and east coast ports such as St. John, New Brunswick and Halifax, Nova Scotia for export to Europe. This was a very involved, multi-step task:

**(1)** a prairie farmer harvested his grain and delivered it by truck to a prairie grain elevator which **(2)** transferred the grain into railway boxcars cars for shipment to Port Arthur and Fort William (today's

Thunder Bay) where **(3)** the grain was unloaded from the railway cars into terminal grain elevators, then **(4)** transferred into ships for the journey to Georgian Bay ports where **(5)** the grain was unloaded back into grain elevators, then **(6)** transferred into railway boxcars cars for hauling to Montreal and other eastern ports where **(7)** the railway cars were unloaded into grain elevators for **(8)** transfer to ocean-going ships. It can be seen from the foregoing that the grain had to be handled and transferred multiple times and this resulted in some of the grain being lost or wasted. Vast numbers of sparrows used to hang around the Collingwood Terminals to feast on the spilled grain. Even today with the newer hopper grain cars, there is still some spillage and wild animals in Banff National Park are sometimes killed by freight trains as they graze on spilled grain along the tracks of the CPR.

Before the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the obstacles to navigation along the St. Lawrence River included rapids and small old canals that could accommodate ships only about 260 feet long. A glance at a map of Ontario will show that the most direct route for prairie grain to get from Thunder Bay (where there were 36 grain elevators in the 1920's) to Montreal and Atlantic Canada in those days was a combination of water and land transport. One could *almost* draw a straight line with a ruler from Thunder Bay into Georgian Bay where there were grain elevators at Owen Sound, Meaford, Collingwood, Midland (with four elevators—two in Midland Harbour and two more around the shore at Tiffin), Port McNicoll and Depot Harbour (near Parry Sound). Six of the grain elevators in this list no longer exist; the two that do, mentioned later in this story, serve, for the most part, Ontario needs via trucks, since the railways that used to serve these communities are all gone.

This trans-shipment of grain provided much work for the CNR and CPR at various Georgian Bay ports hauling very heavy tonnages. Ian Wilson, in his nostalgic railway book *Steam At Allandale*, in which he recreates the various CNR branch lines that radiated out from Allandale in 1954, states that the Collingwood Terminals was *the raison d'être* for the CNR's Meaford Subdivision from Allandale to Collingwood and on to Meaford. That is because it was *the* major source of revenue for the branch line. During the winter "freeze up" several rows of grain-laden ships wintered at the Collingwood Terminals with "winter storage" and were unloaded as space became available in the elevator as the grain was gradually transferred to railway boxcars.

The Collingwood Terminals had 4 railway sidings for boxcars on the south side near the Terminals office building. One of those sidings was the "boarding track" where an extensive pile of lumber that stretched along the entire length of that siding was used for reducing the sliding door openings of boxcars from the floor up, leaving an opening of 2-3 feet at the top so that the workmen nailing the boards on the inside could climb out using a ladder. Two of the four tracks went right through the breezeway/rail shed and far out the north side to what is now Millenium Park. Empties that had been fitted with wooden grain doors were shunted out behind the elevator by a railway locomotive and then winched forward from that north side to be filled with grain. The filled boxcars were then shunted around by a locomotive, assigned to grain duty for the day, to another track in order to build up a sufficient length of boxcars for a "grain extra" train (over and above the regular daily freight trains). A second locomotive would come to town later in the day to help haul the resulting string of boxcars. In 1972 the Federal Government started to purchase the familiar cylinder-shaped



grain hopper cars with the words “Government of Canada” painted on them. These hoppers were much more efficient than boxcars. Since they were filled from the top they could hold more cargo than boxcars that could not be filled to the top (explained above). The grain hopper cars were emptied from the bottom and could be unloaded much more quickly than boxcars, resulting in a more efficient and economical “turnaround”.

Watching a “grain extra” leave town in the late afternoon in the 1950’s was a thrilling sight: two steam locomotives (a “double header”) and a very long line of boxcars getting started from a standing stop in the rail yard produced two enormous plumes of black smoke belching into the sky as driving wheels would, at first, spin to get the heavy train moving. The steam whistle on the lead locomotive would scream for the Huron, Ontario and Hume St. crossings and the ground would shake from the rhythm of the engines blasting their way upgrade as they headed south. Sometimes this train was followed by yet another shorter grain train with one engine. Reg Hawman who lived adjacent to the railway at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> St. East, writing in the 1983 Collingwood history book *Reflections* (pg. 282) said, “A lot of grain has passed through Collingwood Terminals. In the late forties three drags of grain a day went south headed by two of CN’s steam locomotives, the heaviest allowable on our sub division. Mr. Jim Bell, the C.N. agent at those times, once told me they shipped out 14 million bushels in one year alone”.

After the 1959 opening of the Seaway, about half of the steps enumerated above to handle prairie grain were eliminated. Now, during the shipping season from April to December, freighters of 730 feet in length could load in Thunder Bay and travel all the way to

Montreal and beyond, greatly simplifying the process. With even more efficiency, economy of scale and a quicker turnaround time, a self-unloading freighter could discharge its cargo of grain directly into an ocean-going ship in the Gulf of St. Lawrence then turn around and take on a cargo of iron ore for the return trip. Alternatively, ocean-going ships (“salties”) could sail all the way to Thunder Bay and load grain there. This new “marine highway” was a great economic benefit for the export of Canadian grain.

As far as the grain trade on Georgian Bay was concerned, it was as though someone had “moved the highway away” and the ports of Georgian Bay were no longer needed for grain transshipment *in the same way* they had been needed from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>. They were, in fact, still needed for another thirty years (until a Federal Government rail subsidy was cancelled) particularly during the winter months (when ships were idle) to keep the grain moving eastward but on a much-reduced level of activity from previous years. In modern times, much of the prairie grain now travels by rail to the west coast ports of Vancouver and Prince Rupert in British Columbia for export to Asian countries while some grain still moves eastward for export to Europe and Africa but not in the volumes of seventy years ago.

In later years (from 1973 onward) a succession of owners operated the Collingwood Terminals and the building was for sale and facing closure as early as 1988. The Federal Government ended its “At and East” grain rate subsidy in 1989 (meaning “At and East of Buffalo”, explained below). This subsidy was paid to the railways by the Canadian Government for hauling eastbound export grain and flour from Thunder Bay, Ontario primarily to the Canadian salt water ports (i.e.

not frozen in the winter) of St. John, New Brunswick and Halifax, Nova Scotia, in order to be competitive with the movement of grain by rail from Buffalo, New York, the much shorter distance to the U. S. east coast.

Buffalo was once the largest grain port in the world prior to the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. A long stretch along the Buffalo River where it meets Lake Erie was lined with grain elevators and referred to as “Elevator Alley”. Just a few years ago there were fourteen elevators still standing in Buffalo. In 2019 three of them are still in use for grain storage and an additional two are now used to store cement. At least twenty elevators have been demolished. The “marine leg” of grain elevators—the mechanized bucket conveyor that is lowered into the hold of a ship to lift the grain up into the silos—was invented in Buffalo in 1842 by Joseph Dart.

The subsidy from the Canadian Federal Government helped to level the playing field with the United States and kept the price of Canadian grain competitive during the winter months when the Great Lakes and canals were frozen and ships could not transport cargoes. A glance at the map will show what an advantage Buffalo had in transshipping grain by rail to New York City for export. The city of Buffalo, situated at the eastern end of Lake Erie and having the largest collection of grain elevators in the world—nearly 50 at one time according to *The New York Times*—had a massive capacity to store grain and to transship it by rail year-round. Freighters carrying grain from the American west prior to 1959 could discharge their cargoes at Buffalo and did not need to pass through the Welland Canal (bypassing Niagara Falls), Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River and Canals. The route by rail from Buffalo to New York City was much shorter than the route Canadian grain had to

travel simply because of geography. Six different railroads connected Buffalo to New York City. This shortcut for American grain made the Canadian subsidy a necessity.

While the 1959 advent of the St. Lawrence Seaway drastically curtailed grain transshipment to rail cars at Georgian Bay elevators, not all of that prairie grain was for export. There were and are domestic markets in eastern Canada such as feed mills and flour mills and there was still a residue of business for those grain elevators for the transshipment of export grain into rail cars during the winter months when Great Lakes and Seaway shipping was inactive from December to April (until the subsidy was cancelled in 1989).

There are still two grain elevators operating on Georgian Bay. In Owen Sound, the Great Lakes Elevator Co. Ltd. is operated by Parrish & Heimbecker Limited, a Canadian, family-owned business founded in 1909 with more than 60 locations from coast to coast and headquartered in Winnipeg. The Owen Sound elevator can both receive and ship grain by trucks and ships as needed. In former years when water levels were low on Lake Huron/Georgian Bay there were concerns about the depth of water in Owen Sound harbour because of silting and the need for dredging, whereas current water levels are up with approximately 22 feet of water at the elevator dock according to the P&H website. Water levels in Georgian Bay are currently so high that some of Collingwood's waterfront trails are now under water and closed at the time of writing in mid-August.

In Midland, ADM (Archer Daniels Midland), a multinational company headquartered in Chicago and founded in 1902, owns and operates the grain elevator and the flour mill next door. ADM have 42 facilities

across Canada. In *Simcoe.com*, reporter Andrew Mendler wrote about the Midland facility (April 24, 2019) stating that a dozen grain ships arrive at the Midland elevator every year while one ship winters there filled with grain as additional storage capacity and that around 20 trucks leave the flour mill each day to distribute product around the province.

Owen Sound and Midland notwithstanding, the loss of the At and East subsidy in 1989 suddenly made several other massive concrete grain elevators on Georgian Bay, and the railway lines that served, them redundant and unprofitable. The 1990 closures of the Tiffin and Simcoe Elevators in Midland and the enormous elevator at Port McNicoll (7 million bushel capacity), all of them since demolished, bought a few more years of activity for the Collingwood elevator until grain service there ended in 1993. Subsequently, the Town of Collingwood bought the Terminals in 1997 and has wondered what to do with it ever since.

A similar story is playing out in numerous communities in the United States where unused concrete grain elevators and their idle machinery generate heated debate and various solutions are proposed to somehow repurpose them or tear them down. In Buffalo, New York, a local businessman, Rick Smith, owns three abandoned grain elevators collectively called "Silo City"; together these three elevators have a combined storage capacity of 6,623,208 bushels. It is said that people from around the world come to Buffalo to hear and see theatre, musical performances and poetry readings in the large open spaces (not the actual silos) within these buildings, to marvel at and study the architecture and machinery, the murals painted on the silos, and to see the 360 degree view from the roof, etc. Another vacant elevator in

Buffalo becomes a giant projection screen and is used for light shows. Other ports do this as well.

A 2009 Thesis by Ashley D. Thomas titled *The Past, Present, And Future of Grain Elevators...* contains five chapters on the history, development and decline of grain elevators. Of particular interest is Chapter 5 on the rehabilitation of grain elevators. Numerous examples are given and I will mention a few here. In Bloomington, Illinois, a couple bought an unused grain elevator that had been vacant for 10-15 years and converted the silos into a rock climbing gym which has been rated the Number One climbing gym in the world by The Discovery Channel and The Travel Channel. In Akron, Ohio, a grain elevator has been converted into a hotel, the Quaker Square Inn, with 91 guest rooms all located in the grain silos and, yes, this included the installation of windows. Other rehabilitative uses mentioned in this thesis include loft apartments, offices, retail, restaurants and entertainment. It is a very interesting read.

Now in 2019 there is much talk on social media, some of it quite emotional, both pro and con, of what should be done with the Collingwood Terminals. A 38-page Engineering Assessment of the building was produced in June 2018 by Tacoma Engineers of Guelph, Ontario, based on a number of inspections and assessments begun in February 2017. Briefly, the news was both good and bad. Some of the bad relates to two feet of bird droppings inside one of the towers (due to broken windows) and the presence of other environmentally hazardous materials such as asbestos, as well as safety concerns for stairs and platforms. After 90 years the building is generally structurally sound but needs remediation such as a new roof to stop water infiltration. The engineer's report *estimated* it would take around

\$5,000,000.00 to demolish the building to ground level, or up to close to \$10,000,000.00 to make recommended repairs and remediation to preserve it.

In July 2019, the Collingwood Town Council asked staff to provide council with options for the future of the building and members of the public were encouraged to give their opinions as well. As reported by Erika Engel in *Collingwood Today* (July 24, 2019), a motion by Councillor Steve Berman “asked for consideration of public/private partnerships, a full sale, integration in the waterfront master plan, public consultation, and the potential for third party expertise to guide the process”.

Collingwood’s original 1855 wooden grain elevator gave way to something newer and much bigger in 1870 and that, in its turn, gave way to the present building in 1929. The Collingwood Terminals, for the past 26 years, has been a silent archive, a fortress-like sentinel standing guard over a harbour that hosts pleasure boats and now its future, too, is in question. Its original function long in the past, its only commercial uses currently are as the site of numerous communications devices on the roof because of the height advantage and the use of a portion of the ground level red brick building at the east end for a sailing school, the Collingwood Maritime Academy, for wooden boat building and repair. In addition, the Collingwood Yacht Club, founded in 1973, uses the former Collingwood Terminals office building as a Club House which it leases from the Town of Collingwood. Use of the office building by the Yacht Club began in 1975, making use of just the basement followed by occupancy of the entire office building in 1993 when the Terminals closed as a grain handling facility. Even without grain, the property is still being used in a small way which brings in some revenue for the Town.

Less tangible, but extremely emotional for people, especially those of us who were born and raised in Collingwood, is the grain elevator's recognition as an iconic symbol of Collingwood that can be seen from miles around. While it stands, this 90-year-old building will always remind us of a time when prairie grain arrived by ship and departed by rail as Collingwood played its part in helping to feed the world. While it stands, it will also remind us of Collingwood's very extensive marine industrial past—log booms and sawmills, fishing fleets, wooden boat building, steel shipbuilding and repairs, transportation of people and cargoes by rail and ship—all of which extends back to the mid 1850's in some form or other. The Collingwood Shipyard closed 33 years ago this month and, with the exception of archival mementoes along Heritage Drive and exhibits at the Museum, there are only memories, photographs and videos to indicate the activity that used to take place on the town's waterfront now that the land use has changed from industrial to commercial and residential. The Collingwood Terminals is the last harbour structure standing from that significant industrial past that defined the town. Collingwood would look very different without it.

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