

## Urban Profile

# Windsor, home of cars and refuge of Uncle Tom

By Alan Harvey



Downtown Windsor and the Detroit skyline across the river.

The Canadian city of Windsor proudly thinks of itself as the automotive capital of the Commonwealth. Strategically set in the industrial heartland of North America, astride the Detroit river which is often called the world's busiest waterway, Windsor is the largest Canadian port of entry from the United States and has well over 400 thriving manufacturing industries in its immediate environs.

It is the southernmost city in Canada. By a geographical quirk it is located one mile south of its American sister-metropolis, Detroit, a friendly rival which overshadows, but does not bedazzle, its Canadian neighbour. Indeed the two cities have advanced in amity, taking full advantage of their strategic location at the crossroads of the most industrialised areas of Canada and the United States.

Their proximity has brought ambivalent moments, gratifying some and annoying others. Once, when the US endured its prohibition era, Windsor slaked the American thirst with illicit supplies; and once, before the freeing of the slaves, many negro workers escaped to freedom in Canada.

The two cities were closely linked by the

Detroit river, described as the world's busiest water thoroughfare whose vessel passages, excluding passenger and sand boats, total up to 20,000 in a season, an average in one recent year of 61 a day.

## Marine engine on wheels

When the age of sail declined on the river, a revolution took place that had repercussions round the world. The presence in the Windsor-Detroit area of industries producing marine engines and wagon bodies led to the idea of a fusion. A gasoline engine was fitted into a wagon body, producing an automobile. Commenting on the development, the Windsor Chamber of Commerce remarked in an historical sketch:

"From such simple beginnings grew an industry that was to become the greatest single factor in the world-wide pattern of life in the first half of the 20th century. It was because of the fortunate presence of these two industries in the same area that Detroit led the world in this social upheaval, and Windsor became the automobile capital of the Commonwealth."

The first Canadian-assembled Ford car was produced in August, 1904, in a wagon works. The only heavy tool used was a drill press.

Once Windsor was something of a one-industry city, heavily dependent on the motor car. It was hard-hit by plant closures in the depression years. But it fought back, displaying a booster's spirit and great resilience to become Canada's fifth most important industrial community. With a population in 1974 of 198,086, it produces a wide range of goods including paints, pharmaceuticals, industrial machinery, processed sweet corn and whisky, as well as playing cards and aspirins. Its rock salt mines produce more than all other such Canadian mines combined.

In 1919 Windsor established the first amalgamated health unit in Canada and 30 years later set up the nation's first child guidance clinic.

## Greenhouse area

Civic boosters call Windsor the "Sun Parlour of Canada" because of its moderate climate, with an average winter high of 33 above zero and low of 20 above. The soil of Windsor's Essex County is particularly fertile and there is a long growing season averaging 212 days, with some 165 frost-free days permitting farmers to produce peaches, pears, apples, cherries, corn, soya beans, wheat, oats, tobacco, sweet potatoes and asparagus earlier than any other area in Canada. Farms claim the highest per capita production in the nation. Nearly half of the greenhouse area is concentrated around this "Sun Parlour." More than 20 million people cross the border each year between Detroit and Windsor, using railway, vehicular tunnel and bridge.

Historically, it was the area around Detroit that was first opened to white settlement with the arrival in 1701 of Sieur Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, a burly adventurer from Gascony who established a trading post and fort on what was to become the American side of the river. The Canadian side was first settled by French voyageurs, some 50 years later. Various groups — Indians, French, British and Americans — dominated in turn. When the US declared war on Britain in 1812, the Essex County peninsula became a battleground of chequered fortunes.

The French influence is still seen today in the city of Windsor, whose topography in parts recalls the long, narrow French Canadian farms of early pioneer days.

In 1759, the fall of Quebec to the British under General James Wolfe at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham resulted in changes in the administration of Detroit, with British officialdom taking charge of the French Canadian population. Four years later came what was called the "Pontiac Conspiracy" when the Indian chief of that name crossed from his village to try to take over the fort at Detroit to be