

St. Thomas Manufacturing from the Earliest Days

BY FRANCIS HUNT

NOT many years ago the task would have been light for the scribe assigned the duty of writing up the manufacturing industries of St. Thomas. Though the task would be light, it would not have been one that would bring satisfaction to a man interested in the city. This town seemed to have been passed over and considered undesirable by men of capital and ability, seeking a location for manufacturing establishments. Some business men promoted various industries and invested their money in them, but most of them through bad management and adverse circumstances proved lamentable failures. Some weathered the storm and today are among the most thriving institutions.

When the bonus was voted to the Canada Southern Railway, it was vainly thought that by making the city a railway centre its industrial success would be assured and that enterprises would drop in upon us like dew from Heaven. The railway centre was established but industrial prosperity did not come for many years—old residents who had waited for it long, passed away, and their eyes did not behold it.

No satisfactory reason has been given why this city did not share in the industrial prosperity which came to other cities, less fortunately situated, and not possessing one half the facilities for business exploitation. There was no reason to give but that the fates had ordained it otherwise.

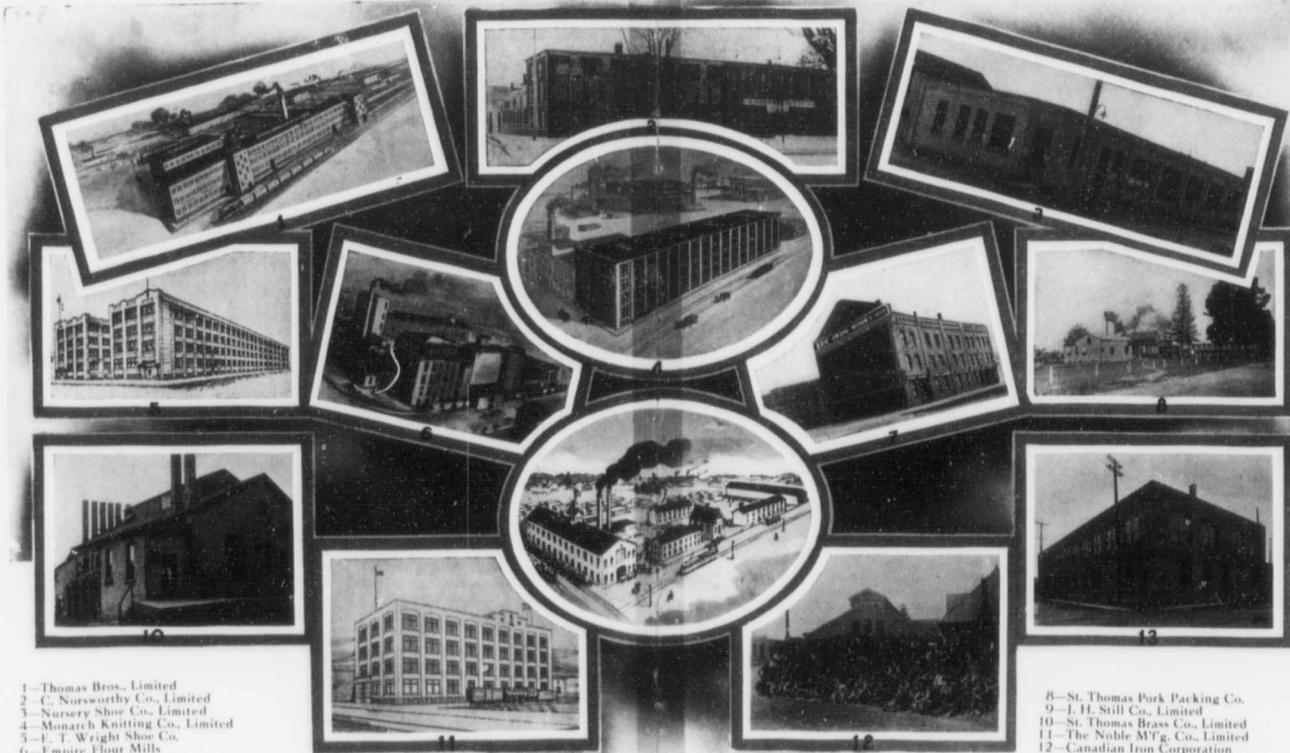
But at last the tide came in and this city is coming to its own. Big factories, filled with hundreds of workmen and women, now occupy what were vacant plots that grew luxurious weeds not many years ago. The pioneer factories that survived have taken on a new lease of life and are reaping the reward of good management, and the advantages of a growing time.

All industries are not of equal benefit to the community. Those that pay a living wage for labor to the heads of families are the ones that boost the town. Those that hire cheap help and pay starvation wages are a curse to everybody but the gaudy who profit on poverty.

I think I may truthfully assert that the wage earners in St. Thomas, taken in the aggregate, are as well paid for their labor as the same number of men in any other city on the continent. The money paid to establish the beautiful homes on nearly every street in this city, represents only surplus earnings of mechanics, railroad men and others who work for wages. Take the homes out of St. Thomas owned by the wage earning class and what would you have left? These wage earners have lived well, educated their families, con-

tributed liberally to charitable and church funds, and enjoyed a good deal of the luxuries of life. Yes, the industries of the city pay a living wage, and for this let us be thankful. The kind that starves a community is not wanted.

The rise and progress of industrial life in St. Thomas is tinged with romance and its recounting will be of such interest



- 1—Thomas Bros. Limited
- 2—C. Nurseworthy Co., Limited
- 3—Nursery Shoe Co., Limited
- 4—Monarch Knitting Co., Limited
- 5—E. T. Wright Shoe Co.
- 6—Empire Flour Mills
- 7—Eric Iron Works, Limited

- 8—St. Thomas Pork Packing Co.
- 9—J. H. Still Co., Limited
- 10—St. Thomas Brass Co., Limited
- 11—The Noble Mfg. Co., Limited
- 12—Canadian Iron Corporation
- 13—The St. Thomas Metallic Vault Co.

to the people of these later days that we have compiled the facts given us from authentic sources.

From the time when the echo from Rapelje's axe first rang out in the wilderness in 1810, near where the old English church now stands, to the year 1870, manufactures did not flourish to any great extent in St. Thomas. The settlers were poor and for many years grew slowly in number. Their wants were few and were mostly supplied by themselves. With an axe and an auger each settler built his own cabin, made his own furniture. He built his long sled, which in summer and

winter was useful to transport such articles as neither he nor his beasts could carry on their backs. His ox yoke required a staple and ring, which was often difficult to obtain—first from the lack of iron to make it, and secondly from lack of money to buy the iron. The loom and spinning wheel in the corner of the cabin turned out the clothing for each household, and the peripatetic cobbler made the boots and shoes when the settler could not make them himself. The mill at first was a stone and a hollow stump; afterwards two stones were fitted together and turned by hand.

and the business and the name continue to this day. George Wegg & Son is the present name of the firm, and its establishment is on Elgin street.

It must be said, after examining the history of the Talbot settlement, that the mechanic and the manufacturer did not flourish here to the same extent as in other settlements. Col. Talbot was an unlimited monarch in this district and he exercised all the power derived from that form of government. He seemed to think that agriculture was the one art alone needful for human happiness. The few articles necessary at

the time for the settler could be made by himself. For had not the Colonel made his own furniture, his own cloth? And, therefore, every settler could and should do it. True, he built a rough grist mill, but it had to be at his cabin door; it wasn't necessary anywhere else. He would not sell a blacksmith a piece of land in fee simple, on which to erect a forge at "Ireland," Tyrconnel. Some Americans at an early date tried to purchase land from Col. Bostwick at Port Stanley for the purpose of establishing a foundry, but Col. Bostwick did not, for some reason, grant the request, and the foundry was not built.

Col. Talbot had no use for cold water, nor for anyone who advocated its use. He denounced the advocates of temperance and in strongest language. The bulk of settlers who looked up to him as a pattern in all things, sanctioned his views on the cold water question. In no part of Canada were distilleries so plentiful as in the Talbot Settlement, and nowhere else were they worked so industriously. Paul & Ketchum had a large distillery at the foot of Kains' Hill, and did a thriving business. They sold good whiskey at the rate of five gallons for a dollar. There was not much ready money in St. Thomas in those days, and payments were made for the liquid in grain, skins and farm trucks. Henry Van Buskirk conducted a distillery near the old English church on Stanley street, which burned down. Blackwood had a mill and distillery near the old Turville mill.

Alexander Love, father of Neil Love, was probably the first man in St. Thomas to conduct a manufacturing business in an extensive way. He opened a cabinet shop in the thirties and employed a large number of hands. The pioneers having cleared their farms were in a position to secure the comforts of life and some of its luxuries. There arose a demand for furniture other than that made with the settler's axe and Love prepared to supply the demand.

The celebrated author, Mrs. Jameson, who visited St. Thomas in 1837 on her journey to Col. Talbot's, inspected Mr. Love's factory and furniture stock. She says: "There is here an excellent manufactory of cabinet ware and furniture; some

As the years went by and the clearings became larger, and the settlers became better supplied with the necessities of life, they began to yearn for what was then considered some of its luxuries. There came a demand for wagons. Oxen were too slow for long journeys, and there came a demand for horses. Horses must have harness, and to supply this there arose a demand for leather, and the tannery was started. The wagon must be built, and required iron work, and the wagon-maker came.

George Wegg started the manufacture of wagons in 1852