



THE COLLINGWOOD FURNITURE COMPANY—A FORGOTTEN INDUSTRY

H. David Vuckson

Most Collingwood natives are familiar with the former Kaufman Furniture Factory and its iconic brick smokestack that stood for many years in the west end of town. However, 45 years before the Kaufman operation began, another large furniture manufacturing business was formed in Collingwood—a business that has long been a forgotten piece of Collingwood’s industrial past. The original impetus for that new venture in 1903 came from the Trott family, famous for their furniture store at Hurontario and Second Streets built in 1880-81, and an associated aspect of their business, a funeral home.

The Trotts arrived in Collingwood in 1862 and, being cabinet makers by trade, took up that profession in Collingwood’s early boom days. By 1867 they had their furniture factory and warerooms in a wooden building at Hurontario and Second Streets. In 1877 they erected a new factory in a brick building of both 2 and 3-storey sections on the south side of Second Street just around the corner from Hurontario St. The former factory was replaced by their 3-storey brick building which still stands on that corner. The new 3-storey store and the 3-storey section of the factory behind it on

Second St. were eventually linked at the second floor level for ease of transferring product from one building to the other.

The letterhead on an 1876 Invoice from Trott's original **STEAM CABINET FACTORY, COR[NER] HURONTARIO & SECOND STREETS** lists the products of the factory:

HENRY F. TROTT, MANUFACTURER OF AND DEALER IN EVERY DESCRIPTION OF CABINET FURNITURE, CHAIRS, SOFAS, SPRING BEDS, WINDOW CORNICES, LOOKING GLASSES, PICTURE FRAMES, &c, &c.

COFFIN CASKETS, SHROUDS, HEARSEs, AND ALL OTHER FUNERAL REQUISITES ALWAYS ON HAND.

As in many small towns in Ontario in the 19th and 20th Centuries, cabinet makers were frequently in both the furniture business and the funeral business. Steady sales of furniture, dependent as they were on the ups and downs of the economy, were not always guaranteed, whereas people were dying in both good times and bad and it follows that cabinet makers could just as easily apply their skills to make caskets as well as dining room tables and chairs. Even if a business man did not actually make furniture, he could still sell furniture and funeral services at the same time. As an example of this within my own family, my great uncle Jack Mathers of Stayner and his sons, my cousins Russell and Harry Mathers, were in both the furniture and funeral businesses. When great uncle Jack married my great aunt Pearl Hewson in June 1918 he gave his profession as "Furniture Dealer and Undertaker". There was actually a joke in the 1960's that there was "a great layaway plan at Mathers".

In 1946 the funeral part of Trott's business moved one block west when Clare Trott purchased the grand old home at 82 Pine St., once the home of William Williams in the Victorian era. That house was named *Bodelwyddan* after a town in Wales. Trotts were in the funeral business until 1952 when

they sold it to one of their employees, Clarence Fawcett (1912-1973); thereafter they concentrated on home furnishings which included the honour of furnishing all the ships built at the Shipyard. Trott's/Fawcett's Funeral Home at 82 Pine St. has been a well-known landmark in downtown Collingwood for 75 years, the house itself dating back to the 19th Century.

With confidence in the demand for furniture, in 1903 Harry Trott (1871-1941), Jim Trott's grandfather, decided to expand in a big way by establishing "The Collingwood Furniture Company of Ontario, Limited". A large 2-storey + basement factory of brick was built on a stone foundation at the foot of Maple St., on the waterfront just west of the log booming grounds of the former Toner & Gregory Sawmill. The factory with a north-south footprint was actually on the north-west corner of Maple and Manitou Streets (Manitou was a street that no longer exists). The main building was 200 feet by 60 feet and in separate buildings on its west side were located the boiler/engine house with a tall metal smokestack and the dry kilns and lumber storage. From the *Collingwood Bulletin Industrial and Commercial Edition* of December 20, 1906 comes this description of the business,

The Collingwood Furniture Company of Ontario, Limited is now firmly established as one of the substantial industries of the town, and gives steady employment to from sixty to eighty skilled mechanics. The company was formed in the fall of 1903, and had their present large premises erected and fully equipped by July of the following year. In December 1904 the first shipment of furniture was made, since which time the product of the factory has steadily won the appreciation of the trade. Shipments are now made throughout the older provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba in the West. As a consequence, the difficulty is now not to sell the product of the factory but to produce enough to satisfy the demands of their customers.

The principal lines manufactured by the company are case goods and tables in a wide range of designs and quality, including the finest quartered oak furniture and the cheaper elm goods. The “Imperial” or surface oak manufactured by this company has the reputation of being the most perfect produced in Canada and they are justly proud of the fact.

The company is capitalized at \$150,000.00 but only about \$75,000.00 or one half has been subscribed, the balance remaining in the treasury until such times as it can be sold for enlargements. The officers and directors of the company are: President, Mr. Harry Trott, Vice President, Mr. W. Carmichael, Secretary-Treasurer Mr. W. A. Hogg, Directors, Dr. Donald McKay, Mr. Fred T. Hodgson and Mr. W. R. Rowland, all of whom have been associated with the company since its inception. Mr. H. D. Lang is manager and has a thorough grasp of the business affairs of the company. Mr. R. J. Scott is in charge of the office and staff and is a thorough and capable accountant. The present output of the factory amounts to \$80,000.00 worth a year, which the company expect to materially increase in 1907.

As with other factories in town, one or more sidings off the main line of the Grand Trunk Railway tracks serviced the furniture factory for delivery of raw materials and shipping out finished product as well as bringing in the principal source of energy in those days—coal—to fuel the boilers (wood waste from the factory was also burned). A photo shows about 40 men and boys posing at one of the entrances to the factory, every one of them wearing a hat or cap and some of them also wearing a face mask.

Despite the optimism and the quality of the product of Harry Trott’s furniture factory, this business would be sold and renamed as the Byrnes Manufacturing Co., Ltd. in January 1911. The principals in this venture, Michael P. Byrnes, President, Sanford H. Lindsay, Secretary-Treasurer and James M. Smith, Managing Director, just happened to be three of the

principals of the nearby Collingwood Shipbuilding Company. Here is what the *Barrie Gazette Magazine of Industry* had to say in September 1911:

BYRNES MANUFACTURING CO., LTD. Manufacturers of Furniture, Ship Cabins and Interior Finish of all Kinds, Maple St. One of the leading and representative industries of Collingwood, and among the largest employers of skilled labor, is the Byrnes Manufacturing Co., Limited, located on Maple street, manufacturers of a general line of high-grade furniture, ship cabins and interior finish of all kinds. This is one of the largest plants of its kind in the Dominion, having on its pay roll 100 men. The plant occupies an imposing two-storey brick building 200 x 60, with additional power house and dry kilns, covering in all an area of about 25,000 square feet. It is completely equipped in every department with every requisite and convenience for its particular work, and throughout the entire plant only the most modern machinery and methods, and the best quality of materials are used. The plant is connected with the Grand Trunk Railroad by switches, which means prompt shipments. Although this firm manufactures a general line of high-grade and artistic furniture, they pay particular attention to, and make a specialty of ship cabins, and these have won a far-reaching and enviable reputation for unique designs and artistic, superior finish. This plant was originally built in 1907 [sic] by the Collingwood Furniture Company, and conducted by that firm until January 1911, when the present company was formed and took control. Their products are labeled "Standard" wherever they have been introduced...

This furniture manufacturing business appears to have not lasted very long. *The Province of Ontario Gazetteer & Directory* for 1910-11 has no listing for this business under either name. The *Vernon's Directory* for Collingwood for 1912-13 has no listing either but this could be because the factory had come under control of the Shipyard by that time (see below). A 2012 post on the Facebook group *If You Grew Up In Collingwood* by Jon Down states that "the

factory sat empty at the beginning of World War I. Boxes for the munition shells being made in the Shipyards were stored here throughout the war”.

The correspondence of John S. Leitch, the General Manager of the Collingwood Shipbuilding Company in the early 20th Century, reveals that during the First World War years, the shipyard went into the making of munitions in a big way, partly for economic reasons due to the fact that there was, for a time, a scarcity of orders for ships expressly intended for the war effort in the *early* years of the war, combined with a lack of skilled workers because so many men had enlisted. [There were indeed orders for ships later in the war in 1917-18 (six minesweeping trawlers for the Government of Canada and two general cargo vessels for the Imperial Munitions Board of Britain), but few of them saw much or any war service due to the time it took to build, launch, finish and deliver them to Europe and the fact that the war ended in November 1918. Curiously, Leitch does not mention the very important contribution of the Collingwood women who put on overalls and ran the machines while the men were away. He referenced the former Trott’s furniture factory in a letter of February 2, 1915,

...we have duly received an order for 20,000 shells at \$3.80 each...when talking to Colonel Bertram of the Shell Committee I told him that we had an excellent Furniture Factory which was at present standing idle and that we could handle a large quantity of the boxes which are necessary for shipping the shells in...he explained that there were so many box making factories in Toronto, Montreal and other places close to where the shells were being made that he thought that our plant was too far away but he would be prepared to consider later the making of boxes for shipping the shells which we manufacture here...they are made of 1” spruce, iron bound with a bottom and top tray, each box being arranged to carry six shells and that for our 20,000 we would require 3,300 boxes and the price given for them to cover

material and labor is 93 cents each...this would mean a little over \$3000.00 but it would be worth opening up the factory for a week or two to turn these out and we may be able to get more.

The shipyard made 18-pounder artillery shells (standard World War I field artillery equipment) and 4.5 high explosive shells for Howitzers. When I worked a number of summers in the Yard as an Office Boy/Messenger in my high school and university years, the second floor gallery in the large Machine Shop along Huron St. was still called the “4.5 Machine Shop” and had its own foreman Bill Horner as distinct from the main Machine Shop on the ground floor where Ab Pleasance was the foreman.

Following Trotts’ sale of the furniture factory, due to the cross-connection of the furniture factory and the Shipyard through the new owners, the factory came under the umbrella of the Shipyard. The 1917 update of the 1904 Fire Insurance map has the factory labelled as “Byrnes Manufacturing Company (Collingwood Shipbuilding Company—Joiner Department”) and the Grand Trunk Railway sidings are gone. Aside from its use to make and store ammunition boxes during the war, the factory could have been used by the Shipyard’s Joiners Department throughout the 1920’s to make some woodwork for the ships being built nearby. However, John S. Leitch, in one of his letters in February of 1917, refers to Harry Trott regarding the furnishing of Collingwood-built ships,

...in connection with the work which we discussed in Montreal last week, it has occurred to me that Mr. Trott of Collingwood would be a good man to handle all or most of the upholstery, galley, and pantry outfit, bedding, crockery, and furnishings as he is much more expert in this class of work than such houses as Eatons and Simpsons.

As confirmed by Jim Trott in an interview with Christine Cowley for her landmark local history book *Butchers, Bakers And Building The Lakers*, his grandfather Harry learned about outfitting ships and secured a lucrative

connection with the local shipyard and its affiliated yards in Midland, Port Arthur and Kingston, a connection that lasted for many decades through two subsequent generations of the Trott family and which accounted for nearly half of their total business.

When I was young in the 1950's the furniture factory was boarded up and had probably been that way (and unheated and very musty) since the Great Depression of the 1930's or perhaps even since the end of the First World War. Its tall smokestack and the railway spurs were long gone, although in its latter years it was used for Shipyard storage. A large sign below a rooftop flag pole at the front of the building proclaimed "The Collingwood Shipyards Ltd.". In a photo taken on May 5, 1960, launch day of the ship *Carol Lake*, the furniture factory can be seen still standing in the distance but as shipbuilding methods changed, the Shipyard needed more room in the modern era of building St. Lawrence Seaway-size freighters. The Yard expanded westward beyond its long time western boundary fence at Pine St. In the 1950's one could drive along the northern dirt road portion of Pine St. adjacent to that wooden fence all the way to the Town Dock. With the Shipyard expansion, the Town Dock was absorbed by the Yard and would become a building berth for two passenger/cargo vessels (*Hopedale* and *Taverner*) launched in 1960 and 1962 respectively. The Toner & Gregory log booming slips from the 19th Century (the sawmill was demolished in 1903) were filled in and the area of the easterly slip was eventually occupied by several long prefabrication buildings with an east-west footprint where large hull panels weighing up to 40 tons were assembled before going to the shipbuilding berth. The furniture factory came to the end of its existence and was demolished to make way for the greatly expanded Steel Stockyard that supplied raw material to those prefab buildings. When my parents and I went to see the demolition in process, I asked my father why they were tearing it down. He said it was "because they don't need it anymore". The brick and stone rubble from its demolition

was very likely used to help fill in the most westerly former log booming slip and what remained of Harry Trott's dream from 1903 passed into history. The site is now part of the Shipyards Amphitheatre & Greenspace at the end of North Maple St.

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