



David A. Manson, Seller of Pianos and Wallpaper

By H. David Vuckson

In the early 20th Century, one of the major piano dealers in Collingwood was David A. Manson (March 3, 1884-June 18, 1947). David Alexander Manson was one of three sons of John Manson, a 10th Line Nottawasaga Township farmer, and Jessie Jardine. Another son, Thomas Malcolm Manson (b. Oct. 1, 1888) would also become a seller of pianos. At the time of the 1891 Census, the family had moved into Collingwood and the father John Manson was a partner in the Jardine, Manson & Smith General Store at the corner of Second and Hurontario Streets.

David Manson was married on March 8, 1910 to Robena ("Ruby") McLeod (Oct. 8, 1878-June 1, 1977) in her home town of Ingersoll. For some time prior to her marriage, Ruby had been the organist at First Presbyterian Church, Collingwood and would later play a part in her husband's music business. At the time of the June 1911 Census the family was listed as living on 3rd St. although the Vernon's Directory for that year has them living on Beech St. (perhaps at the corner of both streets). In the Census both David and his younger brother Thomas, then in their mid and early twenties, respectively, were listed as "Piano

Merchants” at a time when a piano was considered an almost indispensable home entertainment centre. The 1910-11 Vernon’s Directory has the following listing: **MANSON BROS. (D.A. & T.M. Manson), pianos, [reed] organs and musical merchandise, east side Hurontario.**

In August 1915 Robena Manson purchased the house at 458 Ste. Marie St. from Euphemia O’Brien, the wife of my grandmother’s older brother, H. B. O’Brien, for the sum of one dollar plus the assumption of a \$2000.00 mortgage—it would remain in Manson family ownership until 1950. On this half-acre property the Manson son Alex (1920-2015), in his boyhood, would enjoy looking after the many animals the family kept and working in the vegetable garden—a young urban farmer. The vegetable garden may have been of considerable size considering that my parents had quite a large vegetable garden on our *quarter*-acre lot at 639 Ste. Marie St. Since Alex would be age 9 when the Great Depression started, his work in, and the produce from this garden and the animals may have greatly helped to sustain the Manson family in the “hungry thirties” when people were not buying pianos from his father. A substantial amount of produce from a large garden could be stored over a Collingwood winter in a root cellar and put up in preserving jars in an era when people were far more self-sufficient than today.

The property on Ste. Marie St. and the other half acre on the Hurontario St. side of the common fence had all been owned by my great-grandfather R. W. O’Brien with the title in his wife’s name. His daughter, my grandmother, received the house at 433 Hurontario St. as a wedding present in August 1905; her brother H. B. O’Brien purchased the Ste. Marie St. property from his parents the same month in

anticipation of his marriage to Euphemia Simpson which took place in June 1906, prior to which H. B. “sold” it to Euphemia for one dollar, a clever way for a businessman to protect his business interests.

In the 1920’s, David Manson’s Music Store was located in his own building at 206 Hurontario St. (currently home to Fish & Sips) between 3rd and 4th Streets. He advertised in the 1923 Vernon’s Directory:

MANSON’S MUSIC STORE, D. A. MANSON, PROP., PIANOS, WALLPAPER, ETC., west side Hurontario. It is known that he held the agency for Mason & Risch Pianos of Toronto, one of the top brands at that time. In 1920 when my mother was eight years old, my grandfather Hewson, being an across-the-back-fence neighbour to David Manson, took the family down to Manson’s store and bought a top-of-the-line deluxe Mason & Risch upright piano for my mother to take lessons on. This was at a time when learning to play the piano was considered an important part of a girl’s upbringing. A guestimate of the cost of the instrument in 1920 is around \$500.00 for this was an expensive model. Perhaps in reciprocation, David Manson may have ordered a few new suits at O’Brien & Hewson Men’s Wear. I suspect my grandfather may have had some regrets over the purchase of the piano (but not the suits) considering the way things eventually turned out. He may also have purchased his gramophone and records at Manson’s store.

My mother was playing more “by ear” than by the written notes she was supposed to be studying. This was very unacceptable to her piano teacher who, I’m sure, believed that the Royal Conservatory approach was the *only* way to learn. One day my mother was sent home with a note to her father that said, “Dear Mr. Hewson, you are wasting my time and your money. Don’t send your daughter for any more

lessons!” For the rest of her long life my mom “played at” the piano, her creativity stifled by a piano teacher who could not recognize an inborn gift for music inherited from her Irish ancestors.

The Mason & Risch upright had pride-of-place in my grandmother’s double living room and it was the first piano I ever encountered. My mother told me that they never had the instrument tuned in the 37 years it sat there [!] The first servicing that piano ever had other than when it was uncrated in David Manson’s store in 1920, was not until after my grandmother died in 1957 when it was donated to the First Presbyterian Church where it lives and is still playing in the Lower Hall. The first time I tuned it was in April 1974, 54 years after my grandfather purchased it and this experience enabled me to “touch the past”. A recent inspection of the piano concluded that the sound has lots of life left in it yet at age 97.

David Manson’s son Alex, by comparison, did go the formal route to music studies and graduated from the Royal Conservatory of Music, in the process becoming an accomplished pianist who performed on the radio. No doubt he had a fine, well-tuned instrument at home from his father’s store—perhaps a Mason & Risch grand—to learn on and he must have also inherited his mother’s talent for music.

David Manson’s brother, Thomas, had married in 1917 and moved to Toronto where he changed careers and became a superintendent at General Electric. This left David as the sole owner of the music store. Taking on the sale of wallpaper and other home décor items is understandable simply because, by 1923 the piano business was starting to go down a slippery slope as other consumer goods such as automobiles, bicycles, kitchen appliances, radios, gramophones and

movies competed for disposable income. Good pianos last a long time, poor ones not so long (but not forever as popular legend says because any machine with moving parts is subject to friction, wear and wearing out) and people seldom come back to the store to buy another instrument in their lifetime. The market was approaching saturation as demand fell. Selling “wallpaper, etc.” would have kept more customers coming through Manson’s front door. In November 1923 when Asa Huycke’s original opera, *The Message of The Bluebird* was presented in the Collingwood Grand Opera House, David Manson’s wife Robena was the pianist in the 12-piece orchestra for those performances. And since the Grand Opera House did not have a “resident piano”, it is quite possible that David Manson provided the instrument for the occasion and this may have resulted in one or two piano sales due to the public exposure.

Moving a piano into the Collingwood Grand Opera House was no easy feat because it had to be raised up through a hoistway from the alley that ran underneath the middle of the Opera House. Readers who have the local history book *Reflections* can check out the photo of the front of the Town Hall on page 98 where the camera looks past the men of the Orange Lodge right through the central archway, down the alley and through the rear gates to the daylight on the Market Square at the back of the building. In later years the front portion of this alley would be closed off for a store, and still many years later the entire alley area would serve as the entrance to the Arena after the Opera House was demolished.

James Richard “Dick” Ward (1894-1975) who used to live in part of Dr. A. R. Stephen’s old house behind the Queen’s Hotel at the north end of Ste. Marie St. told me in the early 1970’s that in his youth he helped his

father, James A. Ward, a “Teamster”, deliver the pianos in their moving crates from the railway yard to the piano stores in town. Pianos came in on the railway, the only long distance type of transport on land at the time and, using a team of horses, a wagon and some sturdy planks, the Wards handled these bulky and heavy packages and you have to admire the skill and brawn it took to do this in an era when there were no fork lifts or trucks with hydraulic tailgates. Men moved large upright pianos up long flights of stairs (think of the Temple Bldg.) or hoisted them through an upper storey window with block and tackle in those days using just their brains and bodily strength. Depending on the size, upright pianos of that era could weigh between 600 and 800 pounds. In addition to Manson Bros., Alex Heuser and Hector Lamont, two other local piano dealers on Hurontario St. would have been among James A. Ward’s customers.

Dick Ward remembered a time when the St. Paul St. railway freight sheds were located farther east much closer to the main track—this was their original location before they were moved to the east side of St. Paul St. This original location can be seen in the photo on pg. 39 of Rick Leswick’s book *Riding The Hog Special*. In the photo can also be seen a hand-operated crane used to lift heavy objects between the platform and the freight wagons. In 19th Century railway jargon, the track, or siding at the Station where freight was loaded into or unloaded from boxcars was referred to as “the team track” because this is where teams of horses would come to pick up or drop off freight items.

The piano business went into a slow, gradual decline in production from the mid 1920’s onward as people directed their disposable income to other consumer goods and pianos gradually became more of

a “luxury” item than the essential home appliance they had been for so long. As the decline accelerated in the second half of the 1920’s (before jumping straight off a cliff during the Great Depression) some piano companies were taken over by others. For example, Heintzman & Co. of Toronto, the cream of the crop, took over the business of Gerhard Heintzman (a totally separate company owned by a competing relative with the same surname who had died in 1926). The Heintzman family also took over the business of A&S Nordheimer when Albert Nordheimer retired in 1927. By the late 1920’s pianos were not likely to be David Manson’s principal stock in trade as factories closed and sales declined.

Bert Brydon (actual name, Robert Carmichael Brydon) who had a television store/record bar on Hurontario St. took on, for a brief time, the agency for Mason & Risch pianos in the 1960’s. When I mentioned David Manson to him, Bert recalled that when his family came to town in the early 1930’s (his father was Rev. Robert Brydon who served as the minister at Trinity United Church 1931-1936), David Manson’s piano business was just about gone. Few people were buying pianos *or* wallpaper in the depths of the Great Depression; fortunately the upstairs apartments over the store brought in rental income. Bert Brydon was selling radios at the time. A radio was not only much cheaper than a piano but also took up much less space and one did not need to take lessons in order to “play” a radio.

David Manson also found time to serve the Town and was involved in the Collingwood Fire Department’s changeover from horse-drawn equipment to modern fire trucks in the mid 1920’s. He also served as Chairman of the Board of Trade and as the first President of the Ratepayer’s Association.

Time marched on. David Manson was still listed as a merchant in 1935 and 1945 and this latter date does not square with the fact that on December 4, 1943 David and Robena Manson crossed Lake Ontario to Buffalo stating their “intention” to permanently reside in the United States. They also applied for U.S. Social Security Numbers. As a “distinguishing mark” he had a “stiff middle right finger”. Their destination was a town called North East, in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Their daughter Mary (1913-1992) had married a man named Lee and had moved to Pennsylvania around 1937 and her parents were going to live with Mary and their son-in-law. Nevertheless, David Manson appears to have gone back and forth from Pennsylvania to Collingwood for the next few years. The term for this was “resident alien”. In May, 1945 David Manson departed Buffalo by train on the Toronto, Hamilton & Buffalo Railway to return to Canada, giving his profession as “Sales Manager”. At the time he was associated with the Service Station Equipment Company which he represented throughout southern Ontario but in the post-war years he resumed selling pianos at 206 Hurontario St. until his death.

David Manson died on June 18, 1947 at age 63 in the Toronto General Hospital following an operation. The Collingwood Town Hall flag flew at half-mast for his funeral. He was buried in the Trinity United Church Cemetery. In August 1950 his widow sold the property on Ste. Marie St. to Ed Smart of Smart Bros. Ltd. Unlike the Mansons, Ed Smart had no need of a vegetable garden on this property for Smart’s farm grew all the fruits and vegetables he could ever use. For years there had been a gate in the fence that separated my grandmother’s backyard from what was now Ed Smart’s yard. When I started school in 1952 I was told I could use that gate as a shortcut coming home from school. I

did this a number of times in the years before my grandmother died and was never challenged for walking through Ed Smart's yard and driveway to get through to Ste. Marie St. Perhaps Mrs. Smart never saw me doing it.

Robena Manson lived in a number of places after her husband's death. In 1949 she was living with her son, now Rev. Alexander Manson, an ordained minister of the United Church (since 1946) in Beamsville. In 1957 she was living with her son and his wife Dorothy in Corinth, Ont., near Tillsonburg; in 1962 she was living with them in Drumbo, Ont. When she died in 1977 in her late 90's, she was buried in St. Gregory Cemetery in the town of North East, Erie County, Pennsylvania, where her daughter Mary lived. In August 2017, David Manson's house on Ste. Marie St., Collingwood is listed for sale at \$1,995,000.00.

.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.