



PETERMAN'S PLANING MILL

H. David Vuckson

Another long-forgotten industry from Collingwood's early days was Peterman's Planing Mill which was located on Birch St. just south of First Street. The business is said to have begun in 1871-2 by Daniel Peterman and was known as the **BIRCH STREET PLANING MILL—D. PETERMAN**. It was one of several such industries in town that produced finished lumber products such as flooring, doors, window sash, mouldings, etc. Other major competitors in this line of work were Robert Kirk, Bryan Manufacturing and Wilson Bros. This was at a time when the wood supply from the virgin forests of Simcoe County seemed limitless and wood products were in high demand for construction as the many sawmills turned those towering trees into merchantable lumber which, in turn, could be made into the items listed above.

The 1875 *Bird's Eye View Of Collingwood* drawing shows Peterman's planing mill on Birch St. at a time when the western section of town was very sparsely settled. Several buildings are sketched along with the requisite tall smokestack. Just across First St. on the waterfront were the enormous stacks of lumber from the Hotchkiss & Peckham/Toner and Gregory sawmill that we met last month. The sawmill property at the time extended from

the foot of Hurontario St. all the way over to Birch St. There was a ready supply of sawn lumber just a short distance away from Peterman's facility. Because of the nature of the products from a planing mill, it was necessary to store on site vast amounts of seasoned lumber.

The earliest reference to Daniel Peterman I have found dates from *McAlpine's Dominion Business Directory of 1873-74* wherein he is listed under manufacturers of "Sashes, Doors & Blinds".

Mr. Peterman was also written up in the *Poetical Directory of Collingwood of 1875*:

Daniel Peterman makes Sash and Doors and Blinds.

Makes window frame, sash for the same, grand flooring does prepare,

All moulding kind, scroll work and blind, and brackets made with care.

For every name, stone, brick or frame, he does the wood work fine,

Works with despatch, to square and scratch, to squint of the plumb line.

Planes siding too, for building new, as architect should be,

To finish all, both church and hall, to turning of the key.

Keeps large supplies of different size, all lying heap on heap,

He keeps to trade already made and sells it very cheap.

The 1894 *Board of Trade Report* has the following information:

PETERMAN'S MILL

Peterman's planing mill and sash factory, situated on Birch St. between First and Second Sts., is a fairly equipped mill, having a number of modern

machines and appliances for wood-working and general job work. The Petermans, father and son, employ quite a number of men in their shops and on the buildings they contract for.

One of the buildings they contracted for in 1894 was the still-standing Victoria School Annex. At this time there were several other similar businesses in town: Todd's Planing Mill nearby at the corner of Birch and First Streets, Wilson Bros., then on Hurontario St. before erecting their huge factory at First and Walnut in 1902, and Bryan Bros. Manufacturing Co. on Huron St. It can be seen that there was a great demand for fine interior woodwork to keep these four firms busy, the Wilson and Bryan firms in particular, because of their size, shipping their products far and wide "to the North and North-West" and even to the United States. With two railways coming into town—one from Toronto and one from Hamilton—Collingwood was well-placed for these woodworking firms to ship their finished products to distant markets.

Daniel Peterman (1841-1925) was born in Ontario to German parents and his wife Elizabeth Gillies was born in Scotland as enumerated by my great aunt Vetta O'Brien for the 1921 Census. Their son John Gillies Peterman (1863-1944), while he was a partner with his father in the planing mill business from at least 1896, was also a contractor and house builder. The *Collingwood Bulletin Commercial and Industrial Issue* of December 1906 said,

Mr. John Peterman is largely interested in the building and construction of houses, and keeps a large gang of men at work all the year erecting houses or buildings of every kind, large or small. Some of the largest and finest residences in town were constructed by Mr. Peterman.

One of the prominent residences in town built by John Gillies Peterman is Thurso House, corner of Pine and Third Streets, built in 1902 for Dr. Donald McKay (Sr.) as a wedding present for his wife.

Both Peterman men lived into their eighties in Collingwood and both died of heart disease. Prior to coming to Collingwood, Daniel was a carpenter living in King Township, York County north of Toronto. As a young man about age 30 he saw an opportunity to leave the farm and strike out for boom town Collingwood and make his mark in life there. Ten years later, there would be plenty of demand for his woodworking skills as the rebuilding of Hurontario St. got underway following the Great Fire of September 1881. After completing his schooling at C.C.I. when William Williams was the Principal, John joined his father in the business and worked at it almost to the end of his life except for “two or three short intervals spent in other cities” (see below).

In 1891 at age 28, John, the son, like so many other young Collingwood men of that era, heard the call of distant shores and left, not for the west in this instance, but for Detroit and “a lucrative situation in a large planing factory” there. This qualifies him as one of the Collingwood “Old Boys”, men who were born and/or grew up in town and left for distant parts to make their mark and seek their fortune. It is not known how long he worked in Detroit—a few years at least before returning to Collingwood but he was definitely back in Collingwood at the time of the 1901 Census. On the eve of his departure for Detroit, the First Presbyterian Church Sunday School, of which he had been a stalwart teacher for the past 12 years, presented him with an address and a gift.

John Peterman’s wanderlust was not done with him yet, and about twenty years later he heard the call of the west. That great chronicler of Collingwood’s history, David Williams, also mentioned John G. Peterman in his listing of “Old Boys” in the *Huron Institute Papers & Records Vol. II (1914)*:

Then we have Jack Peterman who until the summer of 1913 was one of us here in Collingwood. He is located at Medicine Hat, Alberta, but calls Collingwood home, his family being yet in the "old town".

By way of interest, Peterman was, in the mid-1880s, a member of the oddly-named "Bald-Headed Society" ("Baldies" for short), said to be the most popular secret society for young men of its day. These men were not bald, but one of the members named Jack Fagan had got a very close-to-the-head brush cut one day and the term "baldie" was applied to him and thence to the name of the society.

The *Vernon's City Directories* for Collingwood for the years 1910-11 and 1912-13 lists the business under Daniel's name. The 1923 edition lists Daniel's son "J. G. Peterman, Planing Mills" (when Daniel was age 83). The 1923 directory, in its alphabetical section stated,

PETERMAN, J. G. Lumber, lath and shingles, doors, sash, mouldings, etc., manufacturer, wholesale and retail, office Birch st., phone 555, residence Second, phone 501.

Daniel Peterman, the father, had suffered fire two or three times at the mill over the years but always rebuilt. On Monday, December 20th, 1937 it was his son John's turn. The fire was written up in the *Enterprise-Bulletin* three days later:

Old Established Industry Suffers Heavily By Fire-- Peterman's Planing Mill Burned in Mid-Day Blaze

By a mid-day blaze on Monday one of the town's oldest industries, Peterman's planing mill on Birch Street was almost totally destroyed. With it there was also lost a considerable quantity of valuable lumber stored in the sheds on the east side of the factory.

The fire appeared to have originated in the sandpapering room at the rear on the upper storey where, in the morning, Mr. J. G. Peterman, the proprietor, while operating a machine, had experienced trouble from an overheated shaft. Believing he had extinguished the blaze fully, Mr. Peterman was astonished, on returning from across the street after the noon hour, to find smoke pouring out of the building which, on the prompt arrival of the firemen, was a mass of flames from end to end of both floors. Working under the handicap of a freezing temperature, a strong wind and dense clouds of smoke, the brigade poured two or three streams of water into the fiery furnace for a time with little or no effect. At the same time they kept guard on surrounding property possibly endangered by sparks from the fire in the sheds and their contents of dry lumber. No damage resulted, while the business section of the town, several blocks distant, was never endangered at all. When the smoke had cleared away the industry was a complete wreck, representing a loss to Mr. Peterman of ten to twelve thousand dollars uninsured.

The Peterman business has been in Collingwood almost since there was any town of importance. The late Daniel Peterman, the founder, came here upwards of seventy years ago and started in a small way. Suffering by fire two or three times he rebuilt and continued in business until his death. His son, Mr. J. G. Peterman followed and has since carried on in the brick building on Birch Street. As a custom factory it has given a very important service, the loss of which may mean great inconvenience to patrons.

This sad event must have been quite a blow to Mr. Peterman—the loss of his factory and its expensive machinery and the loss of the valuable stocks of seasoned wood needed in his line of work. Two weeks to the day earlier, John Peterman had observed his 74th birthday on December 6th. He had been a widower since 1929. The fire occurred during the Great Depression when money was tight and this may account for the fact that his factory was

uninsured. One can imagine that insurance premiums were high for a place that was home to combustible materials like wood, wood shavings, sawdust, hot-running machines, varnishes, etc. Fire was ever a hazard in factories that worked with wood. Indeed, two of Petermans' major competitors suffered devastating fires: The Bryan Manufacturing Co. on Huron St. on April 4th 1915 and the Wilson Bros. Planing Mill on First St. on March 5th, 1917.

John Peterman's Death Registration indicates that he worked at his trade until 1943, the year before he died when in his 81st year although it may have only been on a much-reduced basis during the good weather months. In early 1941 and 1942 he visited his son Kenneth in Cleveland for two months. In the winter of 1943-44 he was taken seriously ill while visiting his son but he recovered sufficiently to spend the summer in Collingwood and then moved to Toronto to live with his daughter where he passed away on October 28, 1944 from chronic degenerative myocarditis.

Years later, the Peterman property would host lumber again when Alick McDonald (future Mayor of Collingwood) had his lumber yard on Birch St. before he relocated to First St. where he had the luxury of a CNR railway siding behind his location, a luxury enjoyed only by one other lumberyard in town, that of George Bryan on Huron St. The other two building supply dealers had to unload boxcars at the St. Paul St. railyard and truck the supplies to their places of business. This was a time when freight was carried by the railways, not massive trucks. I remember watching two young men unloading huge sheets of Johns-Manville wallboard out of a boxcar at the freight sheds onto a flatbed truck. This was very labour-intensive considering that when they arrived at the building supply they had to handle it all over again.

Peterman's building, now The Johnson Apartments, still stands in 2022 at number 29 Birch St., east side. The north wall is the original brick. The

bricks of the front and south walls have been covered over with white stucco. Another building on the property stands at 45 Birch St., and used to be a Canada Bread warehouse and distribution facility (I well remember Jack Pearce delivering bread on our street. He would come to the side door with a wicker basket of baked goods, open the door and call out “Baker!”) Both buildings were gifted to the Town of Collingwood in 1980 by the family of Johnny Johnson who had converted them into apartments, the local Rotary Club managing the buildings on behalf of the Town. The property is currently the subject of a review for possible redevelopment into higher density.

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.