

THE TANNERY LIFE AFTER CROSSEN



EDWARDS & EDWARDS LIMITED

The closing of Canada Blue Tanning for the last time in 1988 signaled the end of a long history of industry on Alice Street in Cobourg. The Crossen Car Works first occupied the site in 1870, but some 130 years later the tannery buildings stood derelict, and in 2007 they were finally demolished.

TIMES CHANGE

A BUSINESS WORTH BUYING (AND SELLING)

Crossen stopped operations in 1915, and Dominion Wheel & Foundries Limited took over just two years later. **A tannery was first established on the Alice Street property in 1926.** While the business changed ownership and names several times, it began under the name of **Edwards & Edwards**, covering seven acres. At various times over the years, cow hides, fish skins and sheep hides were all tanned there.

In 1957 the Edwards family sold the business to the **Remis Brothers** of Boston, Massachusetts. It was later sold to **John A. Lang & Sons. Ltd.** of Kitchener for approximately \$1,000,000.



EDWARDS & EDWARDS HOCKEY TEAM - 1929

MEMORIES

Back in the early 1950s many Canadian tanneries went out of business when synthetic substitutes came on the scene. Then about four or five years ago the industry got a severe fright over the threat of a plastic "leather" developed at enormous expense.

This product is now almost abandoned and leather once again is riding high.

~ Quote from Fred Glasser on his appointment as President of Robson-Lang in 1975



EVEL KNIEVEL

The next purchaser was the Robson Leather Company which, in 1963, purchased tanneries in Kitchener, London and Barrie as well as the one in Cobourg. Under the new business name of Robson-Lang Leathers Limited it became part of Canada's largest tanning company.



LARGE TANNING DRUM ON SITE IN COBOURG.

At the Cobourg plant, raw hides, chiefly from the United States, went through many processes including cleaning, colouring and embossing. They were then shipped to Toronto and elsewhere to be converted into the finished product, mainly shoes and other articles of clothing.

Former tannery employee and current Cobourg resident, Maurice Fraser, worked in the tannery in the late 1960s and remembers the interesting people with whom he had contact there. These included daredevil **Evel Knievel who ordered a leather jacket**, a shoemaker who ordered leather for actor Christopher Plummer's boots in a production at Stratford (size 13) and Ed Mirvish - cousin of Lou Enchin of Enchin Leather Supplies of Toronto.

THE LAST DAYS

Due to the combination of high interest rates and a recession, Robson-Lang went into receivership in 1985. Their last factory to remain in operation was the Cobourg one which had been purchased by **John Flynn & Sons** of Salem, Massachusetts. But it was only a short time before bankruptcy hit again.

"Sadly on May 25, 1986 I personally locked the door of our office, an old house on Alice Street, and put my key in the letter slot," recalled Mr. Fraser.

But that same year, operations were resumed on a much smaller scale by the Canada Blue Tanning Company Limited with Richard Beasly of Oshawa as the principal owner. However, even this small operation was not successful and the plant closed down for the last time shortly after.

By 2004 the facility was derelict. In 2006 a structural evaluation of the buildings identified the risk of collapsing floors, roofs and walls as well as falling material suspended from the ceiling. The town issued a demolition order which Richard Beasly appealed. Beasly lost his appeal and the town ordered demolition in late 2006.



THE FUTURE

As of early 2015 the property lies vacant, with equipment from the old tannery - including tanning horses and a tanning drum - still on site. As with many tannery properties in Canada and elsewhere, contamination with hazardous chemicals has been a major problem. The Town of Cobourg has been unable to find a buyer and is looking at various possible uses, including a parking lot for the adjacent Via railway station.

Soon there may be nothing to remind us of what was once a thriving industrial area in the heart of town, beginning in 1870 with the Crossen Company's major expansion and ending in 1988 with the quiet closing of Canada Blue.

