

# Stone-faced and flour-dusted

## VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

*Tavistock and District Historical Society*

Sometimes the location of a photo hints at when it was taken, such as this one of the employees of the Tavistock Milling Company, most likely from 1910. The curtain and vertical window on the right automatically eliminates this picture from being taken in the Lemp studio because he had this purpose-built room constructed with only an angled skylight window after he purchased the property in 1905.

Skylights were very typical of photographers' studios at the time because electricity wasn't widely available and oil lamps didn't provide enough light for picture taking in the early days of the medium. Big skylights are notorious for collapsing under the weight of wet snow, leaking and since glass is a poor insulator, photo studios were too cold to use mid-winter at the time. An 1897 photo of the south side of Woodstock Street shows two buildings with skylights with hip-jointed vertical windows, so it appears there were rival photo businesses operating in Tavistock at the time. This staff photo was very likely taken in one of these.

One of the beauties of this picture is the employees mostly posed wearing what's very likely their typical flour-dusted work attire. Adam E. Ratz, the manager, is front and centre in a suit and tie, as are two others including his son, Bert, on his left wearing a very formal wing-tip collar. Note how three men wearing bib overalls are also wearing either a bowtie or long tie, but it's very unlikely that the latter was not worn in the mill because of the danger of loose clothing being caught in machinery. The fellow on the right is quite dapper with his vest, jacket, long tie and a white variation of a newsboy cap relaxed and leaning against the windowsill. Handlebar moustaches were very common and milliners were doing good business as stand-

alone shops selling hats that mostly died out post-World War II.

So, why aren't they smiling? Because the light-sensitive materials used for picture taking from the start of photography in the 1830s until 1930 were not fast-acting yet, necessitating long camera exposures. So, the photographers usually told their sitters to "hold still" when their pictures were taken. Of course, someone could hold a smile, but this resulted in frozen, puppet-like expressions that looked very stiff, hence the very frequent flat, expressionless faces of the first century of photography. Only the woman in the long white dress, Mabel Ratz, has a slight grin.

This picture was published in the Christmas edition of the *Tavistock Gazette* in 1910 and, very interestingly, the back page of the paper notes, "All the good photos in this number of the Christmas Gazette were made by us," in an ad sponsored by John Lemp, Tavistock's longtime photographer. This means Mr. Lemp started his photo business not at the back of his pharmacy but in one of the two studios on Woodstock Street. A few years after buying his drug store property on Hope Street in 1905, he had his own photo studio built at the back of it on the second floor (still there today but the skylight is now a shingled roof as it's a private residence). The toy horse prop on the bottom left of this photo appears in a dozen of his new studio photos, so he moved it and a collection of negatives from the earlier photographers to his larger, up-to-date Hope Street location.

The book *Crossroads In Time* by Bill Gladding (1998) has a photo of a similar group from the milling company, but it shot outdoors, that includes a cat, a dog, two different men and missing three others from this picture. The people that appear in both pictures are dressed the same and the same man in the middle row is holding a pipe wrench again, all of which strongly hints that both pictures were taken the same day.

This is a fairly rare photo in the Tavistock and District Historical Society's collection because the purpose of the picture is known, the date it was taken is well established and all but two names have been recorded in *Crossroads in Time*.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Why toss your trash anywhere but the trashcan?

Why?

I would appreciate some advice in helping me to understand why someone dumps 37 cigarette butts by the entrance to the Schmidt Woods.

Why does someone dump a bathroom sink by the rail garden on Waterloo Street? Why do dog owners scoop their dog poop into bags, and leave the bags on the sidewalk, on the grass in the park, or by the boardwalk or pond at the Schout

Wetlands? Why do people throw their Timmy's cup or candy wrappers in my township garden?

We are blessed to have so many beautiful, natural places in New Hamburg. Can we please try to keep it that way?

Janet Worthington,  
New Hamburg



(PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, LEMP STUDIO COLLECTION #0031.)

The lack of smiles is very typical of pre-1940s photos because cameras' long exposure times necessitated holding still and a smile that's held usually looks stiff.

There are more photos in the society's collection of people posing in photo studios in their work attire and sometimes at their workplace, often with their tools or products of their trade visible, but it's not obvious why they were taken. They give an intimate glimpse of the lives of everyday local people, instead of always posing in their Sunday best.

**Last week's History Mystery answer:** The 1905 photo was of a group of mostly young adults casually posing for a group photo on a summer day on a lawn with tennis rackets. The question was: "If an equivalent group photo was taken today of an outdoor, summer tennis group, what two items would they probably be wear-

ing that this group is not?" Connie Roth of Tavistock submitted the only correct pair of answers: shorts and sunglasses. They both didn't gain popularity until the 1940s, largely because the World War II theatre of operations included the tropics, necessitating improved eyewear for pilots and cooler clothing for soldiers.

**This week's History Mystery:** What article of clothing of at least three people is made of cardboard? This question is open to all ages. Send your answer, first name, last name, the name of your community or rural route number to [tim\\_mosher@hotmail.com](mailto:tim_mosher@hotmail.com). The first person to answer correctly will have this information published in the next edition.

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