

Bunting and a boat float

VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

Armistice Day ending first world war was on Nov. 11, 1918, and this photo was taken the following summer in front of the bunting-decorated Zimmerman home in Tavistock.

The village wanted to celebrate the end of four years of war, of sending local young men and women overseas to support the effort, after mourning the loss of some. Local people were encouraged to build a float for a main street parade to commemorate the end of the bloody conflagration. It's more than ironic that many families of the district sent their young people to fight against Germany, the country of their ancestors.

Floats are so named because originally, they were barges pulled with ropes from the shore, decorated for celebrations and floated along a river for the local dignitaries and people to admire. The name stuck after motorized vehicles adopted the idea and they appear to be floating along as they slowly pass the crowds with the vehicle hidden underneath. Two tires are barely visible in this photo giving away the horseless carriage beneath. What's impressive is Zimmerman's time, enthusiasm and imagination that went into the design of this float for the parade. It's not recorded why they chose a boat design in landlocked Tavistock, with no apparent direct connection to WWI, their German-born family or Canada.

Multiple generations of Zimmermans were prominent in the economic development of the district as they were entrepreneurs with varied commercial interests for over a century. Pre-confederation, they manufactured staves (the curved vertical parts of barrels) in New Hamburg and Plattsville. Then they moved to Tavistock occupying a large property immediately south of their home at 113 Woodstock St. N. In 1868, John Zimmerman had seven employees fabricating staves and heads (barrel tops). Cooperage (barrel manufacturing) was all pencil and paper-based in those days and complex because of the many curves involved in the construction of these watertight wooden containers.

Their business flourished. They had kilns to dry wood, a cooperage shop, a saw mill, plus their expanded stave and head manufactory. They shipped their products all over Ontario and to Montreal by rail, of course, with the Tavistock station located very conveniently at the southern edge of their large property.

Wages at their enterprises, by today's standards, are hard to believe but in 1966, Howard Zimmerman wrote a detailed account that was published in the Fact and Fantasy book by retired Waterloo-Oxford District Secondary School teacher Carl Seltzer. Howard noted that the workday was ten hours in 1873 and the men were paid from 62.50 cents to \$1 for the day!

"Transient coopers on piece work got six-and-a-half to seven cents per barrel. The barrels sold for 25 cents. Some ... men had a weekly cheque of \$75, but since they were real drinkers, Monday morning produced hangovers and (a) total depletion of wages, even with whisky at 35 cents per gallon (3.78 litres)."

The Oxford, Commercial, Arlington and Sebastopol hotel keeps were happy barmen!

Around 1900, the Zimmermans opened The Palace Shoe Store in what is today Quehl's Restaurant at 33 Woodstock St. S. Additionally, they had a lumber business in Nottawa, Ont., to provide all the soft- and hardwoods required in Tavistock. By 1906, they acquired the Kalbfleish box and planing mill in Tavistock where they then started to make shooks (box parts ready to assemble), coves (crown molding), sashes (frames to hold window glass) and doors.

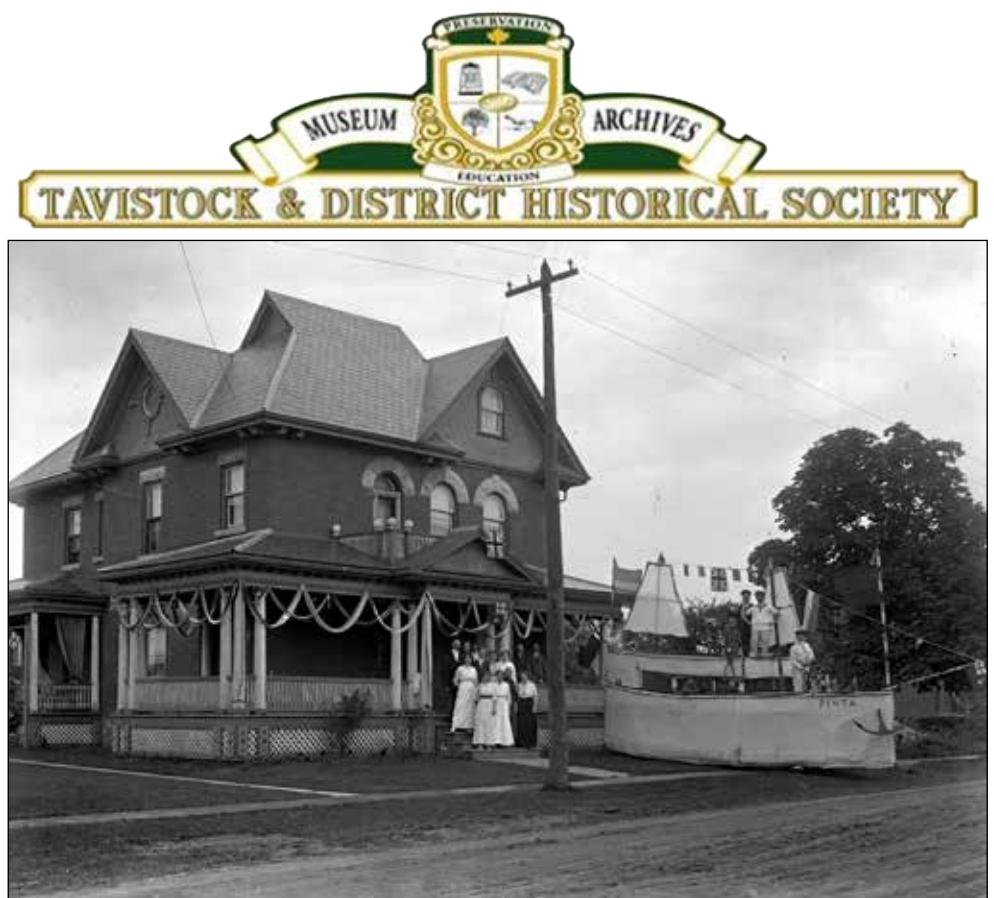
Full-size housebuilding was a natural development for the Zimmermans but then came the first world war and they had to pivot the business towards war-related products. They were well established by the start of the war in 1914 and had contracts to manufacture boxes and shooks.

By the war's end in 1919, this made up 75 per cent of Zimmerman's business sales to buyers from the Canadian government, as well as to butter, soft drink and canned-goods companies. By this time, they employed 90 hands, manufacturing 10,000 boxes a day needing 40,000 feet (12,200 meters) of spruce or pine lumber, reported Howard in his Fact and Fantasy history.

After the first world war, the Zimmermans started an all-new enterprise for Tavistock; raising foxes for fur. The Tavistock Gazette of Nov. 29, 1923, reported that they started with three foxes. By 1930, close to 200 pelts a year were being sent to market, plus they won the contract to build the new Tavistock Arena in Queen's Park. This large Quonset hut-style structure allowed the village's hockey teams to shine.

Many decades later, this hollow shell was where my boyhood chums and I amused ourselves with echo competitions.

During World War II, 1939-1945, Zimmerman Brothers Manufacturing was designated a "war industry" when they produced large quantities of boxes to hold TNT, Howitzer cannon shells and anti-aircraft ammunition boxes. They had 130 employees, 25 of whom were women, working 55-60 hours



(JOHN LEMP; LEMP STUDIO COLLECTIONS SCAN #1304)

The Zimmermans pose on the front steps of their residence ready to celebrate the end of WWI with their homemade boat float. Young Howard Zimmerman is the boy on the upper deck of the boat.

per week.

Demand for fox pelts waned in the late 1950s and mink became the fur in demand, so the Zimmermans hired an expert in the field, Percy Bleay. He increased the size of the herd and the business did well but then tragedy struck in 1956 when fire totally destroyed the box factory next door.

Instead of rebuilding, they decided that fur farming was their future and expanded the mink business, producing 8,000 pelts a year by the mid-1960s. It was one of the largest mink-fur producing farms in Canada. This country's oldest retailer, the former Hudson Bay Company (founded in 1670), was originally based on the fur trade and purchased pelts from the Zimmerman-Bleay fur farm.

I remember the farm as a lad; the long, low pens of row upon row of cages suspended off the ground. There were no mink by this time, so I explored this mysterious former mink ranch when Howard Zimmerman was retired and looking the other way, still living in the old home with his wife, Gladys. They always tipped me well at Christmas when I was delivering their copy of the long defunct Toronto Telegram newspaper to the side porch of their big old home.

Today, the box and planing factory and fox and mink ranch are long gone but the many decades of economic gain to the community is clear. The grand Zimmerman house is all

that remains, a silent, red-brick sentinel of days gone by.

Last week's History Mystery: The photo was of the 1912 Liebler-Quehl wedding reception group. The question was, "What's an odd thing about how some people in the wedding party are dressed?" No one forwarded the correct answer but a number of readers noted their screens or paper copies were not sharp enough to see the details. It didn't matter because the answer is not in the photo; it's in the text. In paragraph four, I wrote, "The male wedding party's boutonnières are all pinned to their lapels with their stems up," so the single flowers were upside-down. Usually, they're pinned with their stems down whether a century ago or today.

This week there are two History Mysteries: The first is for readers under the age of 16: What is the meaning of "Pinta" on the side of the float? The second mystery is open to all ages: What's the connection between popular American folk singer Bob Dylan and this story? Send answers with your full name, the name of your community or rural route number and your age if you're answering the first mystery to tim_mosher@hotmail.com. Whoever gets the correct answer first will have this published in the next edition. The deadline to submit answers is Tuesday, 9 a.m.

SEND YOUR STORY IDEAS AND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR TO GALEN SIMMONS GALEN@GRANTHAVEN.COM

CORRECTION:

A misspelling was printed in the story, "Celebrating 90 years of faith, family and farming: Glen Zehr honoured in Tavistock," on page 22 of the July 31 edition of the Wilmot-Tavistock Gazette.

Glenn Zehr's first name was spelled with one "n" instead of two. We regret any confusion this error may have caused and we would like to wish Glenn Zehr a very happy 90th birthday.