

J. G. Field's Woolen Mill - spinning a yarn!



VINTAGE VIEWS

By Tim Mosher

Tavistock and District Historical Society

One of Tavistock's premier employers for more than a century was the woolen mill at 199 Hope Street East. It provided steady work for numerous local people and woolen products for the nation and beyond from 1868-1987.

When a Mr. Preston first operated his two-and-a-half storey frame mill one year after Confederation, the four employees produced horse and bed blankets, tweeds, coverlets and stocking yarn. The machines were powered by a 115-horsepower engine, which supplied electricity to the village for decades.

In 1869, Preston sold the business to John Steinman and John Gerhardt who built the first addition in 1870. Mr. Steinman bought Mr. Gerhardt's interest in 1873 and operated the concern until 1877 when he sold it to Messrs. Hetherington and Field for \$1,000. They grew the business and constructed additions. By 1883, Field bought out his partner and the mill employed 15 hands 12 months of the year, turning 12,000 pounds (5,443 kilograms) of wool into 40,000 yards (36,576 metres) of cloth. In 1903, J. G. Field's woolen mill was producing 12,000 pairs of socks per week.

During World War I, they switched entirely to woolen socks. One very large order from the American Army for gloves and heavy socks was said to be worth over \$100,000 (over \$2 million today). To fill this order, the plant ran 24 hours a day for six

months. By 1934, they had almost 100 knitting machines, producing almost 400,000 socks a year. Much of the wool that was used was shipped by container from New Zealand due to its superior quality.

Field's sold the business in 1953 to Sam McDougall and his son, Ron, took over at a later time. They retained the well-established name as Field's had a very solid reputation in the North American hosiery business.

Memories of the woolen mill

Summer jobs at J. G. Fields for local youth, including me, were available at "the woolen mill." In July and August of 1976, I worked there. My supervisor, Henry Hallam, called me "the yarn foreman." A big title for this skinny teenager.

I was grateful for the work but the conditions were, um, character building. The various wool-making and knitting machines large and small produced a lot of heat, plus the summer humidity and inhaling wool fibres in the non-air-conditioned factory were the standard working conditions of the time.

Five days a week I collected handwritten orders in code on small papers from all the sock knitting machine workers, mostly women, on the ground floor. Then I'd go upstairs to where the spools of yarn made on site were stored. I'd fill a cart with the spools - each as big as a turnip but cone-shaped - checking the colour codes on their base. The codes were creat-



(ERNEST DENTON, SCAN #5008)

The entire staff of eight men and 48 women from J. G. Field's posed for this panoramic photo. No doubt there wasn't a lot of traffic on Hope Street East that day, June 14, 1934.

ed by the worker gently holding a wax crayon against the spinning spool creating a pale circle of colour and perhaps a second or third colour as well.

Two concentric red circles and a yellow one meant that this spool consisted of a specific wool blend. A yellow and green circle meant that it was a different blend. I'd then push my cart of about 60 spools to a large chute where I'd drop them to the ground floor filling another cart there. I'd wheel it around to all the knitters depositing whatever yarns they ordered earlier, along with their original paper slips.

The 1.5-kilometre bike ride home every day after my shift was a relief. I was paid minimum wage: \$2.65 per hour (currently it's \$17.60) saving it for my college photo studies.

J. G. Field's woolen mill closed in 1987; the building and 3.5 acres of land was sold in 1989 to Hanson Mohawk, a machine manufacturer. Later, it was mostly demolished but partly preserved around which "The Renaissance" condo building was constructed. Today, it provides modern accommodations on two floors with virtually no visible vestiges of its industrial past.

Photos from the past

The Lemp Studio Collection of historic photos consists of about 98 per-cent pictures taken by John "Jack" Lemp between 1905 and 1950, but the large group photo was not. British-born Ernest Denton of Kitchener (1883-1957) was hired to set up his specialized panoramic camera to take this ultra-wide scene. He was often hired by a wide variety of organizations in southern Ontario - especially schools - to take these unique photos with his very

unusual camera.

There are two types of panoramic cameras. One that was popular with amateurs was a small handheld device with a lens that rotated from one side to the other. These cameras captured such a wide scene that the photographers had to be careful to keep their fingers from appearing in the pictures on either side of the photo.

The second was a professional model on a tripod, where the entire large camera swung from one side to the other sweeping the scene and exposing celluloid film (an early plastic) on a curve in the back of the camera through a slit. Some models rotated 360 degrees capturing the entire location, but the photographer had to sit on the ground beside the camera, reach up to trip the shutter and then quickly withdraw his arm and crouch out of the sight of the lens or he would be in the picture too!

Large groups of people were arranged in a curve so that the entire group was an equal distance from the camera, instead of the two ends of the group being farther away, which would have resulted in a disappointing bowed look to the finished picture. I do the same thing these days, taking photos of very large groups, curving them so everyone is the same distance from the camera and so is equally sharp.

This is the type of camera that Mr. Denton used. After taking and developing the photo with liquid chemicals in his darkroom, he hand-lettered his name onto the negative with an opaque writing liquid akin to White Out correction fluid. Compared to today's digital technology, this was a very laborious method but up to date for its time.

Denton's negatives were large,

which produced finely detailed black and white photos that are treasured today because he was very often hired to capture important celebrations and historic moments. Luckily, he signed and dated them all.

J.G. Field's legacy today

There's a company in Toronto that's benefiting from the long history and good reputation of J. G. Field's called "J. B. Field's". The Great Canadian Sox Company produces hosiery of many types and its website includes a very dubious history connecting its J. B. Field's brand to the Tavistock plant with text and photos including Mr. Denton's panoramic picture, claiming its origins are with the village mill.

This tells me that J. G. Field's socks and its long local history are of high regard and worth imitating, albeit it's spinning a very long yarn.

Last week's history mystery:

The question was "What clue in this article (celebrating the end of WWI) is a strong hint as to what day of the week it was when the photo was taken?" The correct answer was forwarded first by Marilyn Pearson of Tavistock, which is that it was most likely a Monday because it's the traditional wash day and you can see laundry on the line on the left of the picture.

This week's history mystery:

What's the relationship between wax and wicks and the phone that Mr. Field is touching with his right hand in his office? This question is open to all ages. The first reader to send me the correct answer will have their name, the name of their community or rural route number published in the next Vintage Views.



(JOHN LEMP, SCAN #6104)

ohn Gerhardt Field and his son, Jim Vipond, in the factory office in June, 1933 (as the calendar on the map attests). They were agents for the Canadian Pacific Railroad, which is no doubt why they have the map of Canada on the wall above a row of socks. Field's hosiery was shipped by train across Canada.

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