

Our oldest firm closes after 134 years

End of historic era at MacKenzie Milne

By: Heather Rath

At the end of August, the oldest established business in Sarnia will close its doors. And a link to our past will disappear.

MacKenzie Milne, industrial and hardware suppliers, founded in 1848 and today owned by Ed Shabsove, has fallen victim to bad economic times.

But before the end arrives, take a peek at the 'good old days'.

Originally the business was founded by John MacKenzie (not Alexander, later Canada's prime minister, who has been incorrectly identified with the firm).

John was joined by Charles MacKenzie, Sr., and he conducted business under the name of C. MacKenzie and Company.

However, in 1872, David Milne arrived in Sarnia from Scotland ("he had something to do with shipping" Shabsove reflects) and joined with MacKenzie.

Indeed, official company records in 1900 spell out the terms of the newly-formed MacKenzie Milne & Company Ltd. firm: "the share capital of the company is to be \$100,000 divided into 1000 shares of \$100 each."

The company was located on Front Street in the vicinity of CHOK Broadcast House.

Ed Shabsove believes MacKenzie Milne started "as ship chandlers and retail hardware merchants. Why, I even have horseshoe nails at home from the store dated 1850!"

Checking with original company records, the second annual shareholders meeting of March 1902 showed a "dividend to the shareholders of 35 percent on the paid up capital stock."

The fledgling business continued to thrive until, in June 1918, the directors decided

to invest in real estate.

Permission was granted "to purchase the real estate and premises now occupied by the company, including the store and workshop (on Christina and Front Streets) for a sum not exceeding \$40,000."

Owners at that time included a newcomer, Peter Paton. Paton's son, Peter Jr., is today the man behind Paton's Hardware on Russell Street.

The year following the big real estate purchase, company records highlight a net profit of \$21,020.04 - and directors' salaries were bestowed accordingly. Paton received \$5,000 annually; Samis, Towers, and Farquharson each collected \$3,000.

Just how business fared is evident in 1925 when a net balance of \$6,066 was reported. In presenting the figure, president Peter Paton "thought the results were gratifying on the whole in view of the reduced turnover on account of general business depression".

Two years later Paton announced the only capital expenditures of the year "would be the purchase of a new roadster for the salesman who called upon outlying merchants to the east and south of the city."

"Also that the roof of the main store building would need repairs, the work of which would be practically all done by the shop employees during slack time periods."

Peter Paton stayed on as president of MacKenzie Milne until his death in 1957; his son (of Paton's Hardware) then took over.

In 1963 Peter Jr. sold the excess property on Front Street owned by the company. As he puts it: "I sold it

through a blind trust. We owned both sides of the railroad track on the riverside just north of Ferry Dock Hill."

The riverfront property went for \$20,000. As Paton reminisces about the sale today he chuckles: "we didn't need the extra land then so we sold it. And that was all it was worth. We couldn't give it away then. It's the redevelop-

stock.

"Devastating is how 32-year-old Ed describes the loss. Despite the setback Ed took over his father's business that year, moved MacKenzie Milne to its present location at 1275 Plank Road, and built it up.

Until now. Until today's recession.

Points out Ed: "the MacKenzie Milne name is a Sarnia historical landmark.

The decision wasn't reached lightly

"But the chemical industry has slowed down to almost nothing and since 99 percent of our business is based on the chemical industry it's useless to go on. After talking with the companies

I can't see anything good happening in the next 2 years."

So MacKenzie Milne must close. But the decision was not made lightly.

As Ed Shabsove pensively admits:

"I hate to see it go because it has been going since 1848. We carried pretty well every article needed in industry. But by the end of August everything will be cleared right to the floor."



MacKenzie Milne, Sarnia's oldest firm, is closing down at the end of this August. The decision wasn't reached lightly. But, says owner Ed Shabsove, the move had to be made because of the current economic situation.

ment that's made the riverfront land worthwhile now."

Interested in establishing his own business, Paton sold MacKenzie Milne in 1964 to Hugh Shabsove who moved the firm from Front to 526 South Vidal Street.

Explains Ed: "my father bought the name with the business and changed it from a retail hardware to industrial supplier for the chemical valley."

Then, in January 1979, disaster struck. A major fire broke out (suspected arson report newspapers - a break-in apparently occurred just prior to the fire) and destroyed a quarter of the building plus 70 percent of the