

Editorial



IT'S FITTING THAT the Mackenzie brothers' store, the oldest business in Sarnia, is captured in this, the oldest known photographic image of the city. Taken circa 1855, it shows a commercial block on Front Street between Lochiel and Cromwell after a light snow.

Image courtesy Lambton County Archives, 9JA-N

The amazing Sarnian time forgot

Now here's a resume. A Sarnia guy founds an oil company on Exmouth Street - 19 years before Imperial Oil - buys a ship and becomes the first to export crude to England.

He launches a second business, an electric light company, which brings the town its first true streetlights.

He founds a trust company, the first in Canada. And he heads the committee that digs a rail tunnel beneath the St. Clair River, one of the great engineering marvels of the age. Such a remarkable legacy should rank Charles Mackenzie - innovator, politician, builder - among the greatest Sarnians off all time. Yet he's a forgotten man.

Sure, the city has a Mackenzie Street and a Mackenzie Park - even a Mackenzie high school. But they were named for his big brother, who got all



the glory.

"It's surprising how much Charles Mackenzie has been downplayed (in history), and it's only because Alexander was the one who became prime minister of Canada," says Greg Primmer, who has researched the Mackenzie boys.

"If Alexander had finished second I don't think anybody would remember him today."

Primmer is general manager of Mackenzie Milne, a company founded by the PM's brothers, John and Charles.

While doing research for its 150th anniversary celebrations he was amazed by Charles' forgotten accomplishments.

In 1848 the store opened downtown in a

straggling hamlet that had just six laid-out streets and 800 souls. The tin-smith and stove shop soon evolved into a shipping outfitter and eventually into the safety and industrial supply firm that operates today on Plank Road.

In 1861, Charles and John also launched the Liverpool Oil Company to capitalize on the discovery of oil in Enniskillen Township, and began exporting crude.

When John died, Charles partnered with another Scottish immigrant, David Milne, to create the Chas. Mackenzie, Milne & Co. in 1881, Primmer said.

Not content with that, Charles branched out again six years later, becoming founder and president of the Lambton Trust Co., incorporating a local syndicate that would become Canada Trust, the nation's oldest trust

company.

Then in 1888 Charles became the reeve of Sarnia, and chief director of the St. Clair tunnel committee, and promoter of the Sarnia Transportation Company.

After founding another company that became the Sarnia Gas & Electric Light Company, the first electric streetlights burst into life at the corner of Christina and Lochiel and select business in 1894.

When Charles Mackenzie died in 1900, Mackenzie Milne was the largest Canadian hardware store west of Toronto, and today holds the honour of being Sarnia's oldest business.

"Charles built a lot," said Primmer, whose father Allan stepped in to help save the company from pending closure in 1983.

"If it wasn't for the Mackenzie family, Charles more so than anybody, Sarnia wouldn't look the way it does today."