

A bit of a history lesson

By GEORGE MATHEWSON
The Observer

Until he delved into his own company's background, Greg Primmer wasn't that interested in history.

But in compiling the fascinating story about Mackenzie Milne, Sarnia-Lambton's oldest company, its manager and co-owner has become something of a history buff.

"There's a lot to be said about having over 150 years of heritage in a company," he said.

Mackenzie Milne was founded in 1848 by Charles and John Mackenzie who arrived in Sarnia from Scotland to work in the thriving shipbuilding trade.

The brothers quickly made their mark on the young community, first making and selling stove supplies and later establishing the Liverpool Oil Company on Exmouth Street. They bought a ship and became the first exporters of crude oil to England.

Primmer said it's unfortunate the Mackenzies' impact has been overshadowed by that of their famous brother Alexander, the prime minister.

"You don't hear a lot about them, but Charles was a reeve of Sarnia and

put in the first electric light. He also (was president of a) trust company that later became Canada Trust."

The inventory and locations have changed over the years but Mackenzie Milne still supplies industrial hardware and equipment.

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With eight employees, it caters primarily to the small and mid-size contractors who do fabricating and welding for Chemical Valley giants.

The 9,000-square-foot facility at 1392 Plank Rd. has the largest open stock of hardware in the Valley and is based conceptually on its historic predecessors.

That rich history can be glimpsed in the 19th century record books. The oldest dates from 1869 — three years before David Milne joined the company — and lists coffin nails, horse-shoes and ship chandlery among the stock.

"The total inventory that year was \$29,945. That was a lot of money back then," Primmer said.

Indeed, when Charles died in 1900, the store was the largest hardware outlet west of Toronto.

A tinsmith by trade, Charles was a director in the company that brought electric lights to Sarnia. A single arc lamp at the corner of Lochiel and Christina launched the service in 1894 together with lighting at four stores. The Mackenzie Milne Co., not surprisingly, was one of them.

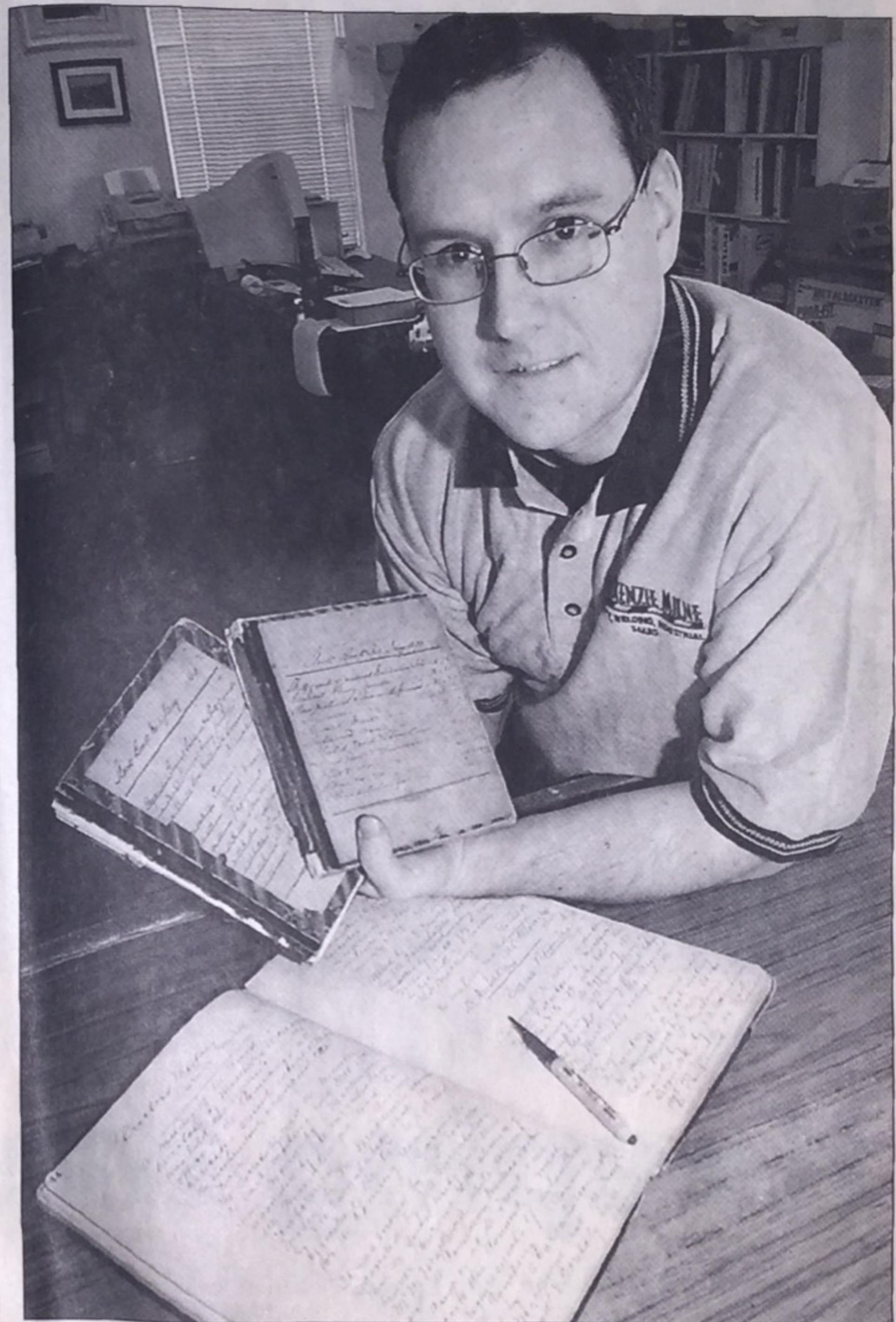
Charles Mackenzie became Warden of Lambton County and represented the riding in the Ontario legislature.

Over the years, the business has had various owners and appeared in some of the community's most recognized photographs, including a street scene from 1855 regarded as the oldest known image of Sarnia.

In 1983, declining fortunes nearly forced Mackenzie Milne to close its doors. But Primmer's father Allan and three partners stepped forward to save it.

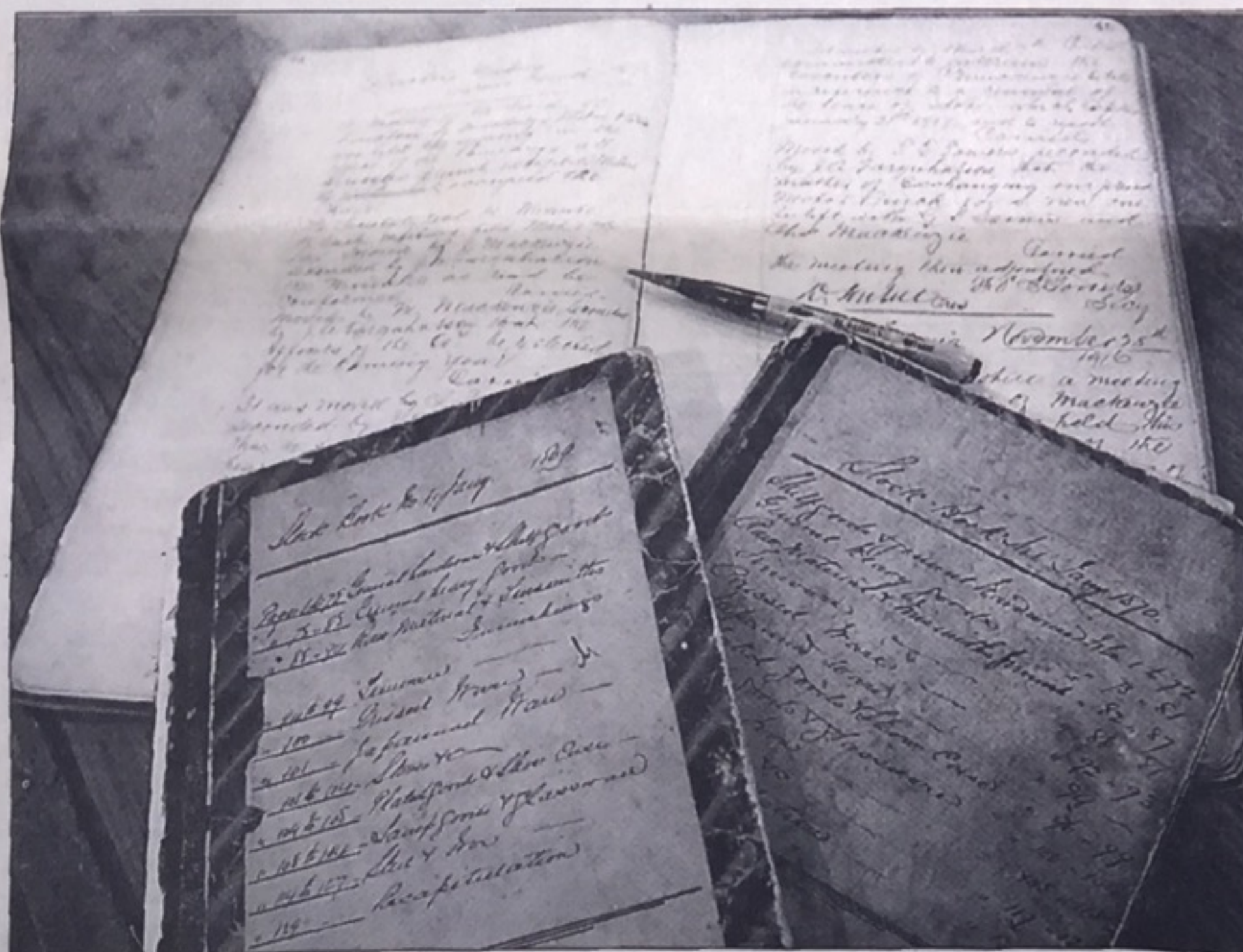
For the 150th anniversary of the company, Mackenzie family descendent Dr. Jim Mackenzie was invited to a staff barbecue. He helped fill in some of the blanks, Primmer said.

"We're trying to keep that heritage alive."



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Greg Primmer, manager and co-owner of Mackenzie Milne on Plank Road shows a minute book from 1900 to mid '30s and two stock inventory books from 1869 and 1870.



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Minute books from Mackenzie Milne date from 1900 to the mid 1930s and two stock inventory books from 1869 and 1870 are pictured here.



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