

FORTY YEARS TO FULFILMENT

CALVERT OF CANADA

(1927-1967)

By Frances Lacey, 1967

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Centennial Year in Canada has focused the attention of millions upon the events of the past and the possibilities of the future and Canadians everywhere are discovering, many for the first time, that their ancestors have written a pageant of history that is at once unique and universal, filled with the tragedies and comedies of a growing nationalism.

It is appropriate then, in an area so rich in history as Essex County, that a major industry such as Calvert of Canada Limited should, as a Centennial project, trace the development of its plant and its involvement in the community. Many of the features of history and geography that have made Amherstburg both a local and an international center in the two hundred years since it was settled have similarly influenced the growth of Calvert of Canada in its forty short years here.

CHAPTER I

Early in the seventeenth century a prominent English immigrant was responsible for establishing several settlements in the New World, notably in Newfoundland and particularly in Maryland. This aristocratic gentleman was **George Calvert, Lord Baltimore**.

More than a politician, he was under James I a statesman of rank whose theories of government, law and religious freedom were reflected in the constitution of the colony of Maryland and in the temper of its life. An aristocrat, his voice was nonetheless one of moderation in the arguments of the day as he threw his energies into the establishment of a stable, tolerant colonial life. It is his name the company bears today, a company which upholds the same standards of moderation and social responsibility as did Lord Calvert.

An integral part of the life in the colonies of Lord Calvert and of all the settlements of the New World was the production of whisky, both for medicinal and beverage purposes. The devastating effects of this "firewater" on the Indians, however, produced the first attempts at government control in both English and French colonies, in the form of heavy fines and severe restrictions against giving or selling liquor to Indians. In this same period local officials were given the authority to grant and cancel licenses to manufacture and sell liquor and with transportation and communication still in elementary states, it was cheaper to operate stills locally than to export grain and import spirits. And while government was implementing these first controls, it began at the same time to encourage local distilling as a means of utilizing excess, unmarketable grain. Indeed, in 1794 here in Upper Canada, Governor John Graves Simcoe noted that from "*the quantity of grain produced for which a market could not be readily found, the inhabitants have been induced in many parts to set up stills.*" Following this 'inducement' about 4,000 bushels of grain were consumed in Ontario distilleries and breweries combined, compared to 700,000 bushels last year (1966) in this distillery alone.

The local character of production was further emphasized by the Temperance Act of 1864 which granted local option to each municipality. The Windsor area was wet: at the foot of Caron Avenue was Roe's distillery, while Rolff's was situated on the river bank at the foot of Belle Isle Street, Bourke's at the foot of Askin Boulevard, and in Amherstburg on the river at the foot of Gore Street was McLeod's distillery where whisky sold for five cents a glass. There were numerous smaller neighbourhood stills as well which catered to local demand.

The same period that witnessed such a proliferation of private stills, distilleries and taverns (twenty of these in the Amherstburg area alone) was also marked by sporadic clamors for prohibition. The Canada Temperance Act of 1878 granted local option on the basis of simple majority vote, superceding the Act of 1864. A Royal Commission was appointed in 1892 to study the feasibility of national prohibition, but this and various Parliamentary minority reports, provincial legislation and local agitation never accomplished in Canada what the Carrie Nations of the United States did when the Volstead Act was passed into law, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, transportation and importation of alcoholic beverages. Although Prohibition was in effect in varying degrees in each province, the export of liquor to another province or country was still legal. The province held the monopoly on sales, advertising was severely restricted, and although manufacturing was still in private hands the excise division of the Department of National Revenue had by now acquired extensive controls.

The days of pulling up to the local distillery to pick up a gallon of whisky for a dollar had gone by. Indeed, many smaller concerns died out when legislation was passed requiring that whisky be aged at least two years before marketing. The energies of local distilleries became increasingly directed toward export sales in the face of domestic restrictions and this, combined with the thirsty citizens of the American market, created the conditions which introduced a major distilling company into Amherstburg.

During the days of Prohibition, and U.S. prohibition in particular, Amherstburg was a small town of a few thousand residents, a resort area and a farm centre. The same accidents of geography which made it a British stronghold during colonial days - its proximity to Michigan and the narrow strait dotted with numerous islands - now rendered it a natural site for downriver rumrunning activity. For this decade it became a curious blend of the wide-open speakeasy town of the twenties, and a normal, church-going, law-abiding community. Theodore Fox's Lakeview Hotel was the finest in town, open seven days a week, catering to Detroit merchants who drove up in their chauffeured Cadillacs, as well as to the local after-church crowd who cooled their Sunday thirst with ten cent pitchers of beer. Mr. Bill Bailey of the Amherstburg Echo recalls being able to name 162 bootleggers he knew of personally within the area in 1930.

During the winter the activity did not cease. Fleets of 'whisky sixes' - Model T's painted white to blend in with the snow - drove back and forth across the ice between Canada and the United States to pick up their cargoes at each company's outlet on the export docks.

The export docks, among them Conklin's, Gatfield's, Duffy's, McQueen's, Wigle's and Woods' were the centers of the export trade (in Amherstburg). The B-13 forms issued by customs officers cleared shipments of beer and whisky for any other than an American port, and even if shippers did make three and four trips per day for loads consigned to parties in Cuba, it was out of Canadian jurisdiction once the boat left Canadian waters. And so perhaps more than in any other era the twenties in Amherstburg was the period marking the rise of the small 'businessman.'. The town was openly acknowledged as the temporary headquarters of the downriver rum crews, yet the runners in truth gave relatively little trouble to the Ontario Provincial Police. Windsor Police Chief Carl W. Farrow, who was head of the Provincial detachment in the area from 1928 to 1934, recalls that the runners were largely a quiet lot, most of them small-time, whose fortunes rose and fell regularly, whose cargoes were confiscated periodically, and whose occupational hazards were perhaps slightly more frequent than the average businessman's. Yet, as Chief Farrow observes, this alone does not paint a true picture of the town as a whole, for despite the runners' activities, the frequent raids on blind pigs and bootleggers stills, and the not infrequent discovery of bodies floating down the river weighted somewhat by lead, and even the (alleged) visit by Al Capone and Bugs Moran on separate occasions, there was still the larger segment of a peaceful citizenry in the town.

In May of 1928 an announcement was made that a Vancouver-based company, Border Brewers and Distillers, would locate a large, modern distillery in town, with area residents Harold and Joseph Massey holding much of the local interest. Amherstburg was a logical choice for such an industry, having the grain of Essex, Kent and Lambton Counties readily available, river water easily accessible, and the American market, particularly the Midwest, right on it's doorstep. In addition, there was the very real speculator's opportunity to take advantage of the local export docks.

In June of 1928 the company took up the option on sixteen and a half acres of the land bounded by William, Balaclava, St. Arnaud and Sandwich streets, including the property of Mrs. William Wilson, Si Bertrand, Prosper Deneau, Thomas Chavis, and Richard Tobin. Purchased for a total close to \$64,000.00, the company at the same time acquired 299 feet of river frontage (the remaining river front footage was acquired in 1942). Construction was to begin immediately, for the distillery was to be in operation by November of that year, although total completion would take considerably longer.

The construction of the plant became a race against time and weather with 125 men working on the distillery proper, the dry house and boiler house, the closed receiver and grain storage areas, the bottling room, case bond warehouse, and barrel storage area. In dollar value the company was to spend close to \$300,000, a tenth of which purchased a 12,432 barrel warehouse in Kentucky, dismantled it, shipped it to Amherstburg, and rebuilt it here (2-C warehouse), along with all the distillery equipment and dryer. From the Atlas Distillery in Peoria, Illinois, Leslie Abbot, the contracting architect and construction engineer (who also built Distillers Corporation in Lasalle), obtained the 3"inch cypress fermenters. The 50,000 gallon water tank rose, the cooling system was installed and the spur line of the Michigan Central Railway was cut through the southwest corner of the property.

All of these buildings were erected according to plan, and by the summer of 1929 shipments from British Columbia were being received for bottling. The original plans, however, indicate several projects which were proposed or actually begun, but later shelved and abandoned. A tunnel, the bottom of which is twenty feet underground, was built from the basement of the front office to the other side of the highway. During construction a cave-in took the life of one worker* and after some time the furthest section was sealed off. In 1929 the shoreline did not run exactly as it does now; at the foot of William Street the river bank has been extended some ten to fifteen feet with fill from later construction projects. This tunnel then, was meant to connect to a portable steel dock, which was to have been installed for shipping.

When the plant went into full operation in 1929 it employed about fifty people, some thirty of them women. Its name was changed to Pioneer Distillers to commemorate the early history of the area and the water meter at the corner of William Street was covered with a stone structure to complement the name. This same year witnessed a shift in export volume of alcohol from the port of Windsor to Amherstburg: 32,174 gallons of wine and 217,160 gallons of liquor left the export docks in 1929 as compared to 10,110 and 92,453 gallons respectively the year before.

All of this - the tunnel, the plans for a dock, the rush to complete construction and the increased export activity at the Amherstburg docks - would seem to indicate that the distillery had been built specifically to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by Prohibition. To whatever extent this was true, the plan was never realized. Prohibition in the United States was repealed and on May 31, 1930 the final clearance papers were issued by customs on the town docks. An era had come to an end. It was rather ironic that Prohibition seems not only to have built Pioneer Distillers but also, in being repealed, nearly closed it down.

* Isaac Ujanen, 35, was killed instantly and Ernest Mulder, 40, was seriously injured.

The Depression years at the distillery were years of atrophy: the rosy future predicted by the original plans and builders never reached fruition. Stocks in the company split one for ten at one point, and the full complement of the employees worked only four to six months of the year. The company changed its name to Amherst Distillers but this failed to stimulate significant growth and it continued to stagnate, for both the money and the foresight were lacking to make the plant a central manufacturing, marketing, and distributing center that its unique border position made possible.

CHAPTER II

The war years mark the beginning of the second chapter of the Calvert story, for it was in the spring of 1942 that the company ownership changed hands. In purchasing the British Columbia Distillery, Samuel Bronfman, president of Distillers Corporation in LaSalle (Quebec), had also acquired Amherst Distillers and its valuable stock of aged whiskey. Here lay the money and the foresight to take a small, dying company and mold it into the corporate structure of the Seagram organization. Mr. W.H. "Bill" Timmis, who began with the company in 1928 as an office clerk earning \$17.50 a week, was manager at the time until he was transferred later that year.

New ownership gave direction to the structure of company operations which had previously been lacking, and new channels were opened through the national corporation. The future of the plant had been shrouded in uncertainty until this point. Now under new management, all facets of production were quickly mobilized for the first full-time, capacity operation since the construction of the plant. The question immediately at hand, however, was the conversion of production from beverage to industrial alcohol for the war effort. All distilleries in Canada (and in the United States) were literally drafted into wartime production, for War Order # C.C.14 forbade the production of beverage alcohol after November 1, 1942 and placed the distilling industry under the jurisdiction of the Chemicals Controller. Each distillery was allowed a 'furlough' for the remaining two months of the year for beverage production.

The decision to buy Amherst Distillers had been made in April of 1942. All papers were cleared and new management was in effect by August and by December the production of industrial alcohol took on added urgency when Japan's Asian conquests cut off the supply of natural rubber from Malaya. Synthetic rubber then was to be manufactured from a basic combination of styrene extracted from coal and 190-proof alcohol. The destination of the alcohol produced in Amherstburg was Kobuta, Pennsylvania, the location and the purpose of the plant there being at the time strictly

classified. It took fifty gallons of such alcohol to produce enough rubber to outfit a jeep, but the alcohol served an additional variety of purposes: forty gallons powered a torpedo; fifty-five gallons produced enough powder for one 16-inch shell. The plastics industry used alcohol in making parts for planes, ships and war instruments; the textile industry used it in manufacturing parachutes, protective clothing, and cord structures in tires. In addition, it was an essential ingredient in drugs and antiseptics as well as solvents.

The renewed activity that summer of 1942 was interrupted by a fire which began suddenly late one July evening. Flames and smoke burst from the grain bins and stubbornly resisted the efforts of firemen and employees to extinguish it. After an hour and with a Windsor Fire Department pumper, the flames were brought under control after 13,500 bushels of grain had been destroyed and extensive smoke, heat, and water damage had been done to distillery machinery, fourth floor mill room equipment and the weigh scales. Reconstruction began immediately and was completed within six weeks.

And so during the war the plant operated under special conditions. The labour force stretched thinly over essential jobs, working not only full time but double shift as well. In the distillery, women for the first and last time operated the still and the cookers for men's wages on both day and evening shifts.

The war years and those immediately following were also witness to a new era in company-community involvement and in management-employee relations. In October of 1942 Amherst Distillers formally appealed its assessment in the Amherstburg Court of Revision, questioning the decision to assign it totally to the Public School Board in place of its traditional fifty-fifty split with the Separate School Board. After a month of discussion the distillery appeal was finally upheld and the correspondence published in the Echo created an atmosphere of goodwill toward the company's new management.

In the spring of 1943 a committee composed of Fred Lukes, Jim McBride, Ralph McManemy and Joe Taylor called a charter meeting in the local I.O.O.F. hall. In May that same year Local 73 of the Distilling Rectifying and Wine Workers of America (A. F. of L.) was founded. Thomas Hunter was elected its first president and by January of 1946 closed shop had been achieved. The formation of the Union marked a significant development in employee relations and further indicated the growing stability and number of jobs as compared to the uncertainty of pre-war days.

As the government requirements for industrial alcohol were reduced, the distillery nonetheless continued to run a high volume of commercial alcohol while bottling, operating part of the year, took some of the excess from Montreal and shipped some of its volume from the Canada Steamship Lines dock in Windsor. The old Amherst Distillers had by now given way to Calvert Distillers (Canada).

Limited (1943) and became the only distillery in Canada to install an anhydrous alcohol unit based on the ethylene extraction process. Popular speculation over the destination of this alcohol came to an abrupt end one hot humid summer evening in 1950 in what must be described as the most spectacular event in the company's history.

On the evening of August 15th a very cryptic telegram was dispatched by Mr. Alec Traeff, plant manager, to the Company's insurance underwriters, stating tersely, "*Distillery building on fire.*" Indeed it was! At approximately 8:25 that evening the tremendous roar of four exploding rectifiers filled the night sky with flames shooting two hundred feet into the air and the force of the explosion jarred the countryside for miles. The heat was so intense that within minutes the steel beams in the still house were twisted, misshapen hunks of metal.

Miraculously, no one was injured. Of the employees present at the time, Bill Clague, a watchman, was on his way to the still house and Jerry Renaud had just left for the boiler house. A third employee, Bud Plante, was on duty in the guard house, which was near the front office.

The force of the explosion carried straight up, thus saving many of the buildings, including the company house where Mr. Traeff's daughter (Helen) sat alone with her dog. It did create such a vacuum, however, as to buckle the wall of 2-C warehouse, jarring forty barrels loose and creating an additional fire hazard around the base of the building. Within minutes the fire department had arrived but even then the roof had lifted off and debris was raining down over the grounds. There was no hope of saving the still house. All the firemen (many of them employees) could do was pour tons of water on the surrounding buildings to prevent the fire from spreading and to reduce the strength of the alcohol.

The efforts of the firemen were hampered at times by the very serious problem of crowd control -those anxious to help and those who did not seem to be aware of the imminent danger of the walls collapsing or of the chunks of metal and debris that were whizzing through the air like guided missiles for hundreds of feet. It was the employees themselves who knew the plant and recognized the dangers, who were of the greatest help. Jim McBride and Lloyd Brown, for example, helped extinguish the burning barrels at 2-C warehouse and were hosing down the roof until flaming debris floating through the air threatened their own homes across the street. Ernie Naylor, the chief distiller, cut the pipelines leading from the distillery building to warehouse and storage tanks in the yard, while others worked beside the firemen. Four fire departments and forty volunteers fought the blaze for ninety minutes to bring it under control, but the fire still burned at two o'clock that morning, and smouldered far past dawn.

The ruins of the buildings were left standing for some time while numerous inquests were conducted by the Ontario Fire Marshall's office. Despite a thorough investigation of every

conceivable cause, however, they never succeeded in attributing a single definite cause to the explosion, although two more popular theories emerged. Mr. Traeff believed the concentration of dust in the air combined with the stifling humidity common to this region created ideal conditions for spontaneous combustion that led to an immediate chain reaction among the rectifiers. An official of the Fire Marshall's office, on the other hand, believed that fumes in the doubler kettle, part of the anhydrous unit, which had been pumped dry that day of high proof alcohol, had mixed with the air when the seal on the floor above had broken, the explosion occurring when the mixture was touched off by a minute spark or static electricity. The remnants of the doubler kettle were split from top to bottom, and the wall near it was bowed out.

The extent of the damage was widespread, totaling to a million dollars. The still house had been on redistillation that evening, making the loss of aged spirits even higher. A total of 1,457 proof gallons of aged stock was lost, along with 17,327 proof gallons of recent production, and 757 proof gallons of fusel oil. The fermenting room, mill room, still house, cooker room, and laboratory were considered as complete losses, with the exception of odd pieces of equipment and machinery. Emergency measures were effected at once to resume operations in the bottling room and machine shop where minor damage had been done, and to repair the buckled wall of 2-C warehouse.

The fire had been a severe blow to both company and community, and especially disastrous in the light of the first real progress the company seemed to be making since the construction. In corresponding with the company, Mayor Fred Lukes cited the efforts of employees and town to save the plant and expressed the hope that Distillers Corporation would maintain its interest in Calverts. Mr. Herman, Secretary-Treasurer of Distillers Corporation, in reply, acknowledged continued faith in the company and announced that all undamaged operations would continue as before.

After the debris had been cleared from the grounds, forty-two men were laid off indefinitely. By November, 200 tons of steel and forty tons of copper had been salvaged and McQueen Marine had been given the task of leveling the shell of the building. The immediate question on everyone's lips was, of course, whether or not the company would rebuild, but that decision was not to come for some time. With only warehousing, limited bottling, and some distribution in operation, all Mr. Traeff could assure the Union was that if the plant were rebuilt it would be bigger than ever.

Mr. Traeff's words proved to be prophetic. Resting upon a personal, unofficial visit and inspection by Mr. Samuel Bronfman, the decision to rebuild the distillery when it came in 1953 marked the beginning of the third phase in Calvert history, that of unprecedented expansion and modernization. The demand particularly of the American market again, as it always had, made Amherstburg a logical site from which to expand the Corporation's export trade, and this expansion was made feasible through the far-flung interests of the House of Seagram and Distillers Corporation

as a whole. It was only within the network of the Seagram family that the Amherstburg plant began to acquire a level of production that was not even dreamed of in its early days.

The new distillery rose on the site of the old by 1955 and with the installation of an automatic bottling line the following year the entire plant operated on a full, year round, capacity basis for the first time since the war. Since then, bottling and warehousing facilities have more than tripled the fermenter and yeast room facilities have doubled, and a garage, pump house, quality control laboratory, dump house, and electrical substation have been installed. And with the construction of a new 50,000 barrel warehouse in progress and plans for a new bottling room under consideration, it appears that the major industry in the town of Amherstburg will continue to grow as the mainstay of the town economy.

The physical changes and development in the plant have wrought more subtle changes in attitude of both management and employees. The easy informality and mobility of the pre-automation days have been replaced by more exacting and confining demands of an automated operation, but the positions held by the employees now are more secure and stable than ever before. Faith in the company and in job security has developed from even the early 1950's when it took Credit Union organizers Jim McBride, Les McKenzie and Leo Deslippe among them, some vigorous arm-twisting to withdraw five dollars from twenty pockets in order to obtain their charter. In its first year of existence the Credit Union fell seventeen dollars into the hole and regulation meetings were made possible only by counting several members twice. Now, in 1967, 340 people have invested a total of \$227,000.00 into the organization.

The days when women were making forty cents an hour on the bottling line were times when the family atmosphere of a small company in a small town prevailed, when company picnics were held annually in Kingsville, when contests were held to select the best design for the gardens along the river front property, and when the manager's daily tour of the plant was often interrupted long enough to tell Bob Sinasac, the Calvert ball team's pitcher, to take the afternoon off to rest his arm for the big game that evening. Some of this has passed, to be replaced by different means of welding the body of employees together - the Union banquet, bowling leagues, the resurrection this year of the family picnic, and the broader scope now of these activities, such as the twice-annual golf tournament between the Amherstburg and Waterloo plants.

More people are now working in one branch of a vast enterprise, at better wages, in an industry that is expanding constantly. Locally, production has never looked back since 1955.

Although in recent years the concentration here in production has been on V.O., U.S.A., all the Calvert brands still carry the name Amherstburg on their labels and the international distribution of these brands continues to focus attention on the town. The name on the front door of the unique

and distinctive "Pioneer" office likewise continues to attract visitors who recognize the name. The very fact that it is V.O. manufactured here is a witness to the integrated operation of the Corporation as a whole. With the house of Seagram, progress has been unprecedented in the past and appears even brighter in the future.

The localized character of the small company and its informal, often haphazard methods, have been left behind as the plant takes a mature step forward into efficient, modern production and expansion of a much wider scope as Calvert of Canada.