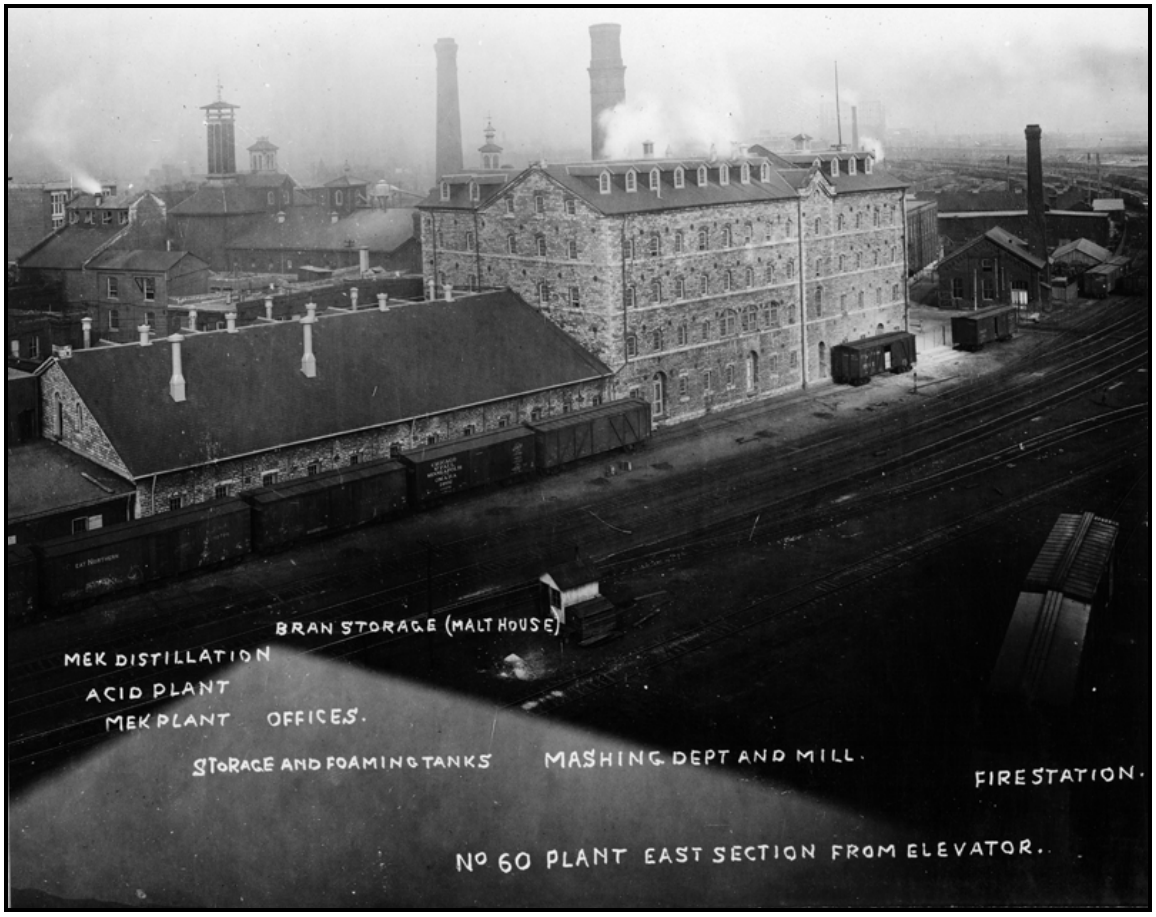
for November 11, 2007

Gooderham & Worts: "Doing Its Bit"



View of "British Acetones" plant from grain elevator, November 1918 CTA

By May 1916 when Gooderham & Worts was transformed into British Acetones, the bloody Great War had been underway for nearly two years. On August 4, 1914, Canada had automatically followed Britain into a war that was expected to be over by Christmas. Young men – probably including some employees from the Distillery – rushed to sign up before it was all over.

The first Canadian troops landed in Britain in October. By Christmas 1914, the war was not over; and the stagnated Western Front comprised over 400 miles of trench, barbed wire, fortifications, and untold human misery. After an unofficial Christmas Truce, the misery continued… and continued. More troops. More munitions. More military material of all sorts fed the slaughter.

While individual Torontonians continued to "do their bit" to support the troops – joining the Home Guard, buying Victory Bonds, tending Victory Gardens, rolling bandages, and knitting countless (much appreciated) socks, mittens, and mufflers – Canadian war industries were ramping up. In November 1915, businessman Joseph Flavelle headed up the Imperial Munitions Board (IMB) that replaced Minister of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes' scandal-plagued and inefficient Shell Committee.

The IMB established "national factories" and oversaw contracts for the construction of war material, including shells, ships, explosives, and planes.

Col. Albert E. Gooderham (light coat) and original staff of British Acetones, Nov. 1916 CTA

1916 brought the conscription crisis that rattled Prime Minister Borden's federal government, and provincial prohibition legislation that outlawed the making, keeping, and consuming of alcoholic beverages (except in private homes or for medicinal purposes). The former had a huge impact on the nation and the latter had a huge impact on Ontario business…including Gooderham & Worts and the neighbouring General Distilling. (The latter was a partnership of Gooderhams & Worts with five other distillers to produce industrial alcohol.)

With relatives at the front and prohibition imminent, the Gooderhams were personally, financially, and patriotically motivated to make a deal with Flavelle's IMB. Both Gooderham & Worts and General Distilling were placed at the disposal of the government, free of charge, for the duration of the war. "British Acetones Toronto Limited" was created to produce acetone and cordite ketone, key components in the manufacture of smokeless gunpowder; Col. Albert E. Gooderham was named Manager; technical staff were sent over from England; other senior staff were seconded from the University of Toronto; and current employees were augmented and trained for the wartime industry.

Using a new fermentation process developed by British naval chemist (and later Israel's first president), Chaim Weizmann, to produce synthetic acetone,** British Acetones leapt into action. And by all accounts, including Col. Gooderham's own massive staff report in 1919, they did a superb job. Initially expected to produce 250 tons of acetone, the plant was producing 1000 tons per year by war's end. Col. Gooderham noted with pardonable pride:

> During the first fifteen months of operation, we shipped 2,162,000 lbs. of Acetone, and it should be borne in mind that this production was carried on while very extensive alterations and enlargements were being made to the plant.

These "alterations and enlargements" ranged from making relatively minor reinforcements for tired timbers, to installing new equipment, building new buildings, even inventing new processes and new pieces of equipment.

By war's end on November 11, 1918, Stone Distillery millstones had ground over two million bushels of corn, distillery boilers had consumed nearly 4,000 tons of coal, plant alterations had cost $1.1 million, and over 400 workers had laboured day-and-night to ship 2,830 tons, or nearly 60% of the acetone produced in the British

Empire. The plant operated six days a week, using the seventh for rest … and sterilizing equipment. Some departments -- such as milling, fermenting, and distilling -- worked 24 hours a day, in three shifts; other departments worked 16 hours a day in two shifts. Everyone shared the common realization that "the firing line began right inside the Works," as Engineer-in-Chief E. Metcalfe Shaw put it in his final report.

All but one supervisory and technical staff members were male. The single exception was Superintendent of the Girls' Department, Mrs. Bowes, who was complimented by Col. Gooderham for her "happy knack of choosing girls who worked well and harmoniously together." Chief-Engineer Shaw expanded on the topic in his general review of operations, noting that nearly all of the 40 women hired were "of good social position," proved to be "extremely capable and conscientious workers," and had tended to "elevate the whole tone of the Works" by their presence. These women worked not only in the business office, as one might expect, but also in the fermentation and distilling departments, where women had never previously, and perhaps never again, worked.

No doubt, British Acetone workers shared the outpouring of joy that swept Toronto when the war ended on November 11, 1918. "They all did their bit," Col. Gooderham summarized in his cover letter to the final report. And their Victory Float even won best in parade on the original Armistice (now Remembrance) Day.

British Acetones' award-winning Victory Parade float on Trinity Street, Nov. 11, 1918

** In the early twentieth century, Weizmann developed a new bacterium that enabled butyl alcohol and acetone to be fermented from corn. Initially, there were no economic or practical uses for the products. But the outbreak of the first world war suddenly created a huge need for smokeless gunpowder called cordite (used, for example, by the navy to avoid signaling the location of their ships) … and the *bacterium weizmann* suddenly had a critical use. The bacterium and the process were exported to Toronto in 1916. See John Polanyi, "The Instructive Tale of Weizmann's Bacterium," The Globe & Mail, June 10, 1996 (www.utoronto.ca/jpolanyi/public_affairs/public_affairs4j.html).

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com. See in particular a large selection of British Acetones photographs, and excerpts from Col. Gooderham's report that will be added to the website under "Documents.". The photographs come from the City of Toronto Archives' Fonds 1583, and Col. Gooderham's full staff report is at the Library of Canada.