

(No) Labour Day 1990



G&W employees pose for a group portrait after rolling out the last barrels in June 1990

August 31, 1990 represented the end of an era in Toronto. On that day, Gooderham & Worts – once the world’s largest distillery – finally shut down. After 158 years of continuous industrial activity and 153 years of distilling, G & W had reached its final call in Toronto. About 30 people were still employed at the plant – mostly long-time employees who had devoted their working lives to G&W. Over 40 Victorian industrial heritage buildings remained on the site, most still in operating form. The industrial past was history. The future for both people and buildings was uncertain.

In some respects, the final closing of the Toronto plant started just over 50 years ago, in 1957 when whisky and other grain-based production was halted. At that time, many of the long-service fellows retired and others, like young Pete Nicholson, were temporarily laid-off and then called back. Thereafter, the Toronto plant focused on rum and industrial alcohols and employees lived under a vague sense of threat. “From that time on,” Nicholson recalled recently, “we were always ‘shutting down’” at least from the perspective of the employees.

Perhaps this had two impacts down the line. Employees were always alert to the possibility of the plant closing down, especially as various activities were reduced or hived off. On the other hand, employees always held out the shutdown-and-recall experience to live in hope that the plant would never, actually, shut down. Again, Peter Nicholson explained the psychology, “Well, you know, over the years, you hear so much that everybody used to just slough it off.” Even when the end really was very near.

In the late 1980s, around the time that the Gooderham & Worts site was declared a [National Historic Site](#), in part to protect the heritage buildings in case of shutdown, the plant’s future appeared increasingly tenuous. Tastes seemed to be changing, with hard liquor losing out to wine sales. Ownership changed, with British-based Allied Vintners taking over in 1987 and, perhaps, having less interest than a Canadian-based owner in maintaining an historic Canadian company. According to Plant Manager [Paul Allsop](#), “The site could create more income as a development property than it could as an industrial property,” so, from his perspective at least, “you could read the writing on the wall,” for some time before the final decision was made. In fact, Allsop told an interviewer in 1994, “I was the only one who knew it was going to close for about two years.” But all proceeded on as it had, with G&W producing about 5 million litres of rum and a substantial amount of industrial alcohol during its final year.

In April 1990, however, the axe dropped. Allsop recalled that day. His boss, George Chandler, the Vice-President of Production for Canadian Operations

... called all of the employees into the office, the new office where there used to be the stable [Building 51, now the Condo Sales Centre] ... and told them that the plant was going to close on August 31. After that, we didn’t do any work that day, as you can imagine. Some of the people were shocked, some of the people were not....For some of them, it actually came as pretty tough.

Pete Nicholson – who was a 37-year employee by then – continues the story of that memorable day:

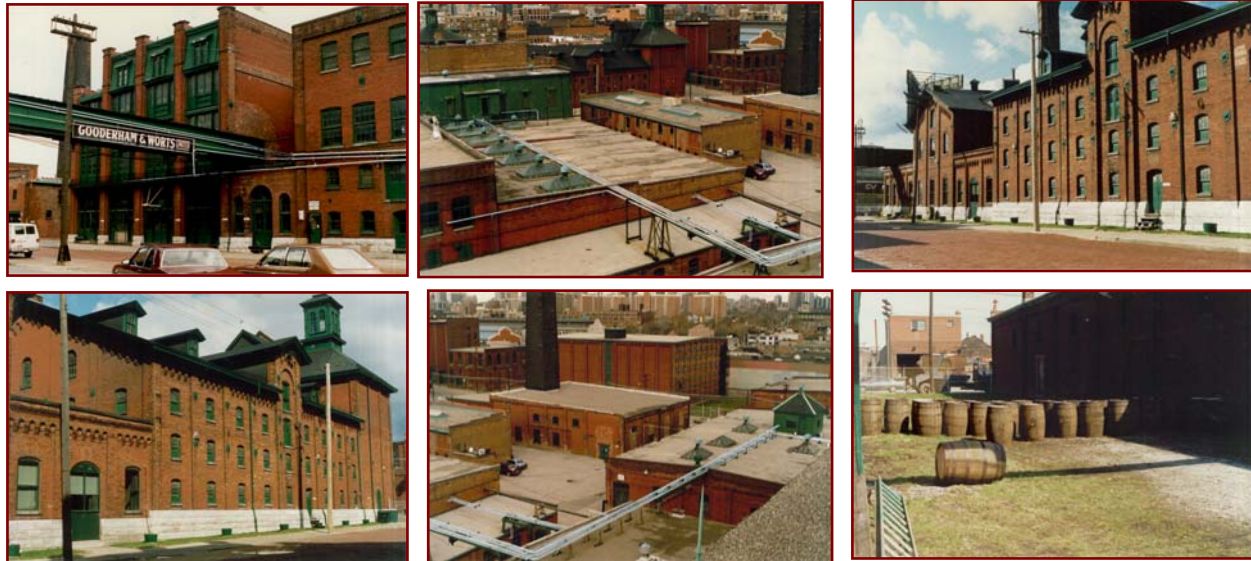
One morning we came in and we were asked to gather in the office [Building 51]. And then one by one we went across to the other offices [Trinity Street]. And we went from office to office. And we were interviewed. Told when the shutdown was going to be. What was going to happen. They were extremely helpful. And told you what your package would be....

I was really upset.... At 52 I wasn’t ready to retire. Financially I wasn’t ready. I had a plan. I was a little bit upset, whatever you want to call it. I didn’t make the decision. The decision was made for me.

For those in their sixties, the plant shutdown may have been a shock, but they were close to retirement and being offered substantial packages. For others – in fact almost all the others – in their forties and fifties, the close-

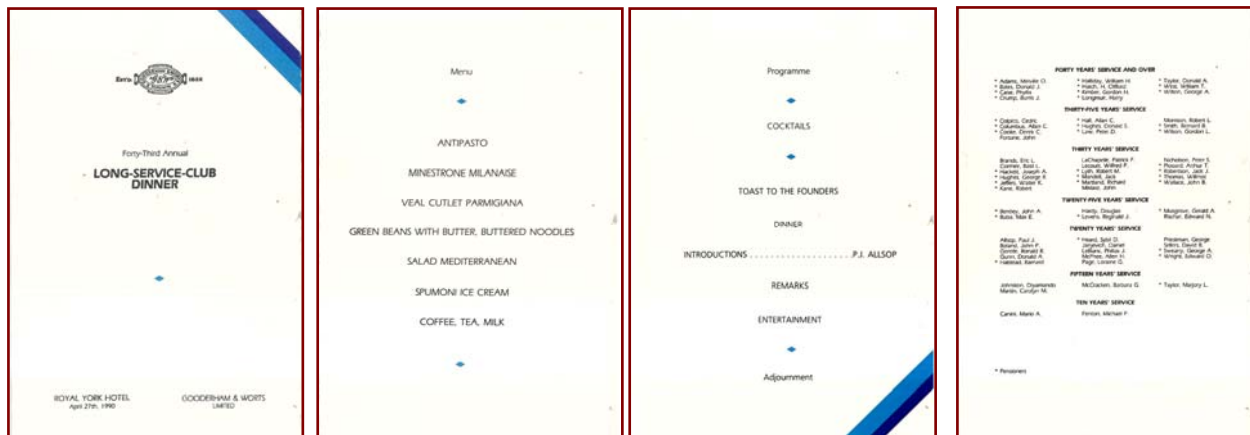
down was more problematic. Most had only worked at G&W and had done so for many years. Some did well, like Pete Nicholson. Others did not.

After hearing the news, young Jim White, who was the last person hired by Gooderham & Worts, grabbed his camera and took a bittersweet tour of the plant. As he wandered the streets and lanes - even climbed to the roofs of buildings - he documented the structures that he would maintain for the next decade, developing the sense of history that he has often shared with heritage professionals and ordinary visitors to the site.



A mosaic of photographs taken by Jim White in April 1990

Shutting down an industrial plant involves more than turning off the lights. Once the decision to close the plant on August 31st was made in April, employees spent the next four months implementing it. No one shirked, despite the impending closure. “The plant staff still had a job to do and didn’t slack off right up to the end,” Jim White has emphasized. “There was too much respect for the site itself to let it fall apart. The site has a way with people once you have been there for an extended period of time.” Some of those very people gathered for one last Long-Service-Club Dinner at the Royal York Hotel shortly after the announcement of the closing.



Pete Nicholson’s program for April 27, 1990 with list of employees and their years of service at Gooderham & Worts

Early on, the last distilling run occurred. The beer still was cleaned and that was it. Much of the time was spent shipping out industrial alcohol and matured beverage alcohol, especially from the two largest rack houses (six-storey Building 42 and eight-storey Building 75), but from all other storage locations as well. Pete Nicholson picks up the tale:

As far as the industrial alcohol in the tank houses and whatever was in there, it would be shipped out. Customers of Consolidated Alcohol, which was also a part of it, we'd get the alcohol to them. It was business as usual until we deleted the stock. By tank trucks or tank [railway] cars. 95% was tank trucks.

And then there was matured spirits, dumped and weighed and shipped to Walker's or Corby's or wherever for bottling. And then the barrels went out, to Hiram-Walker's and Corby's.

In early June, the final barrels of "matured spirits" (probably rum) were loaded into a truck outside Rack House I (now the base for 70 Mill Street condominium). "Word spread fast throughout the site departments," Jim White recounted, "and everyone was eager to come and be a part of this historic event. We all signed the barrel head and I sealed in the truck and shipped it off to Hiram Walker." The smiling faces in the final portrait are perhaps deceptive. It was an historic, but sad moment. Later, staff members received copies of [the photograph](#). Pete Nicholson's still hangs in his Rec Room. And Jim White's signed copy is reproduced here.

Perhaps all too quickly, August 31st arrived and passed into history. Everyone shared a Pot Luck lunch, with cake and no alcohol. Jim White, still "only" a six-year man when most gathering that day were 20, 30 or more years people, soaked up the atmosphere:

Some of the older retirees came to the plant for one last look and to reminisce about days gone by. It was amazing to meet some of these people who I had heard all the stories about. The depression, the bootlegging and the baseball history within the site. If I close my eyes, I can still remember the day quite well. Everyone of course regretted leaving the site, but I stayed late for the cleanup at the end of the day. I still kept in touch with many of the staff and allowed them to come back to pick up belongings. Most never came back and left everything just like they would be returning to work the next day.

A haunting image.

Plant Manager Paul Allsop kept reporters and their cameras away from departing workers. And nearly everyone joined together to close the gate for the last time.

Pete Nicholson held together during his last half-day of work. Then it hit. "When I drove up the street for the last time, and Paul Allsop stopped me, I

kinda broke down a bit in the car. I mean, I was coming through those gates for 37 years and then no more. It stops.” Nicholson went off to the cottage with six buddies to spend his Labour Day weekend. There he polished off a special, gold bottle of R&R (Rich & Rare) that he had planned to consume when he retired. He did so ... 10 or so years earlier than planned.

Jim White, along with Dave Sellars and Mike Fenton, were kept on to look after the plant. Their job, which stretched out over several years, was to maintain the buildings so they could be converted into appropriate post-industrial uses when the time came. “There was only three of us left in the maintenance department,” Jim White has commented ruefully. “And we used to joke about being in Chernobyl. After the nuclear disaster, the town was completely vacated with only a few workers left.”

A2 Saturday, August 25, 1990 THE TORONTO STAR ★



READY TO GO: Five workers at Gooderham and Worts who have logged a total of 147 years at the distillery will see it close next Friday. From left, Bas Cormier, Doug Hardy, Pete Nicholson, George Priestman, Alan McPhee.

COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

158-year-old distillery is running out of spirits

Pete Nicholson (front & centre) and his Pure Spirits crew – with 147 years of G&W experience – pose grimly near the excise scale in Tank House 2 (Building 61) August 1990

While you enjoy Labour Day weekends in today’s lively and revitalized Distillery District, pause a moment to think back on that sad and lonely (No) Labour Day of 1990 when all was shutdown and uncertain.

Many thanks to two former employees of Gooderham & Worts – Jim White and Peter Nicholson – for sharing photographs, information and especially their memories of the final days at the distillery.

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

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