

**Mount Allison University**

**Busy Amherst**

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By

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On the border between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, a small community sat unbeknownst to what the new Intercolonial Railway was about to bring. This small town, named in honor of Lord Jeffery Amherst, would face an economical rise and fall due to the new railway link to Central Canada. The Community grew in leaps and bounds to become known as Busy Amherst, a booming industrial town which manufactured a wide variety of products that were shipped to all corners of the globe. However, the fuel that kept Busy Amherst going burnt out and the town went into an economical down swing. What were the reasons for Amherst's quick climb and rapid, decent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and what was the town like when it was booming?

In 1872, the Intercolonial Railway crossed the border between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and the small community that stood around the railway line began to grow. The area was an excellent location for new businesses, it was located on the new railway line and was not very far from water routes on either side of the Isthmus of Chignecto. Soon the area was dotted with new factories and within the next few years, Amherst was incorporated into a town. The Maritimes received special treatment on the new railway as shipping products out of the region was much cheaper than for Central Canada to ship their products down east. This helped the Maritimes grow and almost overnight places like Moncton, New Glasgow, Truro and Sydney became important industrial communities but Amherst was the most productive.

Amherst was on the map before it became a town and long before the railway ran through

the area. Four men, Edward Chandler, Jonathan McCully, Robert Dickey and Charles Tupper, who were born in the area were Fathers of Confederation. Sir Charles Tupper became Prime Minister of Canada for sixty-nine days after Mackenzie Bowell resigned his post. The area is very proud of these facts and today streets and schools named in honor of each man and a library, the Four Fathers Memorial Library, named in their honor. The pride that is put into the fact that these men called Amherst home is similar to the pride that once went with the phrase “Made in Amherst.”

“The output of manufactured goods in Amherst exceeds in volume and in value that of any other town of equal population,”<sup>1</sup> of the time. Amherst boasted the following manufacturers: Amherst Foundry Co., Ltd., which produced enamelware, steam furnaces and ranges. The Foundry employed 150 men who earned a total of \$80,000 a year, while they manufactured \$300,000 in products. Christie Brothers & Co., Ltd., produced burial caskets, funeral directors’ supplies, house furnishings, mouldings, flooring, trunks, bags, and traveler’s sample trunks. Christie Brothers employed 75 people who earned a total of \$33,000 a year. M. Shane & Co. & The Eastern Pants Co., manufactured fifteen hundred pairs of men and boys’ pants per week and employed only 50 people. Victor Wood Works, Ltd., General Contractors & Builders, produced bank and office fittings, church furniture, doors, flooring, and many other wooden products. They employed 40 men, who earned a total of \$16,000 a year while manufacturing \$70,000 in products. Canadian Car & Foundry Co. Ltd., which included the Rhodes-Curry Co., produced

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<sup>1</sup>Amherst Board of Trade.; Busy Amherst. (Amherst, NS., circa 1915) pp.40

malleable iron works and rolling mills. This was one of the wealthiest companies in the town manufacturing \$3.5 million a year in products, while paying \$600,000 of that to its workers. The Rhodes-Curry branch of the Canadian Car & Foundry Co. Ltd., were the chief producers of church pews, furniture, bank and store fittings, silent salesmen and many more items. One of their largest markets was church furnishing for South Africa. They employed 150 men and had a total yearly salary of \$40,000. Robbs Engineering Co., Ltd., manufactured engines, boilers, machinery, etc., employing some 400 men and paying \$250,000 a year in wages while making \$1 million in sales. Amherst Boot & Shoe Co., Ltd., produced boots and shoes for men, women and boys and the annual output of this factory was \$850,000 while the 250 employees earned a total yearly salary of \$100,000. Hewson Woolen Mills, Ltd., manufactured heavy and fine underwear, fine worsteds, suitings, tweeds, yarns, etc. while employing more than 258 people. The annual output was \$400,000 and the total payroll was \$65,000. There were also smaller manufacturers in the area that were very successful during the town's boom. E. Biden & Sons manufactured confectioneries and The McLeans Milling, Co., produced roller process flour, cracked wheat, feed, and other items. The Heaton Acetylene Co., manufactured linens, hammocks, rugs, towels, and more, while Taylor & Tennant and the Canadian Beverages, Co., produced aerated waters. William Holmes & William DeLahunt, produced high class carriages, and Charles Savage & H.C. Anderson, manufactured harnesses. The Blacking & Mercantile, Co., manufactured ink, shoe polish, and other items.<sup>2</sup> During this time many other businesses were running in the community but were not manufacturers shipping their products out of the town. There were small department stores like Barker's and recreational facilities like The Amherst Swimming and

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-46

Bathing House which boasted a 50 by 20-foot swimming tank. There was also a book written by Walter Hubbell that became successful across the region. He wrote about a young woman from Amherst, named Ester Cox, whom a poltergeist allegedly haunted in 1889. This novel, *The Great Amherst Mystery*, is still in demand today in and around Amherst.

The factories in Amherst produced many products over a monthly or yearly basis. It is amazing to think of the size of this small community and the amount of products that they produced here during the early part of the century. The industries in Amherst turned out: 400 freight and passenger cars, 700 to 850 tons of rolled bar iron and steel, 300 to 400 tons of grey iron, 700 to 850 tons of car axles, 700 to 850 tons of car wheels, 500 tons of malleable castings, 800 to 1000 tons of blacksmiths' forgings, 100 to 200 tons of bolts, and 50 to 100 tons of nuts per month. This along with, \$250,000 worth of enamelware, \$75,000 in ranges and steam furnaces, \$150,000 worth of heavy ribbed underwear, \$75,000 in fine ribbed underwear, \$150,000 worth of men and women's sweaters, \$60,000 in fine worsted suitings and 75,000 pairs of men and boys' pants per year were also produced.<sup>3</sup> These incredible sales brought prosperity to the merchants of the town and the community began to show its wealth.

The site of Christie Brothers & Co., Ltd., is now a park which contains signs that give a brief history of the factory whose remains create the boundaries of the park. Christie Brothers

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.; pp. 41

was producing coffins in 1880 and used a water wheel in conjunction with the brook that ran alongside that factory to generate power. In 1885, the factory converted to steam power and used a 45-horsepower engine at that time. In 1891, the Amherst Swimming and Bathing House opened near by and used some of the steam to heat their swimming tanks. Also that year, Christie Brothers began producing luggage. The Luggage and Bag division would remain until the plant closed down. In 1911, they purchased a new 150 horsepower steam engine from Robbs Engineering and installed in the factory and the last card in the park speaks of the sale of the factory to Dominion Manufacturing of Ontario in 1913. The small park is situated on Albion Street, across from the Amherst Fire Department and is bordered on the opposite side by the railway line. The park shows the important role that the business played in the development of the town.

The value of the town would grow rapidly from 1900 to 1910, and Amherst's Real Estate value would rise from \$1.3 million to more than \$2.5 million. The incidental revenue increased from \$12.9 million to more than \$21 million, real and personal property owned by the corporation increased from \$181, 439 to \$563,755.51, Railway Freight Receipts raises from \$156,139.68 to \$450,502.10, and the population grew from forty-nine hundred seventeen to ninety-seven hundred in the same period. Many look to the abundant water supply for industrial and domestic use, an up-to-date sewage system, well-paved streets, excellent fire and police protection, and a strong workforce to explain the growth in industry. With the excellent transportation facilities of the railway and the nearby water routes and the unlimited electric

power generated at the mouth of a refuse coal mine using wires to transport the electricity to the factories and homes in the town.<sup>4</sup> Amherst was the first town in North America to use this method of generating and transporting power which was suggested by Thomas Edison. Mr. Edison sent a telegram to the community shortly after the power plant was set up and congratulated the people of Amherst and said that he was proud that a community in the province of his father's birth would be the first to use his idea.<sup>5</sup> As new people came to the town some of their main concerns were taxes. With the rapid growth of the community, people believed the tax rate would be extremely high but tax rates in the early 1900's were only \$19 per \$1000.<sup>6</sup>

The community became extremely wealthy and remnants of this wealth remains in Amherst. Traveling along the main street in Amherst, East and West Victoria Street, will take you back in time to see some of the old building still standing in the downtown core and several Victorian homes that belonged to the wealthy merchants of the early part of the century. Today, in the downtown core of Amherst several of the buildings from the turn of the century still stand. Constructed out of stones quarried on the outskirts of Amherst, these buildings have stood up against the hand of time and are still used today, in some cases for the same thing they were used for then. Pugsley's Drugstore, for example, was Sir Charles Tupper's pharmacy and remains a pharmacy to this day. This also is true to Bob's Barber Shop, which is around the corner from the

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.; pp. 15

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.; pp. 19

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.; pp.17

drug store. Both facilities take you back in time as you walk into them. Bob's still has the original barber's chairs and fittings which include an antique mirror and a cabinet that still holds some of the implements used in the trade at the turn of the century. In Pugsley's, there is a small memorial to Sir Charles Tupper and several tools used in the Pharmaceutical business in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are even some old prescriptions still on the shelves behind the counter. Several other businesses and homes from the town's past are huge tourist attractions.

To this day, it is said that the people of Amherst are among the nicest in the country but Amherst was once an extremely racist town. Blacks were permitted to live in the town but they had to remain in a certain section of town which was set aside for them. They were forced to conduct all of their business in this section of town and were not permitted to leave their district of the community after a certain hour. This area of Amherst still exists and is where the majority of the black population of the town still resides.

Amherst would pitch in during the First World War, sending troops to Europe, manufacturing products to go overseas to assist the war effort and, between 1915 and 1919, housed several prisoners of war in Canada's Largest concentration camp. The camp was located on the site which is currently occupied by the E. L. Casey Concrete Company on the corner of Hickman and Park Streets. The camp was a quarter of a mile long and 100 feet wide and could house up to 853 prisoners at a time. One of the most prominent names to be housed in the camp was Leon Trotsky, Russia's war minister, head of the Red Army and leader of the Bolshevik

revolution. He was taken off the Russian ship, S. S. Christianiafjord on April 3, 1917 in Halifax and held in Amherst for fomenting the Russian Revolution. Trotsky wrote extensively about his stay in the Amherst camp in his biography. He described the prison as an old and very dilapidated iron factory that had been confiscated from its German owner. The prisoners of the camp were instrumental in clearing the land for the Cumberland County Experimental Farm and produced a great deal of wooden produces, including toys, which were proudly signed “Made by Prisoners of War.” Some of these items can be seen on display at the Cumberland County Museum, which was once the home of Robert Dickey.<sup>7</sup>

World War I ended in 1918 and the veterans came home but they would see, like all across the country, that many of the jobs were gone and soon the country would be engulfed in the “Year of Strikes.” Winnipeg would go out on a General Strike on May 15, 1919 and soon the city was paralyzed. During the strike, several towns and cities across the country also went on strike in sympathy of the workers of Winnipeg. Among the places that went on strike were Vancouver, Calgary, and Amherst.

Amherst was starting to fall apart by this time. Prime Minister Robert Borden, who was born in Nova Scotia, would destroy the prosperity of his home province. He saw that the CPR was flourishing while the other railways in Canada were losing money. Borden decided to unify

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<sup>7</sup>Foster, Jim., “Amherst,” Times & Transcripts (Moncton, NB., February 6, 1999) pp. F6

all the other railways into the government-owned CNR to stop the CPR from getting a monopoly on the railway. In doing this, the freight rates were raised to match that of the privately owned CPR and the Maritime businesses would discover that it was no longer cheaper to ship produces out of the area to Central Canada. In 1920, Amherst and other industrial towns in the region began to crumble. Some businesses throughout the region were consolidated and sold to Central Canadian Companies while others simply disappeared. In Amherst's case, some businesses have remained and are still running in the town. The most prominent of these businesses that have stuck it out with the town is Robbs Engineering.

Today, Amherst looks back to its infancy and aspires to once again gain the importance that it held. Currently, the town is looking to extend its boundaries and is attempting to bring new businesses to the struggling downtown core. Things are starting to look up in Amherst with the building of a new Regional Hospital and High School slated for the near future. Amherst has taken a long hard road from the days of Busy Amherst but it is slowly coming back into the fold. Now Amherst houses several factories including Robbs Engineering, Pure Energy Battery Corp., IMP Aerospace Components Ltd., and Poly Cello. There is an on going attempt to bring new factories to the town and beautify the community.

Will the town of Amherst, Nova Scotia ever return to the status that it once held when it was known as Busy Amherst? Probably not. The Maritimes have been struggling ever since the early part of the century and never seemed to fully recover from Robert Borden's unification of

the railways. Today, Busy Amherst only lives in the hearts of the elderly citizens and in the minds of the historians of the community. The once prosperous town is long dead and gone but a new modern town is trying to rise out of the ashes of the once great community. Hopefully, for the youth of the community, Amherst will resurface with some of the success that it once held.

## **Bibliography**

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Christie Park, Amherst, NS

A park which was the site of Christie Brothers & Co., Ltd, which contains several signs with information on the once bustling factory.