

Growing Together ? Aurora & Bacon Basketware



By Brock Weir

When Sidney Bacon founded his company in Toronto over 60 years ago, supplying baskets and other products to companies like Eatons and Simpsons was truly its bread and butter.

Today, those iconic Canadian retailers have been consigned to history books, but Bacon Basketware continues to thrive.

But the company chugging along as 2014 rapidly approaches is markedly different than the one that started on Jarvis Street in the 1940s, before moving to Aurora in 1960. When current owner Rob Dales became involved in the company by chance in 1984, Bacon Basketware focused primarily on housewares. Stores like Eatons had significant housewares sections and baskets were part and parcel of the department.

“Before that, there was a lot of business selling pet beds, dog baskets and cat baskets,” says Mr. Dales. “Before that, Sidney was a major supplier of sewing baskets to Singer Sewing Machines, but sewing baskets are not a business anymore, pet beds are imported directly by pet chains, and baskets are no longer considered part of the housewares mix.”

Enter gift baskets. If you find one under your Christmas tree this year originating from a major retailer, chances are the very basket itself has its own origins in Bacon Basketware on Wellington Street West. It is a company that in itself is not only part of Aurora's history, but it is, at the end of the day, steeped in this history as well, based in the former premises of the Fleury Implement Works.

The wooden floors and iron beams in the buildings today merely hint of the building's storied past.

After the implement works were bought by Bissell and business began to dry up, the building was converted to storage and that's when Bacon Basketware slowly began to take over the company.

The conglomeration of five or six original buildings continues to serve the company well to this day. It was here that Mr. Dales entered the business in 1984.

Woodworkers by trade, he and his brother were looking for a job to revamp the company's Toronto showroom, but fate had other ideas and Mr. Dales soon became an employee and worked his way up the ladder.

“In a 60-year-old company, there are various foundation myths which may or may not be true,” he says. “One of them is [Bacon] was supplying the T. Eaton Company a lot of product and their terms were such that if you were in Toronto you didn't get to charge

shipping. By moving to Toronto, you got to charge the shipping. That is just one story, but I don't know if it is apocryphal or not.?

Without pet and sewing baskets, Mr. Dales says Bacon Basketware is a company which 'lives at the pleasure of the market.' His first introduction to the business is when gift baskets were gaining prominence within the company, supplying retailers like Crabtree & Evelyn with the materials to make their trademark soap and cosmetics packages.

In that time, three divisions of the company began to emerge, serving not only this market, but also floral and garden centres and home décor.

As the business changed, however, founding principles remained the same and they, in turn, serve as the foundation of the company today.

'There has to be some kind of culture that carries a company through,' says Mr. Dales. 'They are pretty simple: treating employees and customers fairly and openly, always taking the high road. It's not really that complicated. It's the old-fashioned virtues like honesty and transparency.'

'We're a well-established company and fairly known in the trade, but if we didn't keep putting new and interesting product in front of our customers, all the tradition would mean nothing. We are a product-driven company and we have to keep putting new and innovative product in front of our customers that they are going to want to buy from us. In essence, that is what it is all about.'

In December, while most people are flocking to stores and mall kiosks to pick out that perfect gift basket for family, friends or co-workers, that signals a bit of downtime for Bacon Basketware. Once the baskets are out of their doors, it is up to the retailer to do the packing, and they have a bit of time to bask before the late winter rush in preparation for the spring gardening season.

'At this time of year, CanPar pulls out a full trailer of product every day, so we're shipping a 40-50 foot trailer every day in the fall to customers across Canada, large and small,' says Mr. Dales. 'I think our longevity sets us apart. We have been in the trade and known for a long time. We are a go-to. We have stuck in the business where others have come and gone. I think we keep changing our product mix so customers keep coming back to see us and, at the end, I think that is probably the single most important thing.'