

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: The Other Aurora Plow Company

By **Jacqueline Stuart**

It was a relatively mild November evening back in 1882 when the Time Traveller set out to enjoy a supper being provided by the Wilkinson plow company for their employees and some invited guests.

The event took place not in the fine dining room of the Queen's Hotel, but in a new moulding shop just completed for the plow works. The brick building was on the north side of Wellington Street, just west of the stream which crosses the street west of Machell Avenue. (Wilkinson's arch-rival, Fleury's, was on the south side of Wellington and east of the stream.) The utilitarian surroundings had been disguised by the use of evergreens, flags, and mottoes such as "Speed the Plow." Examples of the prize-winning plows, road scrapers, and other implements manufactured by Wilkinson were on display.

The dinner may have been free for the employees, but they had collected enough money to present gifts to Mr. George Wilkinson and to the other two partners in the firm: Walter H. Perram, manager of the local Federal Bank, and Robert St. B. Young, a brother-in-law of Mr. Perram.

Later, as the after-dinner speeches droned on, the traveller thought back to 1869, when Mr. Wilkinson, an ambitious blacksmith, moved from Whitchurch township into Aurora and set up his first plow works at the south corner of Yonge and Church.

It was said that his wife, Asenath, helped him construct the very first plow. In July of 1876 the workshop was destroyed by fire but before the end of the month the property on Wellington Street, formerly a woollen mill, had been purchased. Now, six years later, this large new building had been added to that site.

And the time traveller also looked forward. In 1889 the plow company would leave Aurora and move to West Toronto Junction. It was a serious blow to Aurora, removing about fifty jobs, and a number of the men affected packed up their families and households and followed the plow. Despite the tax and water rate concessions provided by the Junction, in 1894 Wilkinsons had to close down for a while. Just before the turn of the century George Wilkinson and other family members withdrew from the company.

Wilkinson Plough carried on in the Junction but suffered another near-fatal financial setback in 1911. The company was saved by an American firm and survived as Bateman-Wilkinson into the 1930s, producing construction equipment in its later years.

Asenath Wilkinson died in 1907. George Wilkinson died in Brantford in 1927; he had been living in a fairly modest home with one of his sons and his family.

Meanwhile, the Wellington Street site eventually came into the hands of the Fleury foundry, Wilkinsons' old rival, and later still the moulding shop, new in 1882, housed the Town's works department. In the mid-1970s the old workshop came down to make way for a new building which would accommodate, initially, the municipal offices and the region's public school board.

Today, 136 years after that celebratory supper, the school board occupies the whole of the modern building at 60 Wellington Street West, and working plows in Aurora are few and far between.