

# Family sells flowers for over 120 years

By Dillan Cools

My great great grandfather was S.S. Potter, everyone called him S.S.," said Anne MacKinnon, fifth generation owner and operator of Barber's Flowers, the best smelling shop in downtown Belleville.

MacKinnon's great great grandfather Samuel Stanley Potter started a farming and canning business in Prince Edward County over 120 years ago where they grew fresh fruits, vegetables and of course, flowers.

Potter would bring his flowers to Belleville on a horse and wagon to sell it at the Farmers' Market behind City Hall, before renting a storefront on Pinnacle Street and eventually purchasing a store on McAnnany Street.

"He had all daughters so he asked his oldest grandson (Stanley Barber) to help him with the business which was my grandfather and once the kids were raised, one of his daughters (Lottie Mae) came and helped in the business," said MacKinnon, speaking to the businesses temporarily skipped generation.

After starting with his grandfather, Stanley Barber continued to run the business with his two sons, Willet and Robert (Stanley) Barber. Willet had two children and Robert had three, including Anne MacKinnon who was born in 1968, the youngest of all.

MacKinnon grew up on the same family farm that her great great grandfather had started the original business on a century before. She lived in a house that her parents built after their marriage in 1960, located across from her uncle's family home and cluster of greenhouses.

"We had a big furnace in the middle that heated all the greenhouses in the winter and big piles of coal in the back that I tobogganed down, even though you weren't supposed to," said MacKinnon.

MacKinnon's first taste of the family business was working in the greenhouses as a kid, and later as a teenager, she pitched in at the store during its busiest times.

A rise in coal prices during the '70s and '80s and the introduction of more cost effective methods of importing flowers lead the family to minimize the greenhouses share of the operation.

"The beginning of Grade 12, you're sort of at that age and stage when you're trying to sort out what you want to do with your life," said MacKinnon.

"I thought I would like to do something so I could stay in the Belleville area to be close to family, thought it would be a good community to raise my own family someday...and thought 'Well, this business seemed to do well for my family,'" added MacKinnon.

MacKinnon took the next step and enrolled in a two-year retail floriculture program at Humber College in Toronto that taught the business side of running a

flower shop on top of the usual studies of arrangement and design.

MacKinnon had been returning home to help out during the Christmas holidays and after graduating in 1989, began working full time at the shop.

"Every day is totally different. It all depends what customer walks through the door or what time of year it is. I feel really lucky that there is always something new," said MacKinnon, who still works full time at the shop.

Having just finished up a successful Christmas season, MacKinnon will have her hands full again in no time as Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day and the wedding season are just around the corner.

"You do it yearly but it changes and there are different trends so it's not just the same old, same old," said MacKinnon.

Rapid technological advancements are also affecting the floral industry as scientific studies offer insights into how to make flowers last longer.

This is important for MacKinnon who, in addition to receiving Ontario grown flowers, is receiving thirsty, dry-packed flowers from such faraway places as Holland, Colombia and Ecuador.

"We even get stuff from Australia and Israel...they really come from all over... but I don't think we've ever had anything from Russia," joked MacKinnon.

MacKinnon must have the up-to-date know-how to properly revive, rehydrate and treat these flowers after such long trips.

"We go through a lot of steps to make the product the best it can be for our customers, so that the flowers look good and last as long as possible for the customer," said MacKinnon.

With such a long history in the Belleville area, it's no surprise that Barber's Flowers sees its fair share of familiar faces.

"This man came in every week to get a red rose, and he was an older man, and after he'd done this for a year, he showed us his wife's obituary and we realized that she had passed away," said MacKinnon.

"We asked him if he was taking the rose to her cemetery and he said no, he was putting it next to her picture and he's still doing it. It's been over a year, he comes in every Friday. We know he's coming," added MacKinnon.

It's no secret that downtown Belleville could use some more investment, some more movement and a serious facelift, but MacKinnon is thinking deeper than this.

"The infrastructure underneath is ancient. We could be in deep trouble... The whole east side drains to some huge pipe that runs under Front Street and it's from the 1800s or something. We're really living on borrowed time," added MacKinnon.

"I don't know if I'm trying to keep the business going for another generation or sell it for my retirement," said MacKin-



Photo by Dillan Cools

Anne MacKinnon owner of Barber's Flowers, organizes gerbera daisies from a recent shipment at the Front Street store in downtown Belleville.

non, the mother of two teenagers.

MacKinnon's 17-year-old son has not expressed an interest in running the business but there is a chance for her 14-year-

old daughter who is still three years younger than MacKinnon was when she decided to pursue floriculture.

"We'll see what happens."

As long as the pipes don't explode, Barber's Flowers will be open for business for some time, as MacKinnon shows no signs of slowing down.

## Business a legacy of three generations

By Moush Sara John

Cold from wind chill numb my face and back of my hands as relentless as the blue azure skies that stretch above me and beyond as I make my way to Stephen Licence Ltd.

Most shop windows in downtown Belleville display a fancy selection of goods available, but I am pleasantly surprised as my attention is taken up by the curious display of the miniature train model that runs through snowy slopes, past a small village.

Stephen Licence set up shop in Belleville in 1918, but little did he know that his establishment would be flourishing in the midst of a struggling downtown even after so many years.

In 1952, when Licence died, it was under the ownership of another longtime employee for five years and when he was retiring, Gerry Bongard, Licence's son-in-law thought, "It would be a nice gesture to bring it back into the family fold. It didn't precisely come to the family, it came to the Bongard family.

"We kept the name Stephen Licence. At different times, family members often questioned this and wondered why we didn't change it to Bongard -- because of Carole, my wife. And out of respect for the long-time establishment. From 1918-1952, he had established a pretty good business operation."

Under the ownership of the Bongards, the almost century-old establishment has grown into a robust business with a huge selection of bicycles, sporting goods, and hobbies, and although the store has moved its address on Front Street through the years, it still remains a landmark in downtown Belleville.

Well-stocked -- besides different makes of bicycles -- are a range of Canadian winter icons -- skates, hockey sticks, snowshoes, toques, mitts.

"Sometimes I can recognize the children and grandchildren of customers I have served in the past. But teenagers and the younger people are not into most of the things these days, because they're all on ipads," Bongard says.

"A gentleman was just in and he went to look at the paint. And I said, 'Oh, you've run out of paint, you'd had to come in early. He said, 'Yeah my wife bought me a model for Christmas.'" And now he is enjoying it because he's back doing something he liked when



Photo by Moush Sara John

Gerry Bongard, owner of Stephen Licence Bicycles and Hobbies, at his business in downtown Belleville.

he was younger. So that's where the market is.

"We used to be strong craft workers, but not anymore. There are very few people doing craft work now. It's a whole different world but there are enough people there to keep us going.

"Technology has affected us. We've lost a good share, a good amount of what would have been our customers. The young are caught up in a technology that is generally not healthy and not safe. And they might wisen up someday but it might be too late."

When Bongard bought the business in 1957, he knew very little about the business and has learned much of what he knows on the job. He says, "It wasn't easy. You make mistakes for sure. We still make mistakes, it's part of the game.

"Well there's always the risk of buying too much. Buying something you shouldn't have bought. We had two stores at one time. And that proved to be a bad decision. The second store was shut down

in the 1990s. It was there for 20 years.

"If something doesn't work, you get rid of it. We had radio-controlled products and it wasn't doing well, so we just abandoned it and found products that do work."

On any given Saturday and even through the week, there are likely three generations of Bongards tending the shop with other longterm employees, most of whom have been with them through the decades.

Gerry's son, Kevin Bongard says how he got interested in the business. "It has been 35 years. It's the first and only job I had. I was about 15. I can still recall as a kid I'd get dropped off on Saturday afternoons by my mother, and I'd be amidst all the peers that were here -- friends, my dad, my brother, my cousins, and other folks that worked with us here. It was just like the family gathering place. And now my son, John is here on Saturdays.

"This store had maybe 19 people work-

ing here back then. When I say I got dropped off by my mother, it was more like day care. I'd have little odd jobs. It was like a big extended family."

Gerry Bongard has another love -- singing. He tells me about how he has been a chorister in the same church choir since he was nine years old and still is, "My hobby is retailing, but it is also singing. I think."

And looking back does he think he has fulfilled his dreams? Gerry says, "I'm doing something that I would've always wanted to do but in a different way. My program has been to help people.

"I'd dreamed of being a doctor, which all young people think about way back then. But it's basically to be of service to people. So I look at this particular program as a service to people's enjoyment and we make it the very best we can to see that they're happy. And if they ever come to get me someday, I will either be selling or singing!"

## Planning for the big day

By Gabrielle Smith

Summer may feel like it's eons away, but for couples planning a wedding in summer 2015, there's no time like the present to begin planning the big day.

The Unveiled Bridal Show is a boutique-style bridal event being hosted in the former Brick Furniture building on Pinnacle Street this Sunday afternoon. From 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. for \$10 in advance or \$12 at the door, brides are invited to explore the vendors who will be advertising their services of everything from dresses to DJs, bakers to photographers.

In addition to the vendors, there will be free mocktails and refreshments, mini Lily's Bridal fashion shows, and various giveaways, leading up to the grand prize giveaway of \$1,000 cash.

Liz Cesareo, owner of All Dressed In White Bridal Boutique, says the event comes at a perfect time, since January is the height of planning for this upcoming wedding season.

"If I were having a wedding in summer 2015, now would be the time I would be shopping for my dress, if I don't already have it. I would also be looking into cakes, limos, photographers, et cetera. Those things get booked up very quickly."

With all of the elements that go into a modern wedding, it's easy to see why so many people become overwhelmed when planning the day. Having such a variety of wedding-related professionals under one roof is a way of making the process more manageable.

To see more on the bridal business, go to: <http://www.qnetnews.ca/?p=47325>

## Safety on the ice

By Alyssa Lloyd

It gets dark early, the days seem so short yet tend to drag on, there are so many things you could be doing if it was just a touch warmer out, but only a few things to be done in this cold. But is it cold enough?

Their words of caution, whenever ice is involved is, "no ice is safe ice."

For a look at the work being done by Belleville Firefighters training on the ice, go to:

<http://www.qnetnews.ca/?p=47340>