

Firms trace roots to Victoria's birth

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Times Colonist

As the economy emerges from a global crisis, a handful of long-time businesses in Greater Victoria can tell harrowing tales of surviving times of war, the Great Depression and cycles of recession.

These companies opened for business when horses, not cars, were common on the dirt roads that ran through the sparsely developed community. They have not only weathered economic cycles, but adapted to changing tastes, trends, needs, demographics and technology.

Despite the passage of years — in some cases more than a century — the original family still owns the business, as is the case with Butchart Gardens, founded in 1904 and now a National Heritage Site.

In the summer of 1858, the Hudson's Bay Company was the lone business in Victoria. But as its employees arrived and gold rush fever lured adventurers, an entrepreneurial spirit grew, creating new stores and services.

Turning the yellowed pages of the *British Colonist* newspaper from 100 years ago, you can see names we know today, including banks and grocery stores.

In a Pemberton & Son advertisement, a six-bedroom house in Fernwood was listed for \$4,500. The real estate company lives on today as Pemberton Holmes.

Managing broker Michael Holmes, whose great-great-grandfather Joseph Despard Pemberton founded the firm, owns Pemberton Holmes with brothers Richard and Peter, representing the fifth generation in the family firm. Niece Nicole Lee and nephew Morgan Holmes are also at the firm, representing a sixth generation.

The opportunity for a career in the family business will be there for Michael Holmes' own four children, now aged eight to 13.

J.D. Pemberton was hired as

surveyor for Vancouver Island for the Hudson's Bay Company and later served as a member of B.C.'s first legislative assembly. Pemberton and his oldest son, Frederick, opened their business in 1887 as engineers, surveyors and real estate agents.

In 1917, Cuthbert Holmes married Phillipa Pemberton, daughter of Frederick. Cuthbert Holmes joined his father-in-law in the business and became the firm's president in 1933.

If J.D. Pemberton walked through the door today, "he'd connect with it," said Michael Holmes. "He really set it up to sell his own property and loan on it. It's a different animal altogether, but it's certainly still related. We are still doing the same thing."

The firm today has 30 employees and works with 260 real estate agents. Survival is a "combination of luck and circumstance and a little bit of good judgment," Michael Holmes said. "It has been through a number of ups and downs."

It's critical to adapt, he said. "We really changed our business model. We have done that three or four times over the course of 100 years. We've gotten in and out of businesses. We were in the insurance business. We were in the real estate loans business. In 1912, I think we were the largest residential real estate lender in B.C."

The 1920s and 1930s "were a very difficult time," Holmes said, adding that his grandfather, Cuthbert Holmes, injected capital into the business.

A dozen years ago, when cousin Philip Holmes had the company, the commission split was changed allowing real estate agents to earn more, Michael said. "As a consequence, we were able to grow quite rapidly," he said.

And there are other durable entities still doing business today:

- Brown Brothers traces its start to Percival Rideout Brown who opened his own real estate and property firm in 1889.



DEBRA BRASH, TIMES COLONIST

Morgan Holmes, left, Michael Holmes, Richard Holmes, Peter Holmes (holding Simon) and Nicole Lee outside the Pemberton Holmes office. Richard holds a gavel used by the firm's first president, J.D. Pemberton.

- Crease Harman and Company opened in 1879, making it B.C.'s oldest law firm.

- The Tally-Ho horse-drawn carriage company started in 1903 as a transportation service but became a tourism mainstay that has carried generations of visitors along scenic streets.

- After Andrew Sheret arrived in Victoria from Scotland, he opened as a plumbing and heating contractor with a shop on Fort Street in 1892. The company now has 21 locations in B.C., which include 18 retail plumbing showrooms called Splashes Bath and Kitchen centres.

- A shipyard opened at Point Hope in 1873 and went through a number of names. In 1938 it became Point Hope Shipyards Ltd. and today operates as Point Hope Maritime, part of the Victoria-based Ralmax Group of companies.

- Victoria's most famous landmark, the Fairmont Empress hotel, opened in early 1908.

- In 1877, Mortimer's Monumental Works opened for business, and in 1896, Stewart Monumental Works was founded.

- In 1885, Roger's Chocolates was born in a little storefront on

Government Street, where it still operates today.

- Still arriving on doorsteps and now through the Internet, the *British Colonist* printed its first edition of 200 copies in 1858 under ownership of Amor De Cosmos, later premier of B.C. The *Victoria Daily Times* was launched in June 1884, printing an afternoon edition to compete with the morning *Colonist*. The papers merged in 1980 and today the *Times Colonist* is owned by Canwest Global Communications.

- Other long-standing names that showed up in the early 1900s include Standard Furniture, Sands Funeral Chapels and Island Blue Print.

- Jordans Furniture and Robinson's Sporting Goods both opened in 1929.

- The Strathcona Hotel is a downtown institution in the 900 block of Douglas St. E.J. Martin opened it in 1913.

- George Straith Clothing was established in 1917. Today, Kane Straith Clothing continues the family tradition in St. Andrews Square on Yates Street.

- Jeune Bros. Tent and Awning Ltd. arrived in 1886. It outfitted gold prospectors, made sails and

life rafts and now relies on awnings for 80 per cent of its revenue. It is owned by brothers Blaine and Darren Massey. "It is one of the longest-running small businesses in the province now," Blaine Massey said. Awnings have gone high-tech. They can be equipped with sensors to automatically roll up when it's windy and to unfold when the sun comes out. "It's fairly competitive. The biggest thing you can sell is service and quality," he said.

- W & J Wilson opened in the mid-1880s and although it has changed hands, the Wilson family still owns the 1221 Government St. building. Current owner Tom Thomson started helping his own father at the store when he was just 10 years old. A century ago, the store sold summer suits for men priced at \$15 to \$35. Suits were made of new English worsteds, Scottish tweeds and English and Irish serges.

The secret to long life in business? "Listening to our customers," Thomson said. "Just trying to find their needs in a changing world. It's a big job to do that. We have also, from square one, been considered good value ... quality at a fair price."