

Flashback: Remembering the Wingham Salt Works

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WINGHAM – The railway came to Wingham in the 1870s, bringing “tremendous growth” to the small market town nestled where the two branches of the Maitland River meet.

Due to the railroad, Wingham became a leading distribution and supply centre, prominent in lumber and agriculture, among other things, but there is a fading memory in the Town of Wingham that bears repeating.

In the 1880s, salt deposits were discovered in the County of Huron, stretching 50 miles in length and 10 miles wide, with several locations in the area also finding salt, including near Wingham.

The March 30, 1888 edition of the *Wingham Times* said, “The Onondaga geological formation in the County of Huron in which salt deposits are found extends over an era comprising the stretch of country in the vicinity of Seaforth and running in a northern direction, ending at Lake Huron near Kincardine.”

Upon this discovery, the day’s council offered a bonus of \$1,500 to develop this industry in Wingham, but that venture failed, according to history books, and a joint-stock company was formed to take over.

“For a week past much uneasiness has been felt by those interested in the salt well project in this town,” an 1885 *Wingham Times* news article said, “that the strata of salt had been passed and the well would have to be abandoned.”

The article said, “The brine is there, but not in paying quantities. Things began to look so blue that a project to form a joint-stock committee to sink another well was at once started, and the response of our citizens was very hearty.”

According to the newspaper article, the Director of the Geological and Natural History Survey at that time, Professor Selwyn, conferred with the local council, advised them that the salt may be deeper, and encouraged them to keep drilling.

“He thinks that the position in Wingham in relation to Goderich would make it probable that we have not yet reached the main salt bearing horizon,” one of the councillors of the day, Coun. Willson said.

The mayor at that time, Mayor Neelands, sent samples to the professor at his request, so he could compare the strata “with the records in his possession, and thus arrive at a fair idea of the horizon that we have reached.”

“There is one thing sure,” the article said, “and that is our citizens will not abandon the idea of securing salt, even should the present well fail. Should it fail, steps will immediately be taken to sink another well south of the town, where there is no doubt extensive salt beds exist.”

In May 1886, a healthy de-



Photo provided from the Collection of the Huron County Museum & Historic Gaol
Workers stand in front of the Wingham Salt Works in this undated photo. The property is now home to the Wingham Legion.

posit of salt brine was found on the farm of Thomas Walker, later the William Arbuckle farm, on the 12th Concession of East Wawanosh.

Grey, Young, and Sparling of Seaforth bought the company and began the operation that became Wingham Salt Works.

“Arrangements for Messrs Gray, Young & Sparling of Seaforth to operate the Wingham well were made in May 1887, conditional upon the Canadian Pacific Railway building a spur to Wingham to haul their product. This was arranged, and in the years that followed until 1904, the facility was producing and shipping a train car load of salt every day.”

According to the *Wingham Times*, Sparling, who managed the operation, moved to Wingham in 1888. “Mr. and Mrs. F G Sparling and family left here on Wednesday for Wingham, where they will live hereafter. Mr. Sparling, having charge of the Wingham salt works, found it inconvenient living here when he had to be there so much of the time, and hence his removal. Seaforth has given Wingham several good and worthy citizens, and our northern neighbours will find Mr. and Mrs. Sparling among the best. We wish them every success and comfort in their new home.”

According to the Huron County Museum historical records, Peter MacEwan, chief driller at the Goderich Salt Company, was contracted to oversee the drilling process in Wingham. “As a chief driller, MacEwan had successfully drilled over 20 oil wells in Lambton County and throughout southwestern Ontario since 1861,” the records said, “and was well known for his ingenuity and experience.”

“The well was sunk during the month of May 1886 to a depth of 1,185 feet, with a 30-foot bed of salt being struck at the 1,100-foot mark.

“Brine was pumped above ground across open fields to the town of Wingham where the 30 x 20 x 7-foot storage tank and evaporator plant was situated. This location was at the intersection of Victoria and William Streets where the present day Royal Canadian Legion is located.”

The East Wawanosh Township 1967 historical book said that capacity for pumping the salt brine was approximately 12 pails per minute.

A two-foot-long leather bag full of flaxseed was used to control the amount of water going down the well to dissolve the salt rock.

A “brine tester” checked the brine daily for density, changing the flaxseed bag when necessary.

“A walking beam was used, with the one end pumping the brine out of the well and the other end pumping it through four-inch piping to the salt block at Wingham,” the book said. “This piping was laid on the top of the ground from the well, across the different farms, across the prairie, over the footbridge to the storage tank at the salt block which was at the terminus of the C.P.R. track on Victoria St.”

Arbuckle maintained the lines in his fields and recalled the difficulties that came with the expanding and contracting of the lines due to weather. The pipes would expand in summer and contract in winter, sometimes pulling the threads off the ends of the sections, which would then need to be repaired by hand.

Arbuckle recalled what a cold chore that was, the historical book said. “Sometimes the pipes would spring a leak and in winter when this happened, the brine would spurt up through the deep snow along the rail fences and the men had to shovel down through this salty slush to put in a new section of pipe.”

“Brine which leaked out of the pipes killed off all grass and swamp in Arbuckle’s field,” the book said. “Sometimes when brine was low, the pumps had to be kept pumping day and night, and William Arbuckle and his father would take turns firing the steam engine. Great piles of cordwood had to be kept on hand for firing.”

The storage tank was built on the north bank of the Maitland River, just across the street from the salt block. The frame building that housed the equipment was 150’ by 84’. The evaporating pan was 144’ by 24’ with a boiling capacity of 180 barrels in 24 hours.

Approximately eight inches to a foot of brine was boiled in the evaporating

pan, maintained by four fires, using about 3,500 cords of green wood per year.

The wood used to fire the evaporating pan was stored near the salt tank on the street. According to a *Wingham Times* news report, it caused some concern among the local townspeople.

Mr. Long and Mr. Johnston appeared before town council in February 1890, “asking to have the wood removed from the street at and near the salt block.”

The complaint was referred to the street committee, and no further mention of this has been found.

In 1901, Grey and Young withdrew from the business, leaving Sparling the sole controller.

In 1902, the *Wingham Times* reported, “The dwelling house and barn on the salt works property have been moved back further on the lot and other improvements will be made. Mr. Sparling will now have more room to pile wood. The block is closing down for a few weeks.”

In 1903, another salt well was drilled; a Nov. 12 news article from the *Wingham Times* said, “The people of Wingham and vicinity will be pleased to learn that Mr. F G Sparling has been successful in striking brine in the new salt well he has been drilling. The first signs of salt were seen on Friday, last when the drillers had reached a depth of 935 feet. Work has been continued since that time so that the well may be deep enough to ensure a continuous flow of brine. The salt works will be put in operation as soon as the necessary repairs have been made.”

The Nov. 26, 1903 *Wingham Times* reported, “Mr. F G Sparling expects to have the Wingham Salt Works in running order on Monday next, and will then be able to supply the farmers of this section with a good brand of salt.”

A few weeks later, on Dec. 3, 1903, the *Wingham Times* further reported, “The salt works are again in full operation and a large quantity of salt has already been made. The farmers and others in need of salt will now be able to have their wants supplied.”

In 1908, Sparling drilled a third well, after losing tools, during maintenance, down

the second well and being able to “drill no further.”

This well was across the concession, just west of the swamp, and was reported to be the “best well in Ontario at that time with 37 feet of salt rock. An oil engine was used here instead of steam.”

For several years the Wingham Salt Works delivered large quantities of coarse and medium grade salt to surrounding communities.

According to the East Wawanosh book, Bluevale resident Raymond Elliott, a son of John Elliott, recalled times when he and Arbuckle “teamed sleigh loads of 300-pound barrels of salt to Brussels, Mildmay and Clifford.”

The first mention of coal was seen in 1904 in addition to wood. A report dated Sept. 22 said, “If a coal supply arrives in Wingham this week, the salt works will again be put in operation.”

On Nov. 24, the salt works advertised in the *Wingham Times*, looking for 5,000 cords of wood.

“The past few weeks have seen busy times at the Wingham salt works,” the *Wingham Times* reported in Dec. 1904. “For the two weeks ending last Saturday, 14 carloads of salt were shipped from Wingham. This made heavy work for Mr. Sparling and his staff. The good work is continuing, and orders are being filled at the rate of about one car load a day. Wingham salt gives good satisfaction, hence the extra demand for it.”

In 1905, the Wingham Salt Works had a fire, a news report said, with quick-thinking employees putting it out.

“On Tuesday evening the fire alarm called the firemen to duty at the salt works. It seems that the fires under the pans burst out at the sides, setting fire to the platform surrounding the pans. Prompt action on the part of the employees, who with the brine quenched the blaze, prevented a serious blaze. The brigade were promptly on hand, but the water was not required as the blaze had been extinguished.”

By 1905, the demand for salt from the Wingham Salt Works exceeded the supply. A news report said, “Mr. Sparling has not been able to keep the supply up to the demand recently and is now nearly 2,000 barrels behind in supplying the orders.”

In 1906, the Salt Works was operating quietly and “without much noise or excitement,” the *Wingham Times* reported, “and few, perhaps, are aware of the large product of this industry in a single year.

“During 1905, there were shipped from the Works, by carloads or sold to merchants, farmers, 7,640,000 pounds of salt, or 3,820 tons. This large quantity would make 255 carloads of 30,000 pounds each, or 25.5 train loads, with 10 cars to each train. If this salt was all put on one train, that train would be one mile, 33 rods, seven yards, three feet in length, or nearly 1 1/8 miles.”

Large orders continued to come to the Wingham

Salt Works, which received an order from a large pork packing establishment for 2,000 tons in February 1906.

“This thriving industry is not likely to be closed down for the want of orders.”

Sparling expanded the Salt Works in late 1906 to include a large chimney with fires burning at each end, “in this way the output of the works is largely increased. Mr. Sparling has a large staff of men and the works are being run to keep up with his orders, so great is the demand for Wingham salt.”

In March 1908, the brine tank collapsed and spilled into the river, a news report said.

“It was built on the bank of the river, and from some cause, the supports gave way, and the tank and contents went down stream. It will be quite a loss to Mr. Sparling, as the cost of lumber at present is considerably higher than when the tank was built.”

The business ran steadily until 1914, when it was listed for sale after Sparling became ill.

The hardware store owner in Wingham, Alex Young, purchased the salt block, and when he died, his son L.S. Young took it over and ran it until 1918.

William Davies Meat Packing Co. of Toronto purchased the business, hoping to use the brine to cure their meat, but it would not cure properly.

The salt blocks existed until around 1926, and the buildings were later torn down, “and the salt wells in East Wawanosh stopped pumping brine.”

According to John Pattison’s book, *Museum Musings*, the property was then used, for about five years, by a “man from the West named Jack Hairsign,” who used the property to auction off wild horses.

Then in the 1930s, Lloyds purchased the property to store lumber, keeping it for several years because it was so close to the railway.

Hydro purchased the property with the intention of using it for district headquarters, Pattison’s book added, “but plans changed and Hydro built in Walkerton instead.”

The town purchased the land in the late 1960s for the Royal Canadian Legion, Wingham Branch 180, which still stands today.

FOR SALE

WINGHAM SALT WORKS

OLD ESTABLISHED BUSINESS

First class wholesale and retail trade. No other salt well within 30 miles, plant in good order, reason for selling, failing health.

F. G. SPARLING

WINGHAM, ONT.

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