

THE WILLIAM RENNIE SEED COMPANY: A CORPORATE HISTORY

This paper is a study of the history of the William Rennie Seed Company. This business was started in 1871 and grew to be the largest mail order seed company in Canada in the early twentieth century. The company was operated by members of the Rennie family for nearly one hundred years (1871 to 1960). The life cycle of the firm was heavily influenced by contemporary events so a study of the firm is also a study of Canadian economic and social history.

Introduction

Most public and private companies disappear from public consciousness once the business ceases operations. Occasionally they will become the subject of interest to some student of business history. The Rennie Seed Company is an exception and primarily because of a particular quirk of the second president of the firm, Robert Rennie. He was an ardent stamp collector who took care to preserve many of the envelopes that arrived at his mail order firm. The envelopes were later sold and have become staples of many Canadian collections. Interesting in their own right, these envelopes provide extensive evidence about the firm's operations. The company itself is a case study in the commercial history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada. This paper examines the history of the Rennie Seed Company considering in particular how economic and social factors interacted with the firm's business strategy.

William Rennie was born of Scottish immigrant parents in Scarboro Township, York County Ontario in July, 1835. The eldest of four sons, Rennie received a minimal formal education and then worked on the family farm until 1860 when he bought his own farm located near Richmond Hill. In 1870, he rented out his farm and moved with his wife and four young sons to Toronto to start up a business. Robertson and Crook's 1871-72 Toronto City Directory contained the following listing for William Rennie: "wholesale and retail dealer in all kinds of farming implements, seeds, fertilizers etc. 120 Adelaide Street East." The Rennie family was noted as living at the same address. The nascent Rennie firm competed in one business line or another with numerous other small enterprises operating in Toronto, a town at the time of approximately 51,000 inhabitants.

In 1871, Canada was primarily a rural society with over 80 percent of the population living in a rural setting. The largest Canadian centre was Montreal with a population of approximately 107,000. The majority of urban residents lived in small centres. Table 1 illustrates that there was a considerable population shift to urban centres over the period 1871 to 1901 but even at the end of that period, the majority of the population lived in rural settings.

Table 1

Population Distribution of Canada: 1871 - 1901

Source: Statistics Canada: Historical Statistics of Canada Table A67-69

	Total Population	Population Growth over Last Decade	Urban Population	Percentage Urban	Population in Centres of 30,000 or more	Rural Population	Percentage Rural
1901	5,371,315	11.1%	2,014,222	37.5%	819,036	3,357,093	62.5%
1891	4,833,239	11.8%	1,537,098	31.8%	622,625	3,296,141	68.2%
1881	4,324,810	17.2%	1,109,507	25.7%	361,669	3,215,303	74.3%
1871	3,689,257		722,343	19.6%	223,016	2,966,914	80.4%

Much of the commercial energy of Toronto of 1870 was focused upon support of the agricultural sector. Toronto was by far the largest commercial centre in Ontario but was relatively remote from farmers who were the ultimate customers. It was not practical for farmers to travel widely to obtain supplies so there was an extensive network of rural stores and farm dealers catering to the agricultural sector and other rural residents. Competition at the local level was constrained by geography and it can be surmised that selection and pricing were not completely satisfactory to most farmers. There were many enterprises in Toronto and other centres competing to supply these rural dealers and there is no evidence to suggest that Rennie initially had any competitive advantage. A similar situation existed at the retail level where there was little to distinguish Rennie's offerings from those of its competitors. However, despite its humble origins, Rennie Seed grew into what was reportedly "the largest mail-order seed house in Canada" (Farmers Advocate, 15 January 1900) by the start of the twentieth century while most competitor firms failed to thrive.

William Rennie's success was the result of numerous factors. His most important strategic decision and the one that defined his firm, was to enter the mail order business. Other important decisions included the decision to manufacture farm machinery, the expansion of retail operations with an emphasis upon the floral business and the operation of trial grounds to conduct experiments in plant propagation. Rennie's success was the result of more than just his business acumen but was also due to his high energy levels and his reputation as an expert on agricultural topics.

The Early Era : 1871 - 1890

In 1871, soon after opening his business in Toronto, Rennie issued his first mail order catalogue (Crawford, 2000). The catalogue broadened the potential reach of the firm far beyond Toronto. The catalogue business focused upon seeds and initially was directed at amateur and commercial gardeners and less at farmers. The focus upon seeds rather than agricultural equipment and supplies was a function of the transportation infrastructure of the era and was critical to the firm's success. There were only 2,605 miles of railroad in operation in Canada in 1871 (Urquhart & Buckley, 1965) so many farming areas were only accessible by road. The rail lines in operation tended to connect major centres and branch line networks were yet to be developed. Use of the mail for shipments of agricultural equipment and supplies

was not usually economical as parcel post was not introduced until 1914 (Chronology of Canadian Postal History 1900-1919). Until then, postage was charged on a simple tariff per ounce basis and was very expensive in the case of heavier items. Shipments that were heavy and not suitable for posting could be administratively complex as multiple road carriers were necessary to transport the goods to the ultimate destination.

The postal network was well developed with offices throughout urban and rural areas. There were 2,637 post offices in Ontario and Quebec in 1871 and this number increased to 3,540 by 1881 and 4,467 by 1891 (Urquhart & Buckley 1965). The post office network was a political priority and expanded concurrently with colonization. As an example, the number of post offices in Manitoba expanded from 27 in 1872 to 414 in 1893 (Urquhart & Buckley, 1965). Shipments of seeds to gardeners were well suited to the post due to their high value weight ratio and low total weight per shipment. This transport medium was not as well suited for shipments to farmers as orders would be heavier and seed pricing would be on a commodity basis resulting in a low value weight ratio. By orientating the business towards gardeners and not farmers, Rennie could avoid alienating potential wholesale customers for agricultural seeds. Further, postal regulations until 1889 (Chronology of Canadian Postal History 1868-1899) allowed mail order catalogues to be categorized as newspapers and be eligible for free transport (Amyot & Willis, 2003). This loophole allowed mail order enterprises to become firmly established in the market place.

The first Eaton and Simpson catalogues were not issued until 1884 and 1893 respectively and did not include seeds until the twentieth century. There were, however, numerous seed firms that conducted at least some of their business by mail order. Significant competitors in the period 1871-1900 included George Keith, Steele Briggs and J.A. Simmers all based in Toronto, John Bruce in Hamilton and Alfred Tyler from London. These firms did not prepare French language catalogues and there is no evidence of Quebec firms such as William Evans operating on a large scale outside of that province. Duties were not levied on seed imports (Cherrier, Kirwin & McGowan, 1875-6) but it was not particularly practical for individual Canadians to purchase from American seed catalogues as such orders involved higher postage costs, remittances in US dollars, longer delivery times and potential delays due to customs inspections. Moreover, Canadian catalogues often included copy to convince customers that their seeds were well suited to Canadian growing conditions and climate.

The disincentives that prevented widespread retail imports into Canada also applied to potential American customers of Rennie Seed. Many envelopes used by customers to submit orders to Rennie Seed survive in stamp collections and routinely appear on the market. These envelopes are for the most part circa 1895-1905 and indicate that Rennie Seed served customers throughout Canada with many located in small centres or rural areas (McGuire, 1988). Envelopes from customers in the United States are exceedingly rare. The few envelopes from competitor firms that appear on the market indicate that they served comparable markets.

The success of mail order in general was also a function of the agrarian discontent which was a feature of rural life in this period. (Emmet & Jeuck, 1950). There was little competition to purchase farm products and farmers often perceived that commodity prices were artificially low. In a similar fashion, prices charged by farm suppliers were viewed as unreasonably high (Emmet & Jeuck, 1950). The rural stores however had very strong links to the community and customers were often tied to the stores by credit. In rural areas, the general store often served as the post office so ordering by mail would have been very obvious to the proprietor of the store and would require some assertiveness on the part of the customer. However, customers were clearly very willing to try mail order shopping even though the terms were cash in advance and the vendors were located in far off cities.

The Rennie mail order catalogue grew from a very modest production in 1871 to an impressive

main catalogue and multiple special catalogues and lists. Table 2 shows the listing of catalogues and lists displayed in the 1898 main catalogue. The main catalogue was 72 pages with page dimensions of 7 by 10.5 inches. The front and back cover were printed in colour on coated paper while the inside pages were newsprint with several pages coloured. The cover was quite ornate with embossing and gold highlighting. Extensive use was made of illustrations. This catalogue was directed at gardeners and included 31 pages of vegetable seeds, 28 pages of flower seeds, 10 pages of garden and agricultural supplies with the remaining 3 pages used for ordering and promotional information. While this catalogue was primarily directed at home and market gardeners, page 69 claimed that Rennie was the “Headquarters for Plow Points - Our Sales are Enormous - Prices Very Low.”

Table 2

Rennie Seed Catalogues and Lists for 1898

January 1	Wholesale catalog
January 10	Gardeners and florists list
January 15	Illustrated main catalogue (72 pages)
August 10	Fall wheat list
September 1	Bulb catalog (1896 - 16 pages)
February - May	Weekly price list of seed grain, clovers and grasses

The expansion in mail order enjoyed by Rennie and its competitors occurred despite challenging economic conditions. In the two decades post 1870, the Canadian economy performed poorly. The country experienced relatively slow population growth and emigration to the United States was an ongoing issue. Colonization of the Canadian northwest was proceeding but potential settlers were often lured by homesteading opportunities in the United States. The population of Manitoba and the future provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta only expanded from 25,228 in 1871 to 152,206 in 1891 with rapid growth not occurring for another decade (Historical Statistics of Canada).

Mail order businesses were greatly aided by expansion of the rail network. Rail mileage increased from 2,695 in 1871 to 18,140 in 1901 (Urquhart & Buckley, 1965) and included both main and branch lines so many formally isolated rural areas were now in close proximity to a station. This expansion removed most of the problems associated with the shipment of heavy goods to rural customers. Freight rates by rail were far lower for heavy shipments than the rates charged by the post office. There was also an element of competition as the railroads offered freight service and also sold transportation to express companies that specialized in the transportation of smaller parcels. The 1905 Rennie catalogue noted that Rennie was able to negotiate special low rates with leading express companies due to its large volume. This had the effect of creating a barrier to entry to the industry. Rennie and other seed firms expanded their product lines to include a wide range of seeds and other offerings to farmers. The development of railroads also introduced a degree of confidentiality to mail order purchasing. Customers could purchase money orders from rail stations and receive shipments by rail and avoid the scrutiny of the postmaster who was often a local merchant. Finally, the emergence of general catalogue merchants such as Eaton and Simpson created a culture where purchasing by mail order was increasingly a normal part of rural life.

William Rennie initially located his business at 120 Adelaide Street East, across the street from St. James Park and in the commercial centre of the city. The 1871-72 city directory notes at the same address a wholesale boot and shoe dealer, a cloth manufacturer and a third venture whose line of business is not listed. The space occupied by Rennie was previously used by a coal and wood dealer. Rennie moved his

family in 1873 to 213 George Street which was five blocks from his business. Rennie made several moves in the same block to larger premises until by 1875, the firm occupied the entire block at the northwest corner of the intersection with Jarvis Street. In 1878, Rennie expanded into the adjacent building at 70-74 Jarvis Street and occupied these premises for the next eight decades. The firm maintained stables on nearby Duchess Street and also at times used nearby space for warehouse purposes.

Soon after starting his seed business, Rennie reestablished control of his Richmond Hill farm in order to operate trial grounds to develop and grow seeds for sale (*The Globe*, 25 July 1910). This vertical integration allowed Rennie to capture wider margins, develop seeds suited to Canadian conditions and partially mitigate the vagaries of the wholesale seed market. The farm was evidently well run and in 1883, was recognized as the silver medal farm for Ontario in the first competition organized by the Council of Agriculture and Arts Association of Ontario (Crawford, 2000). Rennie catalogues relentlessly promoted the trial farm, its silver medal status and the presumed superiority of Rennie seeds that resulted. In contrast, in the early days of the mail order seed business, most competitor firms seemed to restrict themselves to the purchase of seeds from wholesale sources. The wisdom of Rennie's move is evident because by the early twentieth century, all the major mail order seed firms appeared to operate their own trial grounds.

William Rennie's entrepreneurial activities had a broader scope than just his seed and farm supply business. He made periodic forays into the manufacture of farm equipment commencing with the manufacture of a grass mower in the early 1870s (Crawford, 2000). From 1883 to at least 1888, the firm occupied premises on Richmond Street West for the purpose of manufacturing drainage and ditching machinery. Rennie's manufacturing endeavors were aided by the 1876 National Policy that imposed high tariffs on imports of manufactured items. These manufacturing activities were successful on their own right (Rose, 1886) and also enhanced the reputation of the Rennie firm. The 1888 catalogue noted that Rennie bred and imported Clydesdale horses and Shetland ponies (Crawford, 2000). Rennie was also involved with the Canadian Mutual Aid Association which was a small mutual casualty insurer. Mr. Rennie served as President from 1889 to circa 1895 when the firm disappeared from the city directory.

Rennie took an active role in the life of the city and was a member of various organizations and served as an officer in the District Horticultural Society, the Industrial Exhibition Association and the York Pioneer Society. He was active in the Presbyterian Church and was a noted curler.

Rennie's four sons (Figure 1) were first recorded in city directories as employed by the family firm in the early 1880s. Robert was listed in 1883 and was followed by his brothers John in 1885 and Thomas in 1886. William junior only worked in the family enterprise for the short period 1888 to 1890. He was reportedly an eccentric figure who became an independent missionary in the Canadian Northwest and later in Japan and avoided contact with his family. He was forced to leave Japan upon the outbreak of World War 2 and returned unannounced to Toronto where he was found several years later by his brother Thomas living in a somewhat senile state in a rooming house (Lamb, 1971). There is no record of any of the sons pursuing post secondary education before starting at Rennie Seed but it is possible that they were employed elsewhere before joining the firm or that they were noted in the city directory some time after commencing employment at the firm. In their first few years of employment, they appeared to occupy clerical and sales positions.

The Three Sons Era 1890 - 1925

In 1888 at the age of 53, William Rennie began preparations to transfer the firm to his sons. William junior left the firm in that year and it is not known what, if any, financial arrangements were made. William Rennie sold the Richmond Hill trial grounds and purchased five acres in Swansea which

was approximately five miles west of the city centre. In 1889, he constructed an imposing home overlooking Grenadier Pond and moved with his family including unmarried sons Robert and Thomas from the George Street residence. In 1889, William Rennie retired from day to day participation in the firm and left it in the hands of his relatively young and inexperienced sons. The oldest son Robert was 27 years old at the time with six years experience. While biographical literature and obituaries suggest that William Rennie withdrew from the seed company circa 1890, catalogues continued to list him with his sons for many years.

William Rennie's retirement was somewhat short lived as in 1893, he accepted the invitation of the Ontario Minister of Agriculture to become the first farm superintendent at the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) in Guelph (Rennie, 1916). His duties at OAC were described as follows: "As Farm Superintendent, Mr. Rennie devotes his whole time to the management of the farm and live stock and the control and oversight of men and students at work" Annual Report Ontario Agricultural College, 1895). He spent a very successful six years at OAC (OAC Review, February 1900) and while there, wrote numerous articles and a book. William Rennie's accomplishments were routinely noted in Rennie catalogues as late as the 1920s and the firm acted as publisher and distributor for his book.

In approximately 1890, the firm constructed greenhouses and trial grounds for the seed business adjacent to the family home in Swansea. The trial grounds were smaller than those used previously at Richmond Hill so the firm was increasingly obtaining quantities of seeds from external sources. There is postal history evidence that indicates that the firm was in regular correspondence with seed suppliers who were most often located in the United States. The catalogues continued, however, to heavily promote the company trial grounds. The greenhouses supported the firm's expansion into the retail floral business and the supply of spring seedlings. This move was wise as the original retail lines of seeds and farm supplies were becoming less relevant as Toronto grew into a major urban centre. The greenhouses were very extensive and seemingly beyond the needs of Rennie's retail store so it is likely that the firm was also in the wholesale floral business. The Swansea operations were managed by George Long who was not a family member. It is possible that William Rennie was also involved in management as except for his period at Guelph, he lived adjacent to the trial grounds and was far more experienced in seed trials and horticulture than were his sons.

William Rennie's retirement occurred several years after the completion of the Canadian Pacific transcontinental line. The new rail line made possible widespread colonization of the Canadian northwest. The population of the area now known as the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta increased rapidly: 152,506 in 1891, 419,512 in 1901 and 1,328,121 by 1911 (Historical Census of Canada). This expansion created excellent opportunities for Rennie Seed as growth was so rapid that the development of retail and farm supply infrastructure lagged behind settlement. There is ample postal history evidence that indicates that the firm was successful in attracting mail order customers located throughout the northwest.

The first decade of the twentieth century was an era of expansion for the firm. In 1905, the firm opened a Winnipeg branch at 188 Market Avenue in the centre of the wholesale and commercial area of the city. The branch operated at the retail and wholesale level and also serviced mail orders from Western Canada. The 1905 main catalogue described the mail order functions of the branch as follows:

We have opened a store in Winnipeg and in the future all orders for seeds from Manitoba, NWT and British Columbia will be filled from there (which insures a saving of fully one

half the cost of freight and also a week to ten days in delivery) and customers may rely upon receiving the same prompt and careful attention as formally.

NB Letters reach us safely if addressed simply Wm. Rennie, Winnipeg.

Steele Briggs also opened a major Winnipeg facility but there is no record of other eastern seed firms locating in Winnipeg or other western cities. The Rennie Winnipeg retail facility moved by 1914 to 394 Portage Avenue which was prime retail space. There is postal history evidence from 1916 that indicates that the firm continued to service western orders from Winnipeg and it is probable that the Market Avenue operation or some other warehouse facility was maintained. The firm also opened retail seed, farm supply and florist operations in Montreal and Vancouver. The firm opened a new retail location in Toronto in 1915 at King and Market Streets which was diagonally across St. James Square from the other Rennie facilities which were subsequently described in Rennie literature as “head offices and warehouse.”

Until 1906, Company literature and the city directory did not list specific titles for the Rennie Brothers and company catalogues continued to list William Rennie as associated with the firm. From 1906 onwards, Robert was listed as president, John as vice president, Thomas as secretary and William as company founder. William Rennie continued to be noted in company catalogues and promotional literature as founder of the firm even after his death in 1910. The details of ownership holdings and management duties are not known and the hierarchy of management positions may be simply recognition of the relative age of the brothers. The brothers all remained in Toronto and non family members managed the outlets in other cities. The three Rennie brothers were active in civic life and were noted in sporting circles as talented golfers, curlers and lawn bowlers. They won several provincial titles and in later years, Robert and Thomas became active in the governing bodies for these sports. Both Robert and Thomas served as president of the Ontario Curling Association. Robert joined the militia in the 1880s and held the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1914.

At the commencement of the Great War, Robert Rennie, at the age of 52, volunteered for active service. His overseas service was meritorious and included command of the 3rd Battalion, Toronto Regiment at the Second Battle of Ypres, Festubert and Givenchy. He was promoted to Brigadier General in 1915 and given command of the 4th Brigade which he held until the end of the war (*Toronto Daily Star*, 19 December 1919). His overseas service obviously increased the management load upon his brothers and likely led to the appointment in 1915 of John Purvis, a non family member, as general manager of the firm. Mr. Purvis held this position until his death in 1934 (*Toronto Daily Star*, 25 October 1934). Robert Rennie continued to be listed as president while overseas and resumed his duties upon his return to Canada in 1919.

The 1920 main catalogue listed the Winnipeg retail branch but no longer indicated that western orders were serviced from Winnipeg. The store was not listed in the 1921 or later Winnipeg city directories. There is no evidence to shed light on why the firm withdrew from Winnipeg. The Winnipeg location was advantageous to western customers as freight charges were lower and orders would be filled more rapidly than would be the case if the order was serviced from Toronto. In contrast, Steele Briggs maintained its Winnipeg operations and also expanded to Regina and Edmonton.

The Thomas Rennie and Harrison Eras 1925 - 1960

Succession was a looming issue for the firm in the early 1920s. The three brothers had operated

the firm for over thirty years and Robert, the eldest, was approaching his sixtieth birthday. Robert may well have found managing the family firm somewhat mundane in comparison to commanding a brigade in battle. In 1921, he was the unsuccessful federal Liberal candidate in the riding of North Toronto (*Toronto Daily Star*, 7 December 1921).

Contrary to the norm of their generation, each of the three Rennie brothers only had a single child. Robert's son Gordon became an architect and was never listed in city directories or company literature as being associated with the family firm. Thomas' only child, a daughter also did not work for the firm. Leroy, the son of John, was employed as a salesman commencing in 1916. He served overseas in the later part of the war and returned to his sales position in the firm by 1920. He was a noted hockey and tennis player whose accomplishments included being singles champion at the 1923 Canadian Open Tennis Championships and a member of the Canadian Davis Cup team. His name often appeared in the 1920s in the Toronto newspapers and it can be conjectured that his focus was on sporting and social activities rather than upon his career in the family business. Two additional males with the Rennie surname were employed by the firm in this era. They were likely sons or grandsons of one of William Rennie's brothers and were not factors in the succession issue.

In 1925, Robert and John withdrew from the firm leaving Thomas in control. At this time, the Swansea trial grounds were redeveloped into a very exclusive residential area. This would free up significant capital and likely made the ownership transition financially feasible. However, the disposition of the Swansea operations had strategic implications. New facilities for the farm seed business were constructed in Chatham, Ontario and George Long, who was previously manager at Swansea, relocated to Chatham. The firm did not replace its greenhouse facilities and as a result, exited the wholesale floral and seedling lines of business. Firm catalogues continued to refer to trial grounds but it seems likely that these were primarily used for the farm seed supply business. In the case of seeds for gardeners, the firm was a packager, wholesaler and retailer of seeds through mail order and its own retail stores.

After retirement, Robert and John Rennie were committed golfers and curlers and remained connected to the civic life of Toronto. Robert continued to be involved in military activities and was a prominent advocate of veterans' interests. Robert fell on hard times after the stock market crash of 1929 and embarked on a new career as an occasional stamp dealer (Hayter, 1988). A long time expert philatelist, he slowly sold off a massive accumulation of envelopes that had contained correspondence received by Rennie Seeds primarily from the era 1895-1905. These envelopes are widely held in collections of Canadian postal history and are actively bought and sold. Thomas Rennie was a highly respected figure in Toronto. Long active in sporting circles, he was appointed to the Board of the Toronto Harbor Commission in 1921 and served for 26 years with the last 9 years as chair. He was a prominent figure in Presbyterian church circles.

An event of 1946 that involved Thomas and Robert Rennie highlights how the City of Toronto had evolved from the anglo-saxon enclave it was in the nineteenth century. Jaroslav Rezek a immigrant from Czechoslovakia and a naturalized Canadian since 1925, applied to change his name to Gerald Rennie. As required under the *Change of Name Act*, the request for the new name was advertised and an opportunity was given for members of the public to oppose the application. Thomas and Robert Rennie filed objections that were couched in legal principles but were actually based, according to the lawyer for the Rennie brothers, upon the notion that people of foreign descent should not be allowed to assume the proud Scottish name of Rennie. Mr. Justice Samuel Factor's decision dismissing the objections of the Rennies was covered in depth in the newspaper and exposed the Rennies to some scorn (*Toronto Daily*

Star, 6 & 14 November 1946).

The size and product coverage of the main catalogues continued to evolve. The 1930 catalogue of 96 pages was 16 pages longer than the 1920 version. There was a much broader product focus than simply vegetable and flower seeds. The catalogue included several pages of pet food and accessories, a section on garden chemicals and fertilizer and a page devoted to gardening books. The ordering instructions noted that the firm now accepted COD orders and shipping costs for orders for Newfoundland were listed. The 1935 catalogue was 82 pages and included four pages of farm seeds in addition to the broadened categories that were in the 1930 catalogue. The coverage of vegetable and flower seeds was shortened to accommodate the farm seed section. Customers were invited to write for the farm price list.

The 1941 wartime catalogue was 70 pages and included all the categories in the 1935 catalogue. The shorter page count was accomplished by utilizing less space for vegetable seeds. This catalogue also included a two page price list for large quantities of seeds for farms and there is no mention of a separate farm price list. The catalogue did not utilize colour which may have been due to wartime restrictions or shortages. The 1944 catalogue was 64 pages and featured a coloured cover and centrefold. Customers were informed that the shrub department was closed for the duration of the war due to lack of manpower. There were special offers of the Rennie's Victory Garden and a Seeds for Britain offer where customers could pay \$1, \$2 or \$3 for a collection of seeds that would be delivered postpaid to a friend or relative in Britain. The second last page was a one page farm price list dated February 5, 1944 that carried the note that prices were subject to change. The 1951 and 1952 catalogs were 68 and 72 pages long respectively. The catalogues include a farm price list and there was no mention of a separate farm seed catalogue.

The seed business remained competitive in the period 1926-1948 as Dominion Seed from Georgetown became a significant participant. Dun and Bradstreet data indicates that Steele Briggs was consistently the largest firm in the industry followed by A.E. McKenzie of Brandon and Rennie who were approximately the same size. A.E. McKenzie, Steele Briggs and Rennie were assigned the highest rating of credit worthiness throughout this period despite challenging economic conditions in the 1930s. The firms must have been well capitalized and the industry profitable in order for this rating to be maintained over such an extended period. However, it was also a period of contraction for the company as the retail outlet in Vancouver and the Chatham facilities were closed in the 1950s and the Montreal store closed in the mid 1960s.

Thomas Rennie was 71 years of age in 1940 and succession was again an issue. Two relatives, John B. Rennie, a warehouseman, and Robert J. Rennie, a salesman, were employed at the firm. It is likely that they were grandsons of one of William Rennie's brothers. They had not served in management and did not fit immediately into succession planning. In 1942, Kenneth J. Harrison, the son-in-law of Thomas Rennie, was listed in the city directory as vice-president of the firm. Mr. Harrison was also president of J.A. Harrison Company which was a family owned coal distributor. It is not known how Mr. Harrison allocated his time and what was the division of duties between Thomas Rennie and Harrison. In the 1949 directory, a new president is shown at the J.A. Harrison Company and Thomas Rennie and Harrison are listed as Rennie Seed management. Thomas Rennie retired from the Harbour Commission in 1947 on account of ill health (*Toronto Daily Star*, 5 August 1952) and it is likely that Harrison was taking the lead role in management. After the death of Thomas Rennie in 1952, Harrison became president and John B. Rennie was vice president. John Rennie had risen from warehouseman to vice president in little over a decade and it is not known what formal or informal training he had undertaken to prepare for this

management role. He was listed in this position until 1957 and in subsequent years, only Harrison was shown in a management position.

The firm was sold to Steele Briggs in 1960 which maintained the Rennie brand, the Toronto store and the catalogue for a few years. There is no evidence that explains the reasons for this sale but it is probable that Harrison family retirement planning played a part. Mrs. Harrison was likely born around the turn of the century so this may have been an opportune time to sell as there did not appear to be any members of the next generation ready to assume responsibility for the firm. By the mid 1960s, the Rennie operations were merged with Steele Briggs. In 1970, A.E. McKenzie, now owned by the Manitoba Government, purchased Steele Briggs and soon moved all packaging and mail order operations west to Brandon, Manitoba. That ended a century of mail order seed operations in Toronto.

Conclusion

The history of the Rennie Seed Company parallels the extraordinary expansion of the country in the first part of the twentieth century. This westward expansion allowed the company to capitalize on its prior successes and market dominance. It was not the cause, however, of its great success. To understand the success, we must consider the extraordinary ability of William Rennie to fashion a business strategy that capitalized on unique features of the Canadian transportation and distribution networks in the 1880s and 1890s. He ensured that the company was economically viable and poised to exploit the rapid expansion of markets. Ultimately, as is the case with many third generation businesses, the entrepreneurial energies died and the markets the company operated within matured. This was not a large family and there may have been simply too few members to maintain the family business in its later years. Of course, the ultimate irony is that what keeps the Rennie Seed Company known to many Canadians has little to do with its success in the seed business or even the later prominence of the family. Instead, it was the hobby of Robert Rennie and his meticulous retention of old envelopes that keeps the name of the firm alive.

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Figure 1

The William Rennie Family Tree

William Rennie
 b. 15 March, 1835 Scarborough Township, York County, Ontario
 d. 24 July, 1910
 married Sarah Glendinning 1862

Robert b. 1862 d. 17 December, 1949 m. Marion Ross 1891 one son Gordon – architect	John b. 1865 d. 6 June, 1955 m. Martha Teasdale 1890 one son Leroy b. circa 1896, d. 1942	William b. 1866 d. 15 May, 1951 never married	Thomas b. 1869 d. 4 August, 1952 m. Annie Allison 1894 one daughter, Mrs. Kenneth Harrison
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