

Making bread in Old Gander

(Robert G Pelley, 2020-02-08)
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Napoleon said that an army marches on its stomach. So do air forces and those who build and operate great airfields. Gander was no exception to the rule.

In Gander's earliest period - that of pre-war construction - there were men building hangars and sleeping quarters, mining rock, clearing off land, laying cables across Gander Lake and rolling asphalt for the runways. They had good messing arrangements in Gander, with even mobile food services, towed by a tractor, for those further away.

But one thing was missing - bread. Breakfast without toast lacked homelike charm. And how could one sop up the sauce from the baked beans?

The cooks tried their best but they needed something better than their six sheet-metal stoves. As Superintendent Fred W Smeaton explained, "the heat in a place with six stoves going was very high and it was very hard to keep all those fires going and to get the heat uniform".

Using mainly broken parts obtained for \$25 from a gas company, he made up something more suitable. In his words,

" Then I drew up a plan of the front of the furnace which had to be fabricated in steel plate and also other plans of the interior of it and we constructed this big oven and the bake house. It was about 8 feet across, went back about 7 feet, and would be about 7 foot 6 high. The two ovens were set in, the back ends were resting on the brick, so where the one had been broken off we backfilled that with firebrick and cement and we set the two of them up and rested them on a brick bridge in the rear and also at the front where it came up against the door. Underneath them we built an arch shaped firebox, my original idea was that we should use coke because it was much cleaner than the

coal. We ordered a carload of coke and got the thing all ready and then after the firebox had been constructed (it was constructed on a wooden frame), the chap who did the job built a fire in a small bucket with some wooden chips and pieces of wood and put them inside just to dry out the brick work. Before we knew what had happened the woodwork supporting the brick actually caught fire but we just let it go to that. When it burnt down a bit we put some coke into it and got her underway and got her warmed up and as far as I know, the fire was never let out after that. When the baker was ready he put in the loaves of bread and he was able to turn out 90 loaves an hour of beautifully baked brown bread with just a nice brown color on it. He was just tickled with the whole thing and, of course, I was too. "

Gander was operational by early October 1939, ready for eventual civilian trans-Atlantic flights but by now, war in Europe had reared its ugly head. Gander was about to become a military fortress with the construction extremely rapid of new hangars, quarters, warehouses and a complex infrastructure of steam-heat, water and sewerage, electricity, communications and roads.

During that general period there existed a company that later became known to everyone as the Goodyear Humber Stores, which, among other things, provided food service to logging camps in the Deer Lake area. Three things coincided to bring Goodyears to Gander. Firstly, the workers hired by Atlas Construction Company were unhappy about not having bread in sufficient quantity and quality. Some of them had worked in Deer Lake and recommended Goodyears. Secondly, Goodyears was aware of the major construction effort to be made in Gander and had been gearing itself up for a possible move. At the same time both Atlas and authorities wanted to keep workers happy and needed an experienced enterprise to do the job. The service contract for not only the bakery but also general messing for the construction crews was signed in November 1940.

In 1944, with the exception of a power plant #162 to the west of the Army side, construction by Atlas was pretty much finished. Some maintenance was done but from spring onward the priority of Atlas was to pull out.

On 04 August RCAF Works and Maintenance reported resuming the tearing down, with the help of civilian labour, of the buildings of the Atlas South camp. At the end of the same month, authority was received to transfer all civilian employees of the RCAF to barracks on the Army side from the old Atlas North Camp, paving the way for its demolition.

The contract with Goodyears was in principle terminated with the departure of Atlas Construction.

A "Memorandum of Agreement between Canada and Newfoundland respecting the Transfer of Air Bases of 17 April 1941 said the following:

13. It is agreed that the Government of Canada will take over as from the date of transfer of the bases the rights and obligations under the three subsisting contracts between the Commissioner for Public Utilities and the Goodyear Humber Stores, Limited, hereinafter described, viz.,

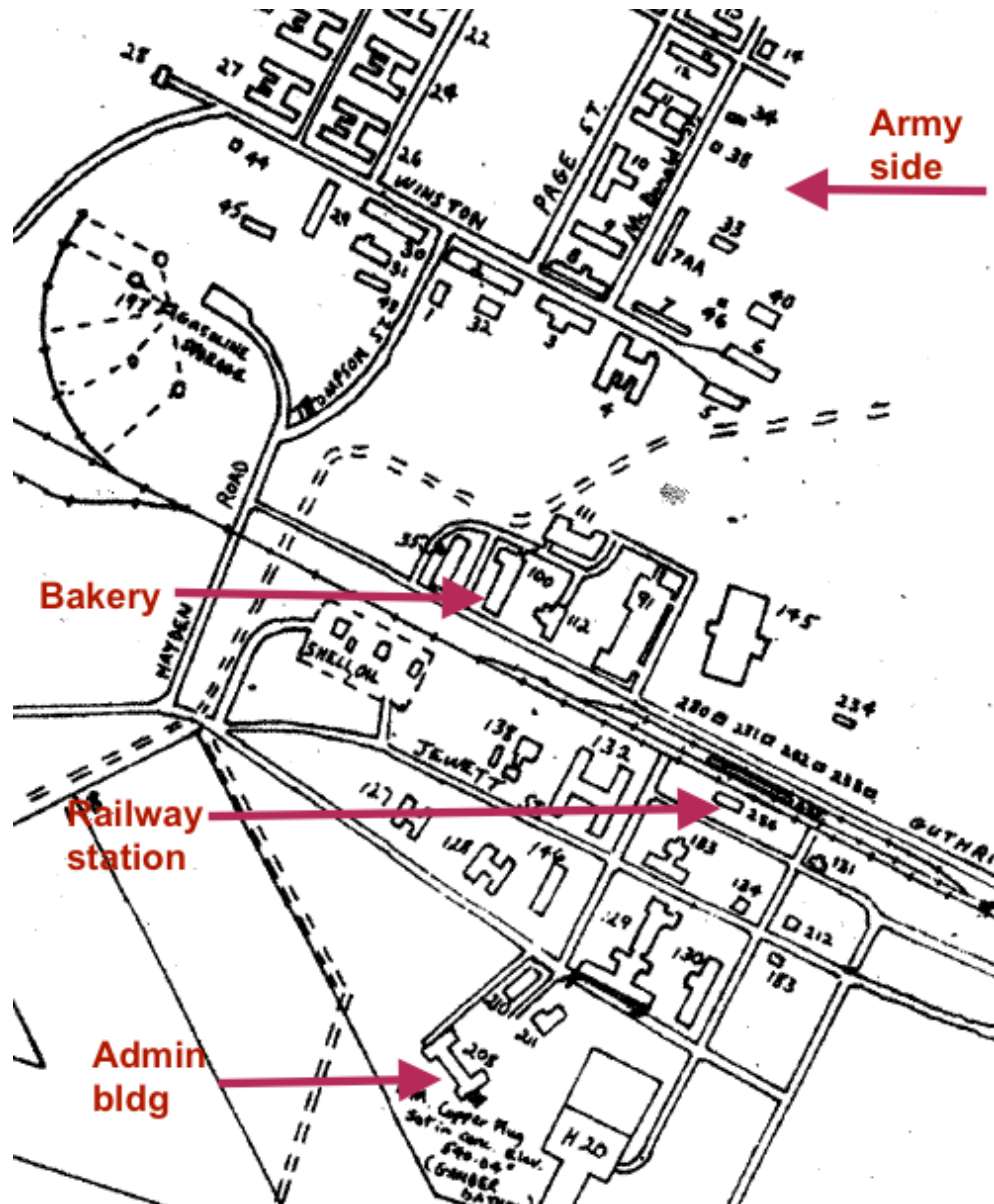
- (1) Contract for the supply of meals at the Administration Building of the Newfoundland Airport; terminable on one month's notice;*
- (2) Contract for operation of the Airport Store; terminable on three months' notice;*
- (3) Contract for operation of a bakery, terminable on three months' notice.*

There would therefore have been no problem to terminate the contract as required.

The war having started, five Digby aircraft of Detachment of 10(BR) arrived operating under S/L Carscallen on June 17, 1940, becoming the first military aircraft to operate from Newfoundland. By the end of June, Canada had deployed army units and additional aircraft to Gander.

After the formal takeover on 01 April 1941, the RCAF obtained permission from the Commission of Government in August to expand the airport at a cost of \$1.3 million; it installed additional hangars, barracks, and storage spaces, and upgraded existing utilities. Runways were lengthened, additional hangars, barracks and mess halls were built. A hospital, bakery, laundry, theaters, heating plants, power houses, and warehouses were built.

Midway during the war, Mr Smeaton had the occasion to chat with the fellow working as the master baker in Gander, now with the grade of Lieutenant. When Mr Smeaton asked if his old oven was still there, he was told that it was operated by a squad of "WAFS". The master baker also stated that the old oven could not keep up with the demand and that an oil-fired furnace would soon replace it. It would appear therefore that the RCAF bakery was set in the same place as the pre-war one.



It is to be noted that the RCAF bakery also supplied American forces in Gander.

With a return to civilian life, the bakery was operated by the Department of Transport and later by Commercial Caterers. The phone number in both cases was 363.

In 1952, a student from Hunt Memorial Academy wrote in the school yearbook the following wonderful description of Gander's Bakery:

Today, the Gander Bakery is operated by the Department of Transport, under the supervision of Messrs. J. C. Lee and F. Nicholl. The Bakery staff consists of nine men and two girls. The girls wrap the bread and cakes.

The Bakery is divided into two sections - the Bread Room and the Pastry Room. The equipment used in the bread room is as follows: A mixer, divider, scales, proofers, racks, a bread wrapper and a slicer. The equipment used in the pastry room consists of a mixer, doughnut cutters, stock pot and baking utensils.

The various breads and pastries produced are bread doughnuts, hot-dog rolls, hamburger rolls, dinner rolls, as well as cakes and pies. These products are distributed to the Department of Transport establishments and business houses in Gander, also to many stores and restaurants outside Gander.

During the year, new plans to remodel the Bakery will be put into operation.

ANNIE MAHER. Grade IX.

The history of the bakeries in old Gander is a reflection of its civil and military history. In "new Gander" there is no "stand-alone" bakery. However there are several enterprises such restaurants and grocery stores which offer bakery products as part of their product list.

In the fall of 2020 the following additional information was provided by Mr Cator Best who worked for the bakery after the war. He adds the following names:

- Mr King - manager in the 1950s
 - Wayne King - son of manager also worked there
 - Eric Waterman - janitor
 - Clyde Waterman - utility man, "wrapper" and related tasks
 - Oscar Chubbs - basically a role of receiving and shipping
 - Three German bakers- of which one -Mr Kaltenbusch, stayed in Gander
 - three local bakers: Clyde Hobbs, Fred Baggs Johnny Marr
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Other main sources of information:

- life story of Fred W Smeaton, as compiled by Carol Walsh
- Supplement to the Beacon, 29 July 1987
- Documents on Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland, Vol 1, 1939-1949, edited by Paul Bridle
- Gander phonebooks
- 1952 Hunt Memorial Academy school book