

Moosehead Breweries sees tragedies, triumphs over 150 years

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Andrew Oland, the president of Moosehead Breweries, has been with the business since 1993. He said the company seen highs and lows since it started in 1867. PHOTO: SARAH SEELEY/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of features on three businesses in the Saint John area that are celebrating their 150-year anniversaries.

SAINT JOHN • Canada was just 90 days old when the Oland family first launched their brewery business.

Susannah Oland, the matriarch of the family, started the brewery in 1867 in Dartmouth, N.S., under the name S. Oland and Sons. She developed her recipe for October ale by brewing at the family's country farm.



Derek Oland delivering beer in 1978. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Andrew Oland, the current president of Moosehead Breweries, said Susannah left her name out of the title because she was a woman.

“At that time it was very unusual for a woman to be involved in any business, let alone the brewing of beer.”

Moosehead is one of three businesses in the Saint John area celebrating its 150th anniversary, the same

year as the country reaches its sesquicentennial milestone.

Oland said the business has prevailed over a series of challenges.

“I think there’s been ups and downs, fortunately more ups than downs,” he said. “From time to time you have adversity. We put our head down and try to work through it.”

The brewery has burned down five times as a result of the heat used during the beer brewing process. The Oland family rebuilt the building after every fire.

The Dartmouth brewery was also destroyed on Dec. 5, 1917, during the Halifax Explosion. Conrad Oland, Susannah’s son, was one of more than 2,000 people killed in the disaster that leveled a large portion of Halifax.

The business faced relational as well as physical struggles. There was a sibling rivalry between the three Oland sons and part of the family located to New Brunswick, while the rest stayed in Nova Scotia.

The New Brunswick Olands set up a brewery on Union Street called the Red Ball Brewery. In 1928, they purchased the James Ready Brewery on the west side and have remained there ever since. Along with the building, the Olands also acquired the Moosehead name from one of the Ready beer trademarks. They started selling the Moosehead Pale Ale as one of their signature products.

In 1947, the company officially switched its name from New Brunswick Breweries to Moosehead Breweries. The name change was to help the organization break into the market in other provinces.

Karen Cousins, the spokeswoman for Moosehead, said the name stuck.

"It was so well received, the label, the image, the idea of the moose."

Moosehead continues to be a family business. Derek, a fifth generation Oland, is the owner. His sons all have an involvement in the company. Andrew, is the president, Patrick is the chief financial officer, and Matthew is the vice-president of the supply chain. Giles is on the Moosehead board and an entrepreneur in Halifax.

Although the location and name of the company has changed, the taste of Moosehead has remained primarily the same, said Andrew Oland.

"An Alpine lager tastes the same today as it tasted two years ago and as it will taste two years in the future."

Derek Oland's aim is the longevity of the business, said Andrew Oland.

"He doesn't want to be the biggest, he just wants to be around the longest."

One of his early memories of the company was getting to meet astronauts when accompanying his father at a dinner in Fredericton as a 9-year-old. NASA astronauts had wished for a case of Moosehead while talking to the command centre from up in space.

"That was very, very cool."

Andrew Oland has been working with the company since 1993. He said his favourite part of working in the business is travelling to different countries and observing the customer satisfaction with the product. Moosehead is stocked on store shelves in 15 countries.

"It's a real pleasure when I make a sales call in the store and someone's buying a case of Moosehead while I'm there."

He said the company's plan for the future is to put a focus on the American market.

"In terms of Moosehead, we see great opportunities. There has been an explosion in the interest in beer over the past 15 years in North America,"he said.

"I think we're always focused on the future, trying to make decisions for the long term."

Moosehead recently launched the Anniversary Ale as a seasonal beer in honour of its milestone. It is made using only Canadian ingredients.