

TAYLOR: Oland legacy lives on

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Published September 21, 2017 - 8:10pm

Last Updated September 21, 2017 - 8:15pm

Ashley Farrington has a lot of brewing history to live up to.

The current general manager of Oland Brewery in Halifax, Nova Scotia's largest brewery, Farrington is the first woman to run the entire operation since Susannah Oland and her sons took it over in 1870.

Although Susannah Oland wasn't listed as one of the original owners of the brewery in 1867 when her husband, John James Dunn Oland, signed a partnership agreement with Captain de Winton, George Corkburn Harvey and Thomas Mowbray to produce and market "Brown October Ale," she was just as important to the success of the enterprise as any of the partners.

It was Susannah's original ale recipe that the partners were brewing, after all.

When her husband John was killed in a tragic accident with a horse in 1870, Susannah took over the company with her three sons. Then, in 1874, she and business partner George Fraser created Fraser, Oland and Co. Proprietors.

Finally, in 1877, Susannah bought all remaining shares of Fraser, Oland and Co. Proprietors and renamed the company S. Oland, Sons and Co.

On Thursday at the Oland Brewery, many of the surviving Oland family and friends of the brewery celebrated the sesquicentennial of the company.

It was explained at the open house Thursday that Susannah used her first initial rather than her full name because she wasn't certain the public would accept a woman as the head of a brewery. A lot has changed since then.

Susannah died in 1886 and Oland Brewery never had another woman in charge until this past July, when Farrington took over as general manager.

Oland Breweries was sold to John Labatt Ltd. in 1971 for about \$12 million. Now, John Labatt is the Canadian operating arm of the largest brewing company in the world, Anheuser-Busch InBev.

Farrington told me Thursday she is very proud to continue the legacy of Susannah Oland, but although the brewing business was once a male-dominated industry, now women are taking on bigger roles.

“I think it’s a good role model for other women who want to take on leadership roles,” she said, and is an example of the commitment by the larger company, Labatt, to be inclusive and diversified.

“We knew there was a long tradition here at the brewery, that the brewery had been through the Halifax Explosion. It is actually the oldest brewery in the Labatt family, so there’s a lot of history and we knew all about it when we came,” Farrington said.

Today Oland Brewery is still on Agricola Street in Halifax’s north end and it also runs the Keith’s Brewery downtown. Oland has a combined roster of 200 employees. The Oland plant produces about 17-million dozen beer every year.

While the Halifax brewery is similar to the processes used at the other brewing operations within the Labatt system, she said, the Oland brewery had a \$40-million biological treatment system installed in 2015, which is a little different.

The system treats the plant’s waste water to reduce the impact on the environment.

Farrington said she found the Maritime beer-drinking population very loyal. “A lot of people are very passionate about Keith’s, about Oland Export, they’re not jumping around from brand to brand. They are definitely a more loyal customer. And I think a lot of people here have a lot of pride in the quality of the beer and the process that we do to make the beer.”

The Oland Brewery produces local brands such as Oland Export, Alexander Keith’s and Schooner, and national best-sellers such as Budweiser and Bud Light.

Source: Herald Business <http://thechronicleherald.ca/business/1505184-taylor-oland-legacy-lives-on>