

Moosehead at 150: Saint John's iconic brewery celebrates

The family business moved to Saint John in 1928

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The Moosehead brand was purchased by the Oland family when it moved to Saint John. (Moosehead Breweries)

It's not just Canada that's celebrating its 150th birthday this year. Three of New Brunswick's oldest companies are marking 150 years in business as well.

Moosehead Breweries, Source Atlantic and G.E. Barbours have been in operation, in one form or another, as long as this country exists.

They marked the occasion with a gala dinner and huge fireworks display in Saint John this past week.

Started by female brewer

Moosehead traces its roots in the Maritimes back to an English woman, Susannah Oland, who moved to Halifax in 1865 with her family.

"They had tough circumstances at that time, and Susannah was a bit of an entrepreneur, a home brewer as many people in that era were, particularly women." said Andrew Oland in an interview

with CBC's *Information Morning* in Saint John. "In 1867 she started her own business, with the help of her husband John and the family."

Brewing might have been normal for a woman, but running a brewery was not.

"The name of the brewery was S. Oland and Sons, because there was no way you could put a woman's name in 1867 on a business, let alone a business involving alcohol," said Oland.

Move to Saint John



Moosehead Breweries Ltd. started out as S. Oland and Sons, the S standing for Susannah. (CBC)

The company was inherited by a son, George W.C. Oland, but in 1917, the Halifax Explosion destroyed the brewery.

The family business was then moved to Saint John, where it quickly expanded.

"In 1928, (the family) purchased the James Ready Brewery, which was on the west side of Saint John, which is where we are today," said Oland.

The Moosehead brand was picked up in an earlier purchase from the city's Red Ball brewery, he added.

After decades as a successful New Brunswick brewery, the company realized it would need to start exporting outside the region to survive. But with interprovincial trade barriers making it

difficult to access the Canadian market, the company decided to export beer into the United States.

"So 1977-78, we start selling in all 50 states, and we still aren't available in Ontario and Quebec at the time," said Oland. "The story in the U.S. was we started with modest expectations, and it was just a great success story, massively oversold our expectations."

Beer market changing

Andrew Oland, the chief executive officer of Moosehead Breweries, says the Halifax Explosion of 1917 led to the brewery moving to Saint John. (CBC)

Today's breweries face new challenges, said Oland.

"We used to say we compete against the old Labatt brewery which was across the street on the west side," he said. "Well now they're part of the largest brewing company in the world. And then we have folks who are literally starting breweries in their basements and their garages."

But it's not all bad, he added. People are much more interested in beer now, he said, "and that's very positive for the beer industry."

With files from Information Morning Saint John

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