

End of the line for Massey in Brantford

BRANTFORD - It was the day that Rick Carter learned the world had changed. The news came in the 1980s from an unlikely source, a truck driver from Winnipeg. "He came to the plant to pick up some equipment but it wasn't ready for shipping and wouldn't be ready for a couple of hours," recalled Carter, who was the manufacturing engineer manager for Massey Combines Corp. "I invited him to have a seat in the office and offered him a coffee. Then we got to talking." The driver had been trucking for about a year. Prior to that, he and his two brothers had owned a century farm. The trucker told Carter: "In 1980, the banks told us our farm, 5,000 acres, was worth \$5 million and we could borrow up to 20% of the value of that land, or \$1 million. We borrowed \$800,000 and purchased all new equipment. "Then, two things happened." The price of farm commodities dropped and interest rates went up. Their land was now worth \$2 million and the brothers were told they could only borrow 10% of that, or \$200,000. The banks wanted \$400,000 from the original loan back, immediately. When the brothers told the bank they didn't have it, the bank foreclosed on their farm and took all three houses. Even the kids' bank accounts were seized.

"Today, my two brothers and their wives are separated and I have a feeling that when I get back to Winnipeg my wife will have filed for divorce as well," the driver told Carter. That's what was happening in farming. That conversation, coupled with some other incidents that occurred at the Massey plant on Park Road North, now Wayne Gretzky Parkway, told Carter the farm implement manufacturing world had changed. "That (conversation) told me that farmers were putting baling wire on their combines to keep them going rather than buying a new piece of equipment," Carter said. "It was happening all across the United States." Farmers, deep in debt, stopped buying for fear of losing their properties. Carter was at Massey when the company went into receivership on Friday, March 4, 1988, owing creditors \$290 million. The plant's closing meant an estimated 2,500 people no longer had jobs. Carter got his official notice on Sunday, March 6. "I got a call at about 10 p.m. on the Sunday," Carter recalled. "A voice said, 'Rick, by order of the Supreme Court of Ontario, blah, blah, blah....' "In other words do not go to work tomorrow because you do not have a f....ing job."

Carter survived the closing largely because he had been attending night school and earning degrees even as he worked at Massey. He had earned an undergraduate degree, and when Massey closed, he got an MBA and a masters in engineering degree. In the immediate aftermath of the closing, he worked for the bankruptcy trustee, arranging for the shipment of tools and tool drawings to various companies. It was a massive undertaking that took six months. He also led the effort to get salaried employees at the plant a termination package that paid them 63 cents for every dollar the company owed them. The settlement, which was similar to what had been offered hourly production employees, came after a lot of legal wrangling and court proceedings.

The legal wrangling focused on the relationship between Varsity Corp. and Massey Combines Corp. Lawyers for the company argued that Varsity was separate from Massey Combines Corp. and therefore not responsible for termination pay. Those on the other side, the hourly workers and salaried employees, argued Massey's was part of Varsity making Varsity responsible for termination pay. The breakthrough came when the president of Massey Combines, Ivan Porter,

said he was an employee of Varsity, not Massey. Carter went on to better things following the Massey's closing but a lot of others didn't fare so well.

"People just didn't know what to do and many had what I felt were pie-in-the-sky ideas like starting their own construction business, or a business dealing with truckers" Carter said. "I never heard of anyone who was super successful. "It was just survival for many people." Many, including superintendents at Massey Combines, were never able to find high-paying jobs again and had to settle for lower-paying ones such as night watchmen, drug store delivery boys and janitors, he said. The bankruptcy and subsequent closing of the combine factory had a huge impact on the community and many families.

Brant MPP Dave Levac remembers the impact Massey's closing had on his family. "I had five brothers that worked at Massey's and when the closing happened, I specifically remember us thinking, 'Oh my God, our family is getting wiped out' because at that time all of them were married, all had families and all were going to have to start over," Levac said. "That was the same story for many, many families across the board in Brantford. "It affected thousands of workers. It was that huge." Massey-Ferguson was like this huge, one-stop factory that provided employment for everyone. When it folded, it was like a stake was driven through the community's heart. Levac worked at Massey's for several summers and was offered a full-time job if he didn't go back to university. "I grappled with the decision," Levac recalled. "I would have made pretty good wages if I had accepted the offer. "One of my brothers had quit school in Grade 10 to work at Massey's and was making more money than me even after I got my degree and started teaching."

His first teaching contract was in 1977 and he made \$9,300 a year.

David Neumann, now a city councillor representing Ward 5, was mayor of Brantford in the early 1980s before becoming the MPP. On March 4, 1988, he was the MPP and had mixed feelings when he heard the axe had finally fallen on Massey's. "The closing of Massey's was the end of a long story of the huge impact the farm implement industry had on our community," Neumann said. "On the other hand, people could finally put it behind them.

"It's a harsh thing to say but it was painstakingly difficult in the early 1980s when you had Massey's recovering, then laying off again, and hiring again and then laying off again," he said.

"People were kept on a string and when Massey's closed they knew that it was the end and they had to look at alternatives." Even after the closing there were many who couldn't let it go, who still believed Massey's would somehow come back. "Even after the official announcement that Massey's was gone people had difficulty accepting it," Neumann said. "Their experience was that Massey's would be down but then come back again. "It was like a death in the family. It was hard to accept."

Doug Aitchison was in his 20s and had worked at the Massey Combines plant for seven or eight years when it closed. "I was 19 when I got hired and I still remember the woman from HR (human resources) telling me that if I stuck around for a year that I'd be working there for the rest of my life," Aitchison, who now works out of the CAW office in Kitchener, recalled. "That's the way it was back then. "You could go into a plant and be there until you retired." Wages were

good enough that someone working in the plant could own a home and raise a family. That's the way it was in Brantford. That's the way it had always been, he said. "When Massey's closed we had people who were making more than \$16 an hour and suddenly they were looking for work and at jobs that only paid \$10 an hour," he said. The world had changed for farmers. The world had changed for workers, too.