

Smibert family pioneers through changes and remains strong in the ice industry



Top to Bottom: Museum (tongs, ice chests, window cards, antique trucks, ice pictures, lunchroom and lockers through doorway); North Star Ice trucks; Domestic hot water heaters (AOSmith 98% efficient cyclone)

The Smibert family saw its start in business when Pioneer Jamie Smibert arrived in Upper Canada (Ontario, to be exact) from Scotland in 1818. The Smibert clan searched for a fertile tract of land to farm and settled in what was known as London Township (current day 10 Mile Road). The following generations farmed until drought and crop failures forced Tom Smibert to move his family into the city of London during the Great Depression.

The farm connection led the family to open a corner grocery store. The family expanded the business by adding a laundry and dry cleaning pick up and drop off service. When this business developed, and using profits from the grocery store, the family began its own laundry and dry cleaning business, called Marvo Cleaners. About 1940, Ross Smibert purchased the laundry and dry cleaning business from his parents and changed the name to Castle Cleaners. (Fit for a King!) A single location was followed in the 1950's by several sites in London and the surrounding area, under the name Allied Cleaners. Allied Cleaners continued until the late 1980's when it was sold to another laundry operation. During this time, Ross also started Wishy Washy Coin-op Laundry. (Suds your duds here!) Today, that part of the business still exists under the name Star Laundromat. (Put back the sparkle!)

During the mid 1950's, profits again funded the development of another business and it was at this time that North Star Ice was born. Ross acquired a 400lb. Koldraft ice machine and bin, and a 24 hr. KGBrown-like dispenser. The business was slow in developing. The third year, Ross acquired another 400lb. Koldraft ice machine to make up for the unreliability of the first one. (As you know, you NEVER want to run out of ice!) The business continued to grow.

By the early 1960's, North Star Ice had six 400lb. Koldraft ice machines on three bins. All packaging by hand ceased at this stage due to tendonitis and arm fatigue. During the 1960's, the company expanded to 36 400lb. Koldraft ice machines mounted on augers, taking product to bins in a freezer room where there was one Matthiesen volumetric bagger and a Hamer 125 stitcher and a conveyor system for packaging. Also, seven Star block machines were added to make product for the campground and marina markets.

Ross used a formula during this period of growth: for every Koldraft ice machine he owned, he could add five new customers to the accounts. Up to this point, North Star Ice had used only laundry delivery vans with thermal blankets to make deliveries. In 1970, North Star Ice bought a Leer money wagon for a one ton pickup truck, to be used strictly for ice delivery. The first straight

truck with a ten foot refrigerated body, dedicated to ice delivery was purchased in 1973. The business had graduated to the big leagues!

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These operations ran until 1977 when North Star Ice purchased its first big production machine - a 5 ton Turbo C-Line machine. At that point, Ross sold off 12 of the Koldraft machines. In 1978, the company bought a 6000 Vogt ice machine and sold off 12 more Koldraft machines. The idea was to test the North Star market for tube ice or nugget ice while still making two tons of Koldraft cubes a day. At this point, John Smibert joined his father full time in the business. Over the next two years, it was concluded that Turbo's nugget ice was the way to go in the London market area.

In 1980, North Star sold the 6000 Vogt ice machine, the last 12 Koldraft ice machines and purchased a 10 ton Turbo C Line machine. The 7 Star block makers were also sold and a Turbo 240 block press was installed. The 1980's was a tremendous growth period for North Star Ice. The economy was booming. Commercial plazas were being built at an alarming rate. The company's customer base of c-stores, grocery stores, gas stations and restaurants grew along with the market area. North Star Ice had always been an

urban ice company, but being in the center of southwestern Ontario, surrounded by the Great Lakes, it was now time to venture out and take advantage of the summer volume ice business the tourist industry in the resort areas provided.

In reaction to this growth, in 1983, North Star Ice added a 20 ton Turbo C line machine. In 1987, a 40 ton Turbo C line machine was added and bin storage increased to a capacity of 50 tons. Three Matthiesen volumetric baggers and three more Hamer stitchers and conveyor systems were installed. Along with this plant expansion, more trucks and merchandisers were purchased.

During the 1990's, growth slowed but business maintained a steady pace. Ross has always believed in running a clean operation and doing due diligence with the limited food safety knowledge he had. In 1992, Guelph Food Technology was hired to perform the company's first basic food safety audit (GMP's -good manufacturing practices). The initial critique of the North Star Ice operation netted five pages of minor suggestions (mostly labeling, signage, and organizational procedures) and the determination to learn more about food safety. From that original audit many years ago to the present, this has been a steady learning process of food
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Top to Bottom: Signage on Stuart Street; Museum (hand tools used to harvest ice, delivery weigh scales, horseshoes for horses on ice, horsedrawn plow, ice buckets on upper shelf; 6" water supply; 12 kg storage



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safety and now with a HACCP Plan in place, Ross feels these reports and verifications of the procedures have engaged the North Star team and helped the operation run more efficiently.

In 1993, the company added a machinery enclosure for two 20 ton Turbo C Line machines, but only a single machine was added. The follow-up machine was added in 1994, along with a new 6" municipal water supply line and eliminating two old 2" lines. The freezer room storage capacity was also increased. To handle increased distribution, more merchandisers and trucks were added to the fleet.

The new millennium brought anticipation and hope for continued good growth. Early in the decade there was growth: North Star Ice purchased two 10 ton Turbo C Line machines. With this addition, the company had to upgrade the electrical service coming into the facility. The city provided a 1200

amp-600 volt dedicated transformer to service the plant and nine sub services, which service the site, were also upgraded. Again, merchandisers and trucks were added to maintain the level of service the customers expected.

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Since the “crash” of 2008, a decline and subsequent leveling off of business has been noticed. Southwestern Ontario's very close automotive ties to Michigan have

led to many factory closures and high unemployment. The high cost of fuel, food, accommodation, the requirement of passports (\$400 for a family of four) have affected cross border travel and tourism. Advancements in the manufacturing of ice machines for home refrigerators is also having an impact on packaged ice sales, especially in the off season when homemade ice satisfies the family's demands.

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Currently, the North Star Ice team is made up of 20 employees working in the London, Ontario facility where they can produce 135 tons of ice per day and service a 75 mile radius of the city of London with a fleet of 16 vehicles.





At age 88, Ross is at the office every day, guiding the operations. His keen knowledge of the ice industry keeps North Star Ice at the top of its game. Just the other day, Ross noted that in 2018, the Smibert family will have been in business in the London area for 200 years. Another reason to celebrate! Over the years, Ross has searched for a catchy slogan for North Star Ice. The industry has used "Have an ice day!" and "It's the clink that makes the drink!" He came up with his own slogan which the company uses today, "Clear and solid, like a diamond!" - fitting for a Turbo C Line product.

North Star Ice is proud to belong to the Canadian Association of Ice Industries (CAII) and the International Packaged Ice Industry (IPIA). At this time, John Smibert is honoured to be president of the CAII and chairman of the IPIA. He strongly feels the packaged ice industry has been good to his family and that time spent working with other industry members to advance the projects of these associations can only strengthen them and in so doing, strengthen the packaged ice industry. He encourages all non-member ice companies to join a regional association and the IPIA to help support the industry and to work together with other industry members to ensure the packaged ice industry's future.



Top Left and then clockwise: 1000 gallon hot water storage from Turbo ice machine for domestic hot water; North Star Ice trucks; 240 Turbo block press station; Skid storage (300 3kg bags per skid); Electrical room (Nine sub services); Office front desk (with awards and team sponsorships); North Star Ice office entrance; Two 10 ton Turbo C Line machines.



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