

Starr - Bennett News

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The Starr Company of Canada, Part II

By Betty Minaker Pratt

(Appearing in the Winter 2009 edition, Part I outlined the formation and rapid expansion of Starr Canada under the leadership of its founders, J. A. Croden and Wilfred D. Stevenson. A prohibitive Canadian tariff on imported manufactured goods enacted in 1918 caused them to establish Canadian facilities for producing Starr phonographs. The story resumes with an account of how Starr-labeled records were supplied.)

Records made in Canada were supplied by Herbert Berliner, who had moved some discarded record presses from the Berliner Montreal factory to his new Compo record factory in Lachine, Quebec, and by May, 1919, began pressing American Starr-Gennett masters in Lachine for Starr Canada. The following year, Croden visited England and Europe, returning with "mothers" to be pressed by Compo for Starr.

The newly formed Starr Company of Canada quickly gained a subsidiary, Starr Phonograph Company of Quebec, under the supervision of Roméo Beaudry, an important figure in the early production of Francophone recordings in Canada. He distributed Francophone records on Starr and Compo labels in Quebec province starting in the summer of 1920.

Early Starr labels were printed with a large "Gennett" logo, surrounded by a scrolled hexagon, and "Starr Co. of Canada, London, Ont." in gold lettering at the top. Steven Barr, author of *The Almost Complete 78 rpm Record Dat-*

ing Guide, has written a label dating guide with matrix numbers and a general company history of both U.S. Gennetts and Starr/Compo in Canada (pp. 48, 161). He describes how "Starr" grew to be the favorite printed name on the Canadian label. (Also see *The Virtual Gramophone* at <http://www.collectionscanada.com>.)



Starr Co. of Canada label

If we could walk into the Starr store in London, Ontario between the years 1917 and 1924, we might meet a few young musicians such as the Lombardo brothers who frequented Dundas Street at the time. We might also say hello to Melville Standfield of Toronto, who started as a traveling salesman with Starr [APN Jul-Oct., 2006, "Standfield-MacPherson Company Phonographs...."].

In 1917, Standfield was recruited by the London office to establish Starr Canada agencies in Western Ontario. In 1918, he traveled to British Columbia. By the spring of 1920, Starr Canada stores appeared in all major cities from the west coast to the Maritime Provinces, and in September the firm was elevated to charter status, becoming the Starr Company of Canada, Limited. By March, 1922, at the height of the company's record sales, there were 101 Starr dealerships in Toronto alone.

Croden and Stevenson were very busy dispatching traveling salesmen such as Standfield, D. S. Cluff and J. W. Caswell (formerly of White Sewing Machine Co.) to all corners of the country. They unloaded boxcars of Starr equipment shipped to London from Indiana, and developed the Starr record pressing business with Herbert Berliner in Montreal.

On April 28, 1922, a disastrous fire in the Starr Canada warerooms on Dundas Street resulted in a massive sell-off of damaged goods [*Toronto Daily Star*, May 19, 1922, p. 10]. That setback may have induced a reversal of the company's fortunes. In 1923, the Starr Company of Canada, Limited, converted from a private to a public company [Indiana Historical Society/courtesy of Richard Green], and John Croden left to open a real estate firm in London [London Free Press, Jan. 20, 1950, p. 21].

In 1924, Starr Canada started to liquidate its stock and assets [letter from George Welsh, Starr Richmond, Jan. 26, 1926]. That same year, Wilfred Stevenson briefly became vice-president of the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, Indiana [CMTJ, Feb. 1924, p. 78]. He was the first non-Gennett to be made an officer of Starr Indiana after Henry Gennett became its president.

Between 1926 and 1929, John E. Roberts moved the Starr of Canada headquarters from Dundas Street to a smaller office at 410 Rectory Street in London and was in charge while the remaining stock was sold off. In January, 1926,

Stevenson became manager of Sun Records in Toronto [CMTJ, Jan. 1926, p. 24].

The Starr Piano Company's Canadian subsidiaries do not appear to have remained under the supervision of the company headquarters in Richmond beyond 1925, when the Compo Company bought the Canadian Starr label. The Starr record label continued to flourish in Canada after the Richmond firm discontinued it in the U.S.A. in 1925.

Compo used the Starr label until ca. 1951-1952 when Herbert Berliner sold the name to Decca. But recordings from the Starr and Apex catalogue continued until 1959. (See *The Virtual Gramophone* at www.collectionscanada.com.)

Betty Minaker Pratt is a graduate in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto, where an interest in the history of Canadian piano and phonograph factories began. Along with Bill Pratt, a Canadian Antique Phonograph Society (CAPS) executive, she has continued this interest thanks to 30 years of collaboration with CAPS members. Their collections and their technical and musical knowledge have provided the foundation for ongoing original research.

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