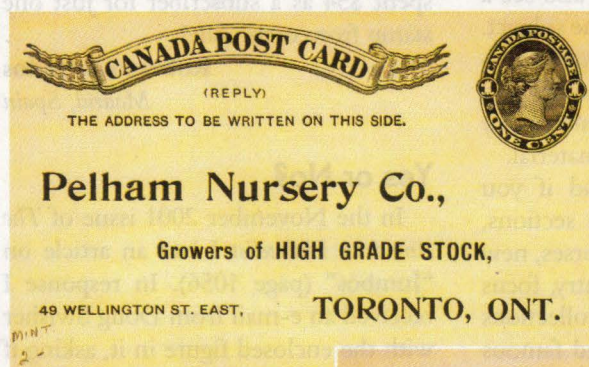


by charles j.g. verge

Brown's Nurseries: A Rural Ontario Post Office, 1897–1910

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were some half dozen plant nurseries in Canada that were noteworthy for the sheer volume of their business. One of these was Brown Brothers Company, established in Ridgeville, Welland County, Ontario in 1891. The nursery also went under the name of Brown Brothers Continental Nurseries and/or Brown Brothers Company, Nurserymen, Limited. The local post office, Brown's Nurseries, was named after the company and opened in 1897. The amount of mail handled through this post office can be taken as an indication of the extensive business done by the firm. It was, at the time, the largest rural post office in Canada and stood fourth in the Lincoln and Niagara District for the amount of mail matter handled annually.

I have been able to link this Brown Brothers Company with one of almost the same name located in Rochester, New York. The latter nursery, started in 1885, became the leading establishment of its kind in Rochester by the second decade of the twentieth century. Both were started by two brothers, Charles J. and Robert C. Brown, with Edward C. Morris as treasurer. Morris and other

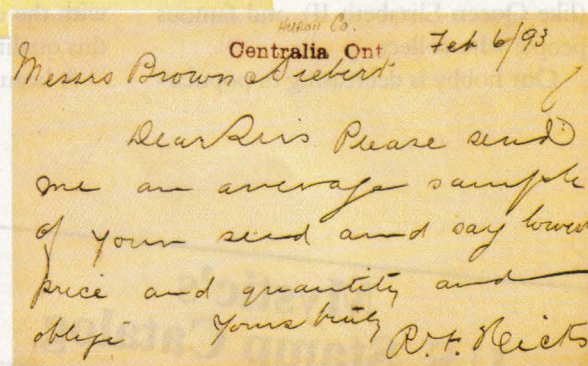


Cards addressed to two active nurseries at the turn of the twentieth century: Pelham Nursery Co. left and the message side of a card addressed to Brown & Siebert below.

members of his family bought out the Brown Brothers sometime before December 1899.

A short description of the surroundings of the nurseries around 1904 will give the reader an idea on how vast a complex it was. There were more than 500 acres devoted exclusively to the growing of nursery stock, with many out buildings and storage areas. The administrative offices were housed in a two-story 60-x-30-foot building. In addition, both the president of the company, Edward C. Morris, and the secretary-treasurer, David Z. Morris, had residences on the nursery's grounds.

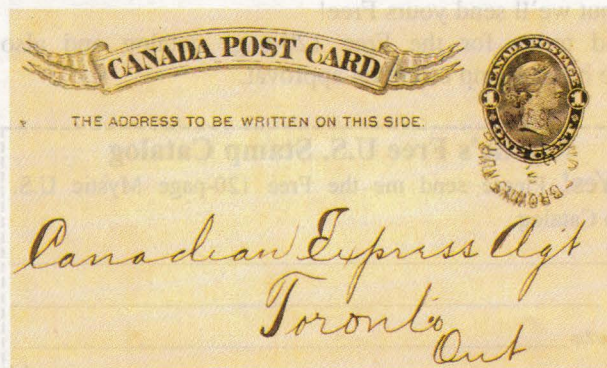
One major advantage of having the main office at the central nursery lay in the fact that all mail orders could be given prompt and careful attention. The company also took in a fair number of long distance telephone orders. As an example of the volume of nursery stock shipped by the firm, in 1903 Brown Brothers shipped out



20,000 clematis vines and 75,000 rose bushes.

The nursery's shipping needs were met by a private railway siding run by the T., H. & B. Railway (Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway) that connected with the Michigan Central at Welland and the Canadian Pacific and Grand Trunk Railways at Hamilton. Unfortunately, there is no known surviving Brown Brothers postal history material recorded with Railway Post Office cancellations.

Nurseries since the 1840s had sold their stock through agents or canvassers (known earlier in the nineteenth century as "tree-peddlers"), and Brown Brothers was no exception. The company constantly solicited for new agents. They frequently sent postage paid reply cards to prominent citizens of a locality requesting that they "have the kindness to give us on the attached card the names of three or four ener-



The reply side of a reply card recruiting sales agents. It has the earliest known use of the Brown's Nurseries split-ring: May 2, 1897.

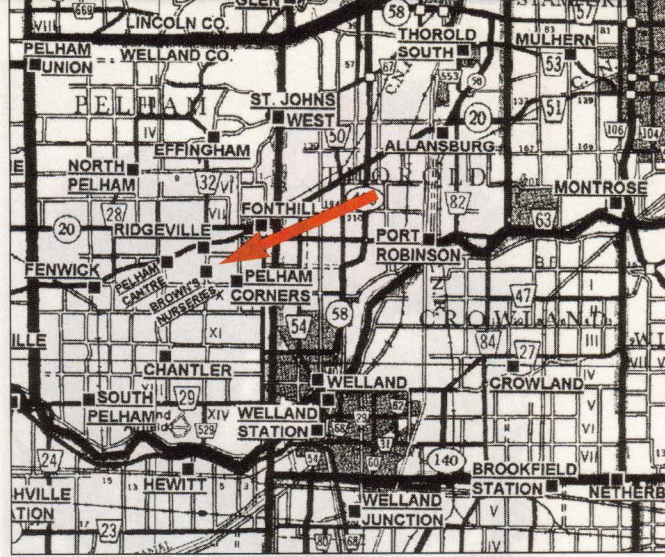


View of part of the Brown Brothers Nurseries. The building in the back with the triangular roof is believed to be the location of Brown's Nurseries Post Office.

getic men of your town or county ... regarding their taking an agency for our high grade nursery stock." In 1904, at the height of their business, the Morrises had between twelve and fifteen hundred agents working for the company in Canada. The agents were given some training and were provided with handsome, full-color catalogues to promote the company's stock.

Brown Brothers started its Canadian business in early 1890 out of downtown Toronto, on the corner of Bay and Richmond Streets, a curious site for a nursery since it was located in the core of the city. The company likely imported all its stock from its Rochester nursery until it established a nursery in Ridgville, Ontario, in the Niagara Peninsula in 1891. In 1896, the company petitioned the Post Office Department for a post office to be opened on its premises owing to the large quantity of shipping done by mail by the firm. The Post Office Department agreed, and the Brown's Nurseries Post Office opened on January 1, 1897.

The Brown's Nurseries Post Office remained active for thirteen years, and in that time had only two postmasters. Charles Fisher Jr., who opened the office, resigned his appointment on August 4, 1899, probably on his leaving the company. He was replaced by the company president, Edward C. Morris, who was officially appointed postmaster on September 1, 1899, and who held that position until the post office closed on May 12, 1910. It was common for senior officers of companies or hotels with private post offices to act as the *de facto* postmaster and have one or more of the company or hotel staff actually



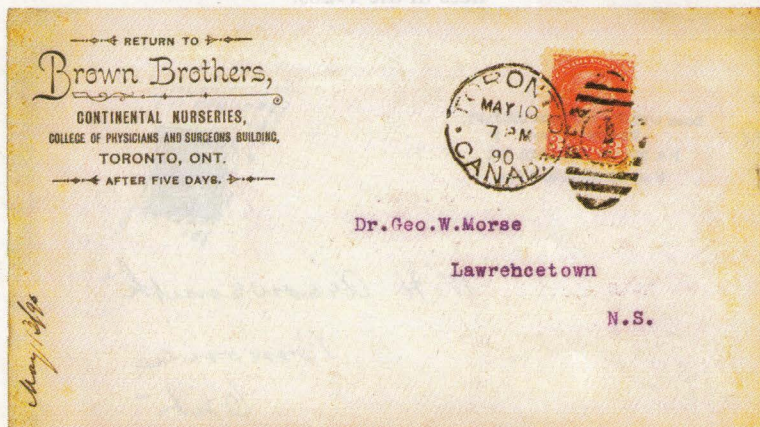
Map of the area surrounding Brown's Nurseries in Welland County. The arrow shows the location of the post office. (Courtesy of Eric Manchee.)



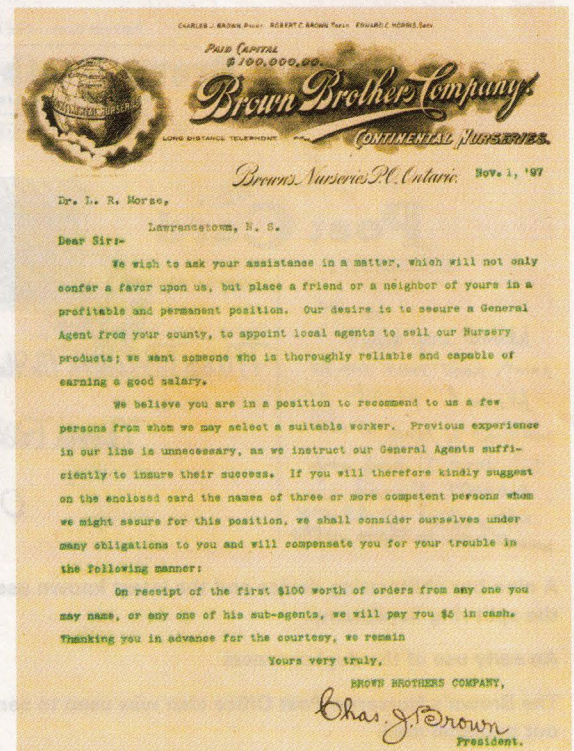
The Brown Brothers administrative handstamp used as a canceler.



Brown's Nurseries first canceling device.



The earliest known Brown Brothers cover posted when the firm was located in Toronto.



Letter for recruiting agents signed by one of the original owners of Brown Brothers.



1. Rose, Madame Caroline Testout.
2. " Eugene Fene.
3. " Frau Karl Druschki.
4. " Baron de Boustien.

Hand-painted and signed plates from the Brown Brothers catalogue.

perform the work in their stead.

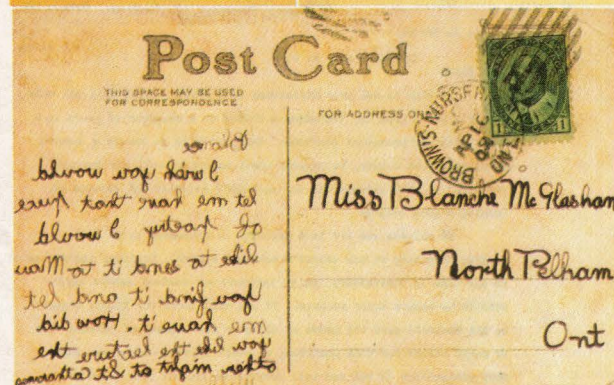
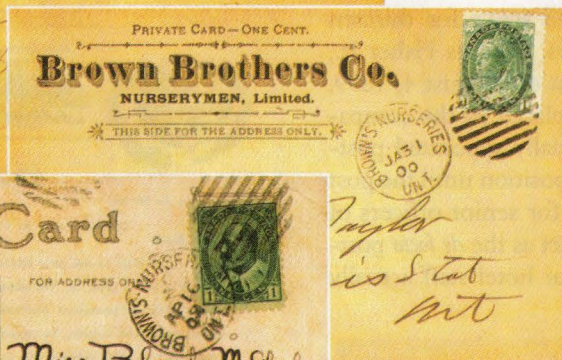
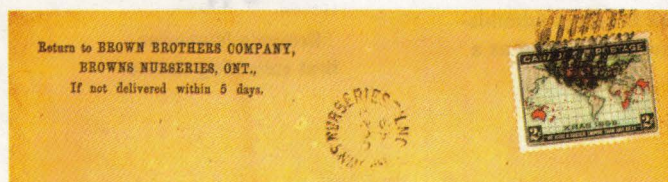
Brown's Nurseries had a number of cancelling devices at its disposal. The first was the split circle. There is no record of a proof strike of this hammer. It likely was not available at the opening of the post office but was brought into use on or prior to May 2, 1897. A company administrative handstamp was used from time to time as well. Sometime between July 12, 1897, and October 27, 1899, the post office was furnished with a nine-bar obliterating device to cancel the stamps. This doubled the postal clerk's work as he or she had to cancel the envelope twice; the example illustrated shows a Universal Penny Post stamp tied by the nine-bar grid and the split-ring dater. Shortly thereafter, definitely before January 31, 1900, a duplex handstamp was put into use at the post office. The example shown is on an evaluation card for an agent. Clients were asked to give a "confidential" report on their sales agent on these cards, with the further suggestion that "if you think him incompetent please recommend some one."

Although used extensively for company business, most of the surviving correspondence posted at Brown's Nurseries is private mail. For example, a postcard sent by a young person who has written to her friend in a reverse script requiring that the card be read in front of a mirror.

There was so much business done by mail that, sometime after 1903, the company had a number of stamps precanceled. Roller cancels were used on packages but very rarely on office mail. Two rollers were proofed for the Brown's Nurseries Post Office. Roller number 2 has not been recorded used, while number 1 is recorded by Smythies and Hollingsworth, *Canadian Roller Cancellations, 1894-1930*, as used between 1898 and 1903 prior to the Edward VII stamp issue. The roller used to cancel an Edward VII 1¢ (Canada Scott 89) in the example shown is too indistinct to read the number. It is either the latest usage of the number 1 roller or an unrecorded use of the number 2 roller. After the company post office closed, Brown Brothers used the Ridgeville Post Office until the company itself finally went out of business in the 1920s.



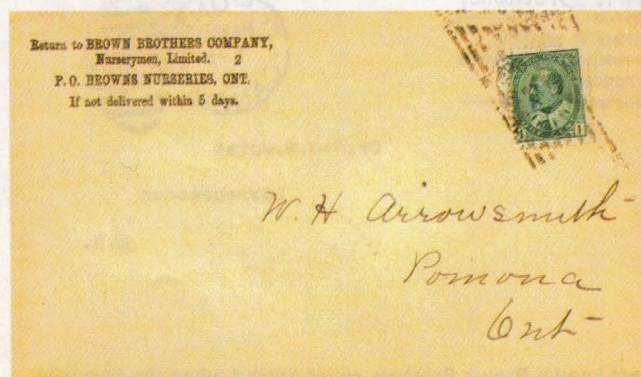
One of the few existing examples of a Brown's Nurseries precancel.



A nine-bar obliterating device and the latest known use of the split-ring handstamp.

An early use of the duplex cancel.

The Brown's Nurseries Post Office also was used to send out personal mail.



The Brown's Nurseries roller cancel.