

The Brown Brothers Company

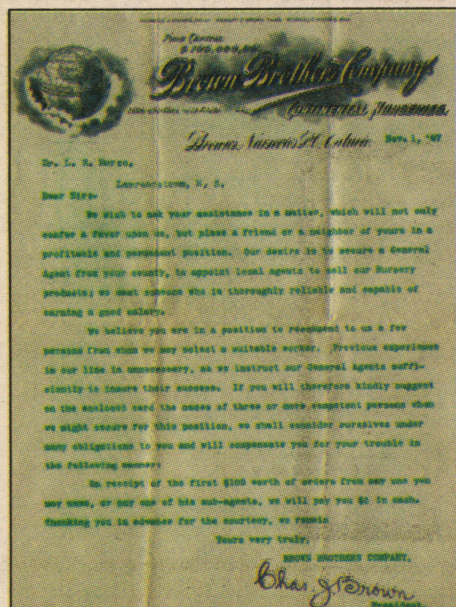


Figure 1: Letter for recruiting agents signed by one of the original owners of Brown Brothers.

CHARLES J.G. VERGE

At the turn of the 20th century there were some half dozen nurseries in Canada that were noted by the sheer volume of their business. One of these was the nursery of Brown Brothers Company in Ridgville, Welland County, Ontario. The nursery also went under the name of Brown Brothers Continental Nurseries and Brown Brothers Company, Nurserymen, Limited.

The local post office, Brown's Nurseries, was named after the company. The amount of mail handled through this post office must 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.

A short description of the surroundings of the nurseries can give an idea on how vast a complex it was. The president of the company, Edward C. Morris, and the secretary-treasurer, David Z. Morris, both had residences on the nursery's grounds. 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. 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.

They also took in a fair number of long distance telephone orders. Edward Morris is quoted as saying in *The Canadian Horticulturist* (September 1904) that "we packed three times as much stock in 1904 as we did in 1900."

He went on to say that "some 14 years ago we started in the nursery business on a comparatively small scale, and today there is no firm in Canada shipping more nursery stock in a year." In 1903 for example, they 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 TH&B Railway that connected with the Michigan Central at Welland and the Canadian Pacific and Grand Trunk Railways at Hamilton.

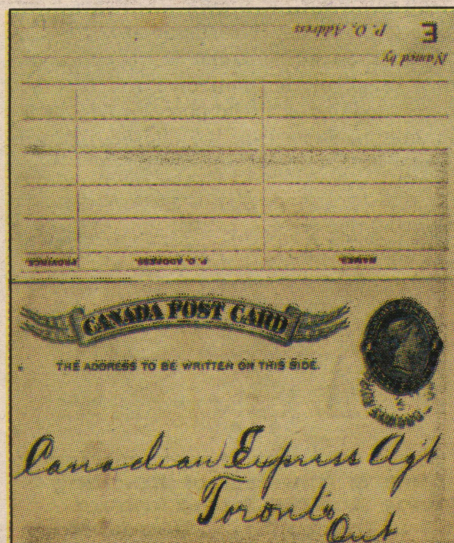


Figure 2: The reply side of a reply card requesting agents. It has the earliest known use of the Brown's Nurseries split-ring, May 2, 1897. The reverse bears the complete text cited.

Currently there is no Brown Brothers surviving postal history material recorded with railway post office cancellations.

Since the 1840s, nurseries had worked through agents or canvassers (known earlier in the 19th century as tree peddlers). Brown Brothers was no exception. The company was consistently soliciting new agents (Figure 1). 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 energetic men of your town or county...regarding their taking an agency for our high grade nursery stock" (Figure 2).

In 1904, at the height of their business, the Morrisises had between 1,200 and 1,500 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. Figure 3 shows one of the handpainted and



Figure 3: A handpainted and signed plate from the Brown Brothers catalogue.

signed color plates from their catalogue.

Brown Brothers started business in early 1890 out of downtown Toronto, on the corner of Bay and Richmond Streets (Figure 4), a very inappropriate place to have a nursery since it was in the core of the city.

The company likely imported all of their stock from the United States until it established itself, sometime later, in Ridgville, Ontario, on the Niagara Peninsula.

In 1896, the company petitioned the Post

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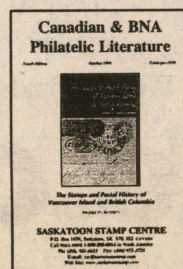
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Office Department for a post office to be opened on their premises owing to the large quantity of shipping done by mail by their firm. The Post Office Department agreed and the Brown's Nurseries post office opened on Jan. 1, 1897.

During its lifetime, the Brown's Nurseries post office had two postmasters. Charles Fisher Jr., who opened the office, resigned his appointment on Aug. 4, 1899, probably upon his leaving the company.

He was replaced by the company president, Edward C. Morris, who was officially appointed on Sept. 1, 1899, and held the 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 be the *de facto* postmaster and have one or more of the company or hotel staff do the work in their stead.

Brown's Nurseries had a number of canceling 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 brought into use on or prior to May 2, 1897. A company administrative handstamp was used from time to time as well (Figure 5).

Sometime between July 12, 1897, and Oct. 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.

Figure 6 shows a Universal Penny Postage stamp tied by the nine-bar grid and the splitting dater. Shortly thereafter, definitely before Jan. 31, 1900, a duplex handstamp was put into use at the post office. The example in Figure 7 is on an evaluation card for an agent.

Clients were asked to give "confidential" advice about the agent and "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 about the nursery — the post office could be used for private mail. Figure 8 shows 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 (Figure 9). They also used roller cancels on their packages and very rarely on their office mail.

Two rollers were proofed for the Brown's Nurseries post office: #'s 1 and 2.

Roller number 2 has not been recorded used. 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 in Figure 10 to cancel an Edward VII 1-cent (Canada Scott 89) 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 firm went out of business in the 1920s.

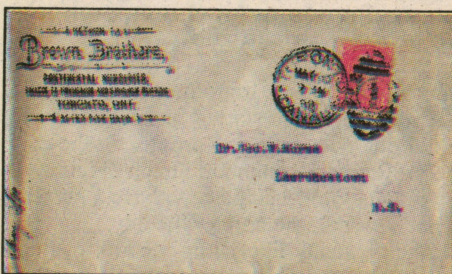


Figure 4: The earliest known Brown Brothers cover posted when the firm was located in Toronto.



Figure 5: The Brown Brothers administrative handstamp used as a canceler.



Figure 6: Nine-bar obliterating device and the latest known use of the split-ring handstamp.

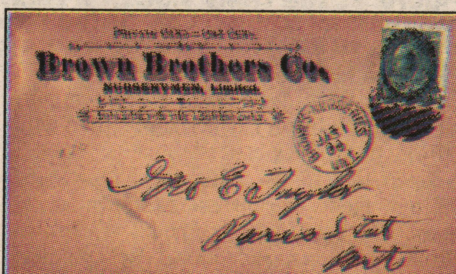


Figure 7: Early use of the duplex cancel.



Figure 8: One could also use Brown's Nurseries Post Office to send out personal mail.



Figure 9: One of the scarce Brown's Nurseries precancels.

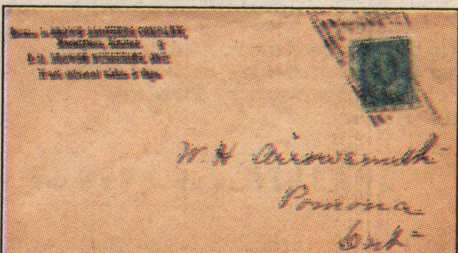


Figure 10: The Brown's Nurseries roller cancel.

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