

What's your
Celebration?
Post it Now!



Just Married!

Life**news**.ca

Guelph**Mercury**.com

<http://news.guelphmercury.com/News/article/551936>

[\[Close\]](#)

Biltmore history turned on its well-dressed head

SCOTT TRACEY

GUELPH — Everyone in Guelph knows the Biltmore hat company was founded in Niagara Falls in 1917 and two years later moved to the Royal City, where the name was changed from the Fried Hat Co. to capture the elegance of New York's Biltmore Hotel.

Right?

At the company's production facility, on Morris Street, visitors are greeted with a large carving recognizing the company's 1917 founding date, and two years ago Biltmore celebrated its 90th anniversary as a premium hatmaker.

But it seems that official history is wrong. New information suggests Biltmore is at least a few years, and maybe almost three decades, older than previously believed.

An unlikely find a quarter-century ago — and some more recent digging through yellowed business directories — turns the company's oft-repeated history on its well-dressed head.

After a lengthy feature story about Biltmore ran in *The Mercury* recently, Guelph barber George Zacher arrived at the newspaper's front counter clutching a smooth grey beaver felt fedora.

The hat bears the Biltmore name, an early variation on the company's crest — with two lions, instead of the later griffins, holding a coat of arms — and the still-used slogan "Canada's Master Hatters."

But it also reads, quite clearly, "Founded 1890."

"When I first saw that article I thought, 'That article is wrong,'" Zacher explained. "Either that or where the heck did this hat come from?"

Good question.

Eric Lynes, the Kentucky native who bought Biltmore four years ago, confirmed the hat appears to be a genuine Biltmore given its design and construction.

"It definitely looks like one of ours," Lynes said recently when shown Zacher's hat. "That would be comparable to our top-of-the-line hat now. That's an expensive hat."

Lynes wouldn't hazard a guess how old the hat might be, but a perusal of vintage hat band material in Biltmore's collection didn't turn up anything comparable to the grey band encircling Zacher's chapeau.

"It's old," Lynes said in his slow southern drawl. "I know that for sure."

Zacher found the old Biltmore in the mid-1980s while helping a friend tear down a cottage in Wasaga Beach.

The hat was in the ceiling of the cottage, inside a hat box so old it crumbled and fell apart when Zacher touched it. Under the box was a Simpson-Sears catalogue from around the turn of the century.

But Jonathan Walford, a freelance fashion consultant and writer, said the colour and style of band on Zacher's hat suggests it dates to the late 1950s or early 1960s.

Walford, curatorial director of the Cambridge-based Fashion History Museum, noted fedoras largely went out of style shortly after that, which might explain why Zacher's hat seems to have had little wear.

Zacher said he doesn't care for the style of the hat, which has been hanging on a hook in his recreation room for about 25 years, and doesn't wear it.

He took the hat into Biltmore a few years ago, and staff confirmed it was one of theirs but could not explain the 1890 notation.

But a bit of digging at Biltmore revealed at least one other reference to the earlier date.

Hanging on a wall in the factory outlet store, across from a series of large black and white photos of the plant in its heyday, is a display showing the materials and processes that go into creating a beaver-blend hat. On that display are two linings, each bearing the words "Lord Biltmore." One reads "Founded 1890" while the other reads "Established 1890."

"Man, you're going to rewrite our whole history," Lynes said recently when the wall display was pointed out by a *Mercury* reporter. "That's cool."

Indeed, it now seems impossible that the company's official history is accurate.

Jack Lambert has been around hats most of his life. He formerly owned New York City's J.J. Hat Centre, one of the biggest hat stores in North America, and for an eight-year period beginning in 1988 was Biltmore's U.S. sales manager.



Ryan Pfeiffer, Special to the Mercury
GUELPH, ON. October 13, 2009 - Old Biltmore hat
for story by Scott Tracey. (Ryan Pfeiffer/Freelance)

He's not aware of any early Biltmore history other than the widely-reported timeline, nor is he aware of any other company using the Biltmore name prior to 1919.

"I've never heard of anything like that and I've been doing this for 34 years," Lambert said from North Carolina, noting the annual Hat Life Directory shows no other hatmaker ever using Biltmore in its name.

Guelph's Michael McMillan worked at Biltmore from 1963 until 1982, and for the last decade of his time there was the company's president.

"Very little of our time was spent actually looking into the history of the company," McMillan recalled recently, adding he knows 1917 is a significant date in the company's history, "but I don't recall that as the founding date."

Indeed, a perusal of old directories suggests the company is at least a few years older than previously believed, and that 1917 was actually the year the company landed in the Royal City.

While it has long been held John Fried started his company in Niagara Falls in 1917, the Vernon's Guelph Directory of that same year showed the Fried-Grills Hat Company was already located on Suffolk Street in the Royal City. It was in a facility occupied a year earlier by food manufacturers McNeill and Libby.

In the 1921 directory, Frank Ramsey is listed as the firm's general manager. Ramsey was a former accountant at Fried's. He bought the company with two partners, in April, 1920. A year later, the company's name had been changed to Biltmore Hats Limited.

While Ramsey claimed the new name was inspired by a visit to the Biltmore Hotel, in New York City, it turns out that is not the only luxury hotel to figure into Biltmore's lore.

While it was in Toronto, Fried-Grills was located at a Front Street address on which the Fairmont Royal York Hotel was subsequently built in the late 1920s.

None of which, of course, explains the 1890 reference.

"I'm intrigued by this 1890 thing," Dr. Andrew Thomson said. "I don't know how to explain it."

The former president of the Guelph Historical Society, Thomson penned the history included in the 'About us' section of the company's website, using historical materials which repeated the assertion the company was founded in 1917.

Thomson suggested perhaps the Fried-Grill Hat Company at some point enveloped an older hat maker "but I have no evidence of that."

Walford, of the Fashion History Museum, also suggested Fried might have started his company by buying an existing company.

"This is not an uncommon practice in the world of business," Walford wrote in an email. "I know of more than one company that says they were founded in a certain year, well before they really began, because they are referring to the company their company bought out."

"It doesn't surprise me that the history of a company could get fuzzy over time," Thomson said.

But while Biltmore's history is less than crystal clear, some are more concerned with seeing the company have a long future after a past marked with strikes, bankruptcies and temporary closures.

"We down here in the U.S. have our fingers crossed, because in my opinion Biltmore makes the best hats in North or South America," former company official Lambert said.

"It's a real quality product."

GuelphMercury.com

<http://news.guelphmercury.com/News/article/551936>



© Copyright 2007 Metroland Media Group Ltd. All rights reserved. The reproduction, modification, distribution, transmission or republication of any material from www.thespec.com is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Metroland Media Group Ltd.

