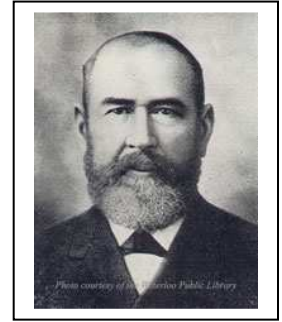


# J. Karl (Charles) and son John Charles Mueller



Charles Mueller was an immigrant from Germany who learned the trade of making barrels before paying \$200 for a pie-shaped piece of land next to his home on Regina Street in Waterloo.

On this land Mueller constructed a small frame building, and there continued the hard work of turning the finest white oak into barrels, using only his hands and a few tools. When he started out in 1872 he had three employees, and was making three barrels a day.

Mueller had learned the cooper trade while working for William Hespeler at the Waterloo grist mill. It was there that Mueller began to “formulate ideas on how he could parlay his particular talent into a business of his own. He began to make wooden tubs on his own selling them as far as Hamilton. It was said that no wooden container, regardless of shape, size or use was too difficult for him to make.”

An early description of the trade provides a glimpse into Mueller’s world in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Waterloo.

*“Apprentices seated at shingle benches, using a draw knife, shaped the wood into barrel staves. The staves were left to dry outdoors for over a year. Then the cooper began the laborious task of fitting the staves into the shape of a barrel held together with iron or steel hoops, but without glue, which would be leak proof.*

*Steam was used to bend and fit the staves and the interior, if being used for the storage of whiskey, would be charred over a fire in order to give the whiskey its colour and taste. A wooden top was fitted into a groove, a bung hole was drilled and finally the wooden barrel bottom was installed.”*

The Charles Mueller Company prospered, and under the direction of Mueller’s son John Charles, production became increasingly mechanized. John Charles had entered the business in 1894 and began to push for modernization, while his father held fast to the tradition of hand-made barrels. The elder Mueller finally capitulated when his son threatened to leave for the United States if they did not modernize the plant.

The first machine-made barrel was produced in March of 1903; that same year the senior Mueller retired from active service in the business. Two years later, John Charles Mueller became aware of a large parcel of land near the Seagram distillery. After negotiating a tax break with the Town of Waterloo in 1905, Mueller built a large plant, and was soon producing 600 barrels per day.

The business continued to thrive and became Canada’s largest cooperage. By 1914, its daily output was 1,000 barrels. Mueller balanced his business interests with community

involvement. He is remembered as one of the principal founders of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, now Wilfrid Laurier University.

Preceding his father's death by some years, John Charles Mueller died at the young age of 41 in 1916, leaving behind four children and a widow. The business was sold to the Seagram family after his death, and the name was changed to Canada Barrels and Kegs, and eventually Canbar.

*Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library*