

# LYONS PEPPERMINT KINGDOM ONCE FAMOUS

Wayne County today is noted for its rich orchards and mucklands. It is second in the nation in the production of cherries.

Once upon a time peppermint was its major crop; Lyons was the center of the essential oils industry in America and Hiram G. Hotchkiss of Lyons was known as “the Peppermint King.”

The scepter has departed from the fields of Wayne. Now most of the nation’s peppermint is grown and distilled in Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, with Oregon and Washington newcomers in the field. Wayne County farmers gave up cultivating peppermint and other herbs because other crops yielded much greater profit per acre.

But because of the prestige of the Hotchkiss name in the world market, the 120 year old H.G. Hotchkiss International Prize Medal Essential Oil Co. in Lyons still ships considerable oil of peppermint. Most of it goes abroad. “The Peppermint King” created an international market and his descendants carry on the business he founded.

Nowadays, the oil in drums is trucked to Lyons from the producing areas. There it is stored in a 12 by 24 foot vault. It is subjected to the exacting Hotchkiss tests, packaged and shipped out by truck. So a pleasant spicy aroma still clings to Lyons, the onetime capital of “the Peppermint Kingdom.”

HERE’S A CAPSULE story of the cultivation and harvest of peppermint:

After the land was fitted and marked about three feet apart, roots one eighth to one quarter of an inch long were set out by workmen carrying sacks of them. The roots were set out close together.

When the plants with the dark green lace-like leaves flowered into pink blossoms late in August, the harvest began and continued into September. Before mowing machines came into use, men cut the crop with scythes. Then it was piled into windrows like hay, and when dry, was pitched off into the vats. There men trod it down.

Then the oil was extracted by a process of live steam forcing it into condensing vats of cold water. Farmers tried to feed the waste straw to their stock but the pungent odor of peppermint repelled the animals.

The yield per acre ranged from 12 to 50 pounds. The flatlands along the water were best for peppermint growing. The crop was rotated because peppermint exhausts the soil. Corn was usually the alternate crop.

There were several stills in Wayne County but the Hotchkiss people were the biggest operators, with two distilleries, one near the canal and the plant, and the other on the Pilgrimport Road. Long ago both were dismantled.

“The Peppermint King” constantly studied new methods. He imported peppermint roots from England and crossed them with the native breed. Thereby he increased the yield and developed a “Black Mint.” He also distilled other essential oils, including sassafras, wintergreen, spearmint, wormwood, and bergamot. Until recent years wormwood grown around Phelps went to France for making absinthe.

But through all its history, the major product of the Hotchkiss firm has been peppermint.

In the old days the oil was put into distinctive dark blue bottles, some of them lipped (they are a collector’s item today); made especially for H. G. Hotchkiss by the big Ely Glass Works in nearby Clyde.

After the Ely plant quit operation, the Hotchkiss Co. had to switch to amber colored bottles, which are used today.

On each bottle is the slogan coined by the Peppermint King: “One 21 ounce bottle of Peppermint Oil will give the correct flavor to a ton of candy.”

Besides confections, peppermint oil is used for pharmaceutical products, dentifrices and ointments.

The top labels on the bottles are printed from the original brass plate of the American Bank Note Co. Each bottle is wrapped in a facsimile of the certificate awarded the first Hiram G. Hotchkiss at the 1851 London Exhibition, bearing the signature of Albert, Queen Victoria's consort.

The wrappings are attached to the bottles with sealing wax heated by a candle. Screw tops have supplanted corks for the bottles, which are shipped in crates which are made on the premises. One thing has not changed. The entire packaging operation is by hand.

In the old days all shipments were by canal. In the floor of the Water Street plant the old trap door through which the wicker demijohns of oil were raised from the canal barges is still visible. Now the waterway had been diverted from Water Street and bypasses the village business section. The era of the canal yielded to the railroads. Now it is the age of the motor trucks.

In 1894, the original plant built by "the Peppermint King," now the site of the creamery a few doors from the present building, burned. H.G. was then 84 years old. He died three years later.

He had three sons and eight daughters. One son, Leman, died early. Calvin became president and manager and held 51 per cent of the stock at his death in 1925. The second Hiram was interested in the business and especially in growing methods. He sought a crop to alternate with peppermint and imported sugar beets from Germany, as well as inventing a beet harvester. He became president on the death of his brother, Calvin, who had striven valiantly to keep the business booming.

With the dawn of the new century the peppermint production in Wayne County began to dwindle. More and more mint was grown in the Midwest, south of the Great Lakes. There also was competition from Japan. The Hotchkiss firm kept its standards and many of its old customers. But the "the Peppermint Kingdom" in Wayne County was doomed. Farmers were turning to more profitable crops – fruits and vegetables.

On the death of his father in 1926, the third Hiram Gilbert Hotchkiss bought out the majority of the stock and took control. A civil engineer, he was long in the service of the state and was once deputy Highway Commissioner of New York. He lived in Albany and Rochester before taking over the family business.

A courtly gentleman who resembles in appearance his grandfather, the third Hiram remembers the lush days of the industry. Nowadays he relies heavily on his daughter, Anne, in the operation of the family business.

She knows every phase of the industry which she entered after her graduation from Keuka College. She can tell you, for instance, that the oil from the Middle West is superior to the Pacific Coast product because the latter is grown under irrigation. She bemoaned the demise of the F.E. Reed Glass Co. in Rochester, for now she has no place to buy blown glass bottles and has to take ordinary stock.

Miss Anne recently returned from a tour of England and Holland, where she called on the trade just as her great-grandfather did in his time. She did not take along oil in fancy flagons. She did not have to.

The Hotchkiss name is better known in Europe than in this country. Many European customers are the same firms that bought from "the Peppermint King" when he visited the world fairs and brought home the medals that made the name of Hotchkiss a proud one in the essential oils industry.

The flag of quality still flies from the masthead of a 120-year old business in Lyons. It is heartening to see old traditions maintained in a mass production, streamlined world.

I left the old shire town steeped in peppermint lore. I hope I have extracted the essence of the story.

**Editors note:** This article was written by Arch Merrill and appeared in the July 5, 1959 issue of the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*.

