

Bradford to Ottumwa

England in October of 1827 was a nation in economic distress. Two wars with its former colonies in the New World and another waged on the continent brought higher and higher taxes for its people. Even to enjoy a bare existence everyone capable or old enough worked. This situation was particularly true in England's industrial cities, such as Bradford in Yorkshire. However, Bradford's woolen mills did provide steady employment for its workers, one of whom was George Morrell.

The Morrell family was composed of the father, mother, six sons, and a daughter. Except for the mother, Elizabeth, all worked in the mills and it took their combined earnings to live. Conditions changed for the better when Robert Hubie, Elizabeth's uncle, died and left her a bequest of £80, about \$225 in today's funds.

One morning as he walked along the canal connecting Bradford with the sea, George noticed a bargeload of oranges. Throughout the day, at his job as a wool-comber, his thoughts returned to the oranges. At a family discussion it was decided to use the bequest to buy the oranges and sell them on the streets of Bradford. That decision, in October of 1827, represented the beginning of John

Morrell & Co., today this nation's 94th largest major corporation and an important factor in the industrial life of Iowa.

Commenting on the use made of the bequest by the Morrell family, George M. Foster, retired president of the company and now honorary chairman of its board, said:

Handling that legacy as George Morrell did, came out like winning the daily double. In 99% of similar cases, the capital would be lost and they would be back at work in the mills worse off than before.

Realizing a profit from the sale of the oranges, George Morrell reinvested the money in fruits and green groceries. Soon with a thriving business, Morrell took a stall in the Bradford Public Market. In 1830 another stall was occupied and the retail sale of hams, bacon, cheese, butter, and eggs initiated. The firm grew rapidly when it began curing its own hams and bacon.

In 1842 the company passed through a financial crisis and it was only through the intervention of George's son, John, that the business was saved. John took control and as sole owner changed the firm's name to John Morrell & Co.

Under his direction the company's steady growth continued. A plant in Castlecomer, Ireland, was opened in the 1850's. Butter, eggs, and poultry were purchased and pigs slaughtered for shipment to England. American bacon, flour, meat, and groceries were sold to the Irish trade.

By 1859 business had increased to such an extent another branch was opened in Kilkenny.

Joining the Castlecomer plant at this time was William Foster. Orphaned at ten, Foster had become a member of the George Morrell household when he accepted a job in one of the Morrell shops. It was thus he met Mary, George's daughter. They were married in 1845.

Accompanying the family to Ireland was a son, Thomas Dove Foster, who was destined to go to America and increase the stature of the Morrell name far beyond heights anticipated by George Morrell or his son, John.

Working on the dock one day, young Tom noticed a box of American bacon on which were stenciled the lines, "Mitchell, Ladd & Co., Ottumwa, Iowa, U.S.A." An avid reader of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Tom, with visions of Indians passing before his eyes, resolved to visit America and find that town with the Indian name. Speaking of this incident in later years, he noted: "I never forgot the name Ottumwa; somehow it stuck in the back of my brain although I had only a hazy idea of its location."

With successful operations in Ireland and a growing business in England, John Morrell sold the Bradford premises and moved to Liverpool in 1860. The movement of American bacon to the English market forced still another move, the opening of a New York buying office in 1864. Huge

quantities of cheese, butter, hams, and bacon were exported to England. Later hams, bacon, and other meats made up the bulk of the shipments.

Thomas D. Foster arrived in New York on July 25, 1868. In a letter to his parents written that same year Foster commented on some of the problems of a bacon buyer:

The bacon business was carried on largely on the west side by wholesale butchers who bought dressed hogs and cured them in their cellars. . . The hogs were cut warm, and in the summer time, all boned—long clears, and bellies. The only chilling was a piece of ice on the shoulder-end of the sides. The cellars were kept at a temperature of 45° to 50°. I was the inspector and had great trouble with the curers on account of the unsatisfactory flavor of the meat and the many tricks resorted to to work off the boxes of rejected pieces with the boxes of good.

The first Morrell slaughtering house on the North American continent was opened in London, Ontario, Canada, in 1868. Hogs were slaughtered, and the meat cured and shipped to England during the cooler months. Warm weather restricted shipments to butter and cheese.

In the fall of 1871 Foster, who had been transferred to the Canadian plant, was sent to Chicago. There he opened the first Morrell plant in the United States in leased quarters at the corner of Archer Avenue and Quarry Street.

Foster became manager of the company's business in the United States and Canada in 1872. Be-

cause he knew meats, it was Foster's decision to concentrate on the product he knew best. Thus meat became the basis of Morrell business on this continent.

On June 24-25, 1874, Thomas Dove Foster toured Ottumwa, Iowa, one of several cities visited in search of a location which would bring Morrell closer to the choice livestock of the American corn belt. While in Ottumwa he visited packinghouses operated by Peter Ballingall and Ladd. Foster's notes on the Ottumwa stop were succinct:

Looked through Ballingall's packing house situated on the Des Moines River. Country all wooded and hilly. Went to Mr. Moss' to tea and Mr. Palmer's croquet party.

Price of hogs fifty to seventy-five cents below Chicago—can get moderate selection—sometimes send drovers out—but generally can get hogs brought in—hogs are fed and watered here—freight over Chicago 10 cents to 20 cents average 15 through to Liverpool.

In the meat packing business one would hardly expect the hand of fate to intervene in one way or another. But consider these facts:

George M. Foster has recorded his amazement at George Morrell's use of his wife's legacy in starting the business. Now here is Thomas D. Foster in Ottumwa, Iowa, the town with the Indian name that had been stenciled on boxes of bacon he had unpacked as a lad on an Irish dock. In Ottumwa one of his guides was Captain J. G. Hutchison, a man Foster had met on a boat trip from England to the United States.

During his business lifetime Foster must have crossed the Atlantic at least once a year—possibly 70 times. He knew every ship on the run and was a passenger when it took from ten to twelve days in the 1870's to the six day trips of 1912. During these trips Foster would check the passenger list and so it was that he came across the names "Ottumwa" and "Iowa" again. The passenger was Captain Hutchison. A solid friendship between the two men was formed. Foster agreed to visit Hutchison in Ottumwa sometime. In making arrangements for that western tour, Foster remembered his promise and scheduled Ottumwa as one of the stops.

The Canadian plant was closed in 1874 and all slaughtering operations concentrated in Chicago.

In June of 1877, Foster received the long awaited instructions to locate a new plant in the corn belt. He moved immediately. Ottumwa's Mitchell, Ladd plant, on the north bank of the Des Moines River near Vine Street, was leased and arrangements made to begin slaughtering with the arrival of cold weather. Foster gave these reasons for his decision to locate in Ottumwa:

I selected Ottumwa because of the railroad facilities, the abundant water supply, the proximity of the raw product, the natural beauty of the city, and the friendliness of the people. . . "This is the place," I said, "and I never regretted the choice."

Sent from Chicago to help staff the new plant

were C. E. L. Gregson, manager; Thomas Swords, ham trimmer; Jack Kinsella, gutter; Jerry Drennan, hog scraper; Adam Urich, side trimmer; and R. N. Morrell, office. When Foster arrived in Ottumwa to take over active direction of the plant, Gregson returned to Chicago. Swords became the plant's first superintendent.

The first hogs were killed on November 13 and on January 9, 1878, the *Ottumwa Daily Courier* reported that "Notwithstanding the few weeks of unfavorable weather, they have killed about 9,000 hogs since the middle of November to date." The *Courier* also noted that the plant was "cutting meats not only for England and European trade generally, but for the local, western, southern and eastern market."

While the Ladd plant served well that first winter, it was apparent there could be no expansion in killing operations. Early in 1878, land on which the present plant stands was purchased, and the first building erected and occupied. During the winter of 1878-1879, a force of 110 men were employed in the new plant and a full crew worked at the Ladd premises.

John Morrell continued his personal ownership until his death on June 16, 1881. He left the business to four nephews, sons of his brothers and sister. The nephews elected George Morrell chairman (president) and Thomas D. Foster was continued in charge of American operations.

The Chicago plant was closed in 1888, and slaughtering operations concentrated in Ottumwa.

Two years previously the English company took quarters at 57 Victoria Street, Liverpool. English headquarters have continued there ever since.