In 1884, a large flour mill was established on Talbot Street West, on the village’s outskirts. It was to become for some time, Blenheim’s largest industry, lasting in spite of changes and a big fire, for a hundred years. Information on the founder’s life and what came to be called the Big Mill has been provided by Jane Rutherford Jenner, a fourth generation member of the Rutherford family.

The founder was a big Scotsman, James Rutherford, known as Big Jim. He came to Canada in 1853, at age 5, and spent his boyhood in Eastern Ontario, where he learned telegraphy and railroading. He married Laura Minerva Burk in 1885, and the couple had seven children.

Mr. Rutherford came to Blenheim in 1872 and was engaged for several years in grain merchandising with other merchant millers, N. H. Stevens, W. E. Neil and W. Hall. He left Blenheim for a brief period but returned and formed the new flour milling firm of Campbell, Rutherford and Sinclair. In 1884, he built what became popularly known as the Big Mill. It was primarily designed for the production of flour.

The mill was five stories high and had a storage capacity of 100,000 bushels. Numerous sheds and auxiliary buildings occupied both sides of what is now No. 3 Highway. Wheat was brought by wagonload and sleighload from as far west as Wheatley, as well as from the nearer farming communities. The grain was brought in bags and manually lifted into hoppers. There were no drying facilities at first; farmers cut the grain in summer, threshed it in the barn in winter and brought it to the mill in the spring. Flour produced at the mill was packed in bags and barrels and shipped by rail car to Boston and the Maritimes. Barrels were important
for overseas shipment; moisture in the air would swell the wooden barrels and make them waterproof.

The mill operator had a considerable white bean business also. At harvest time, up to 50 women would be working in one of the back sheds, sorting beans by hand as they passed on a conveyor belt.

Church building in this decade

Roman Catholic

In 1872, steps had been taken in the tiny Roman Catholic community to build a church for that communion. A French bricklayer, George Halleck, newly come to Blenheim, opened his home for Mass once a month, which was celebrated by Rev. Father Marshall of Chatham.

There was no church of this faith yet in Ridgetown, so some families came from there to the Halleck home for the worship service. Soon the place was crowded and the congregation decided to build a church. Two acres of land on the west side of Chatham north were donated by Harold Labatt of Chatham. Mr. Halleck took the contract for the new edifice and donated the brick. A. L. Bisnett donated the shingles. The church was built in 1875 and was served for a time by the Franciscan Fathers from Chatham.
Mr. Armstrong was born on a farm in Northern Ontario and moved to Sault Ste. Marie at the age of 15 where he was employed in a meat market for the next six years.

He left the business world to study for the Christian ministry at the Toronto Bible College where he earned a Theological diploma. He continued his education at McMaster University in Hamilton where he earned a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degrees. This was followed by two years of graduate study in philosophy at the Ph.D level at the University of Toronto.

He was ordained in 1941 in Blenheim and that same year he married Wilma Goodison of Erie Beach. The Armstrongs have three children.

For the next 27 years, he served in Baptist pastorates in Blenheim, Sudbury, Toronto and Welland. While preaching in Toronto, he also found time to teach history, English and elementary Greek at the Bible College.

Throat trouble resulted in his resignation as a pastor, but led him to the field of Journalism. After receiving a Bachelor of Journalism degree from Carleton University in Ottawa, he became a staff writer at the Kingston Whig Standard where he was employed for seven and a half years writing 3,000 news stories.

Seven years ago, at the age of 65, he retired to Blenheim, but he has been busy supply preaching in the Blenheim area, Chatham, Leamington, and Windsor. Since retiring, he has also written 400 weekly columns in the Blenheim News Tribune. He plans to publish some of these columns in a book.

Mr. Armstrong already has two books to his credit; Buckskin to Broadloom; Kingston Grows Up and the other a biography of M.P. Flora MacDonalld.
THE FIRST 200 YEARS OF BLENHEIM AND SOUTH HARPWICH

By Alvin Armstrong

Commissioned by the Historical Society of Blenheim and District

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The Blenheim News-Tribune
Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of the citizens mentioned here, and to the descendants who will build on their foundation.

The First 200 Years of Blenheim and South Harwich
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PREFACE

"Write us a book on the history of this community, and have it ready for Blenheim's Centennial in 1985," implored the executive of the local historical society.

Against a background of few resources for the early years, and conflicting resources at that, a race against time and the need to compress the story into an affordable book, I have done my best to comply with the request.

It was said of Izaak Walton that "he never hurried; he thought nothing of devoting 10 years to the preparation of a manuscript for the press." Lucky man. He didn't have my sponsors on his tail.

I am fully aware that history, as a record of a community's progress, is itself a growing thing. A first account, which this is, triggers corrections and additional information. It takes a second edition as much as 10 years down the road — a kind of Izaak Walton opus — to be balanced and accurate in every detail.

The present chapters are launched with that clearly in mind.

Alvin Armstrong
April 1985