

Jumbo Oxner, The Merchant of Bridgewater

John Levi “Jumbo” Oxner was one of the most colourful characters of Bridgewater’s early history. Born on August 17, 1834 to a farming family in Dublin Shore, he married Rachel Dorcas Cook, the granddaughter of Henry Cook, who had settled a 2400 acre plot at the falls of the LaHave River around 1790.

By the 1871 census, Levi and Rachel were married and living on the Dublin Shore, with Levi listed as a merchant. The 1881 census shows them living in Summerside –later renamed Dayspring –with two adopted daughters, Jenny Brine, age 8, and Susan Oxner, age 18. Levi was known for being extremely fond of children and for having a huge heart. In 1894, he even donated land for the construction of a schoolhouse for the Bridgewater North/Lower Branch region.

The Oxners built a house on LaHave Street on a lot Levi had purchased in 1864, and by the time Ambrose F. Church mapped Lunenburg County in 1883, Levi had a store, as well as a house known as “Glenwood” – now 793 LaHave Street. The many things he sold included dry goods, groceries, hardware, medicines, hats, caps, boots, shoes, rubbers, ready-made clothing, pine and spruce lumbers, shingles, and much more.

Not content with one store, Levi later opened a store in the lower portion of Starrat’s hotel, downriver of the bridge on Commercial Street (later King Street), selling groceries, dry goods, and hardware. He bought the land opposite the end of the bridge and constructed a large building known as the “Jumbo Block”, running two stores out of this building – a crockery ware and china store, and a dry goods and clothing store. Upstairs there were offices for the Nova Scotia Telephone Company, barrister W. H. Owen, Dr. C. S. Marshall, Customs and shipping offices, and a bank. There was also a newspaper printing office – another key part of Levi’s business since he had bought out the Bridgewater Times and rechristened it the Bridgewater Enterprise. Levi was also the town auctioneer, and many times this allowed him to easily procure interesting items to sell in his stores.

In 1895, insurance salesman William Duff became Levi’s business partner, and the firm became known as Oxner & Duff. Duff married Levi’s adopted daughter, Jennie and later took control of the business, eventually merging the Enterprise, and the Lunenburg Progress, into the presently existing Lunenburg Progress-Enterprise. He also became a successful politician and was appointed to the Canadian Senate.

As with every building along Commercial (now King) Street between Dominion and Dufferin streets, the Jumbo Block burned down in the fire of 1899. This land was extremely valuable, and Judge DesBrisay, who lived immediately behind the building on Pleasant Street, was furious that Levi wouldn’t sell the land to the town to extend a street up the hill from the Bridge (and, ironically, to the front of his house). Levi however, rebuilt. One building was leased to the Bank of Montreal and one portion was sold to the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, which tore down the building in 1922 and constructed the building which now houses the Bridgewater Library. The downriver portion is still standing, and has been incorporated into the neighbouring sporting goods store.

Levi died on September 1, 1911, in Bridgewater and was buried in Brookside Cemetery, with A. R. Sweeney performing the duties of undertaker. On his tombstone, he is simply described as having been “[for] 50 years a merchant of Bridgewater....”