

Isabella Frampton Hawken: Leading Ladies in Niagara's Manufacturing Industry

By Paige Groot

Isabella Frampton Hawken (1878–1952) was a business owner and factory operator in the Niagara region.

In 1907, Isabella and her soon-to-be husband, James Phelps Hawken, made a declaration of co-partnership to “carry on trade and business of renewing incandescent lamps in partnership under the name and first of The Dominion Electric Company.” Although the company was opened under a partnership, the factory and business was primarily owned and operated by Isabella.

Isabella learned the incandescent lamp trade through her employment at the Packard Electric Company in St. Catharines, where she rose to the position of forelady by 1898, and eventually to the manager of the lamp department by the early 1900s.

At the turn of the 20th century, women played an important role in the workforce, mostly in domestic or clerical positions. However, there was also a growing number of women performing physical labour in the manufacturing industry. In 1901, when Isabella would have risen to the rank of forelady or manager of the lamp department at Packard Electric, women made up nearly 22 per cent of employees in Canada's manufacturing sector.

Once Packard Electric closed the lamp department, Isabella opened The Dominion Electric Company, later renamed Dominion Tungsten Lamp Company in 1918. The factory was located at 5 Queenston Street until 1910, when it moved to 181 Church Street, and employed roughly 100 people.

Isabella's factory rewired burnt-out light bulbs and manufactured new bulbs. According to her daughters, Isabella took out several patents for tungsten lamps and rewiring methods. Isabella took great pride in her workers, and ensured they had appropriate training. She even hired famous glassblower Wallace Slater to train the factory's glassblowers.

Difficulties with import and export taxes encouraged Isabella to close her St. Catharines factory in 1925. She opened a new factory called Hawk Electric Company in Lockport, New York that same year. Unfortunately, her patents were not covered under United States law, and the legal battles that ensued over this eventually forced her to shut down the Lockport factory.

Isabella's story reveals important realities for women in manufacturing in the early 20th century.

When the Dominion Tungsten Lamp Company was founded, both Isabella and James' names were listed on the business directory. However, once they were married in 1908—and until James' death in 1918—only James' name was listed on the directory. It wasn't until after his death that “Isobel Hawken” was again listed as the owner.

The absence of Isabella's name from the business directory during her marriage reinforces early 20th-century social standards that women were expected to leave paid employment following marriage to focus on child-rearing.

Lamp and lantern production are categorized under non-ferrous metal industries in the Canadian census. In 1921, when Isabella was listed as owner and operator of the Dominion Tungsten Lamp Factory, women only made up 13 per cent of employees in the non-ferrous metal industry. However, women made up 79 per cent of lamp and lantern makers in Canada. This suggests that lamp making was generally a gendered occupation. Additionally, women made up fewer than one per cent of managers and superintendents in Canada's non-ferrous metal industry. Isabella was one of only 14 women in these roles in the 1920s. Isabella's career as a factory owner and operator in St. Catharines in the early-20th century provides us with insight into the experience some women in Niagara had in the manufacturing industry.

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