

"AND STILL WE GREW....."¹⁾

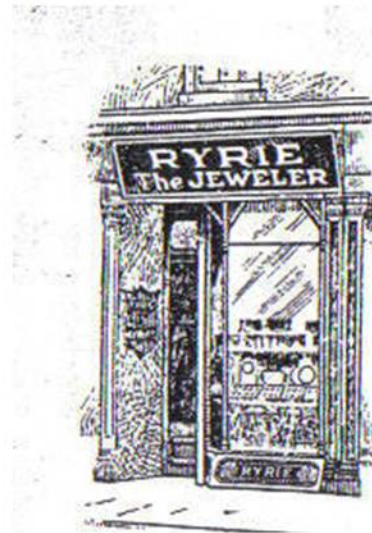
The success of Ryrie Bros. as mirrored in their Toronto Locations.

By Dorothea Burstyn

Ryrie's first location was opened at **113 Yonge Street**, a small store on the east side of Yonge Street with a frontage of only 12 feet. These premises had been known as a jewelry store since 1854, but had most recently belonged to Segworth & Co., watchmaker and jeweler. James Ryrie had apprenticed with Segworth & Co., and had managed the store before taking over as owner in 1879. This opportunity opened since Segworth & Co., wanted to concentrate more on the wholesale side of the business and moved to the Pacific Building at 21 Scott Street.²⁾

113 Yonge Street was a tiny store but had an impressive large sign with "RYRIE The JEWELER" above window and entrance door, another Ryrie sign on the foot of the large window, which featured an attractive pyramid - shaped display of jewelry and watches. From the beginning the firm was a partnership of the Ryrie brothers, even though the name Ryrie Bros. was only registered 1897. Consulting the Toronto address book we find listings for James Ryrie senior, carpenter, at 10 Sydenham. Listed at the same address is James Ryrie as watchmaker and jeweler (only until 1879), William Ryrie, first as piano tuner (1879) and later as commercial traveler (1882), and Henry Ryrie, first as salesman (1879) and later as jeweler (1882). 1883 Harry Ryrie is listed as "watchmaker, employed by James Ryrie with rooms at Suffolk Place.

The authorized Ryrie history – "The Humble History of a Great House" – describes the first firm as a partnership of two brothers, whether this was William or Henry (Harry)³⁾ is unclear. The first few years were difficult – the Ryries "were not strangers to midnight oil and getting up with the lark"⁴⁾ and resulted in a financial loss of



Above: 1st and 2nd Ryrie stores

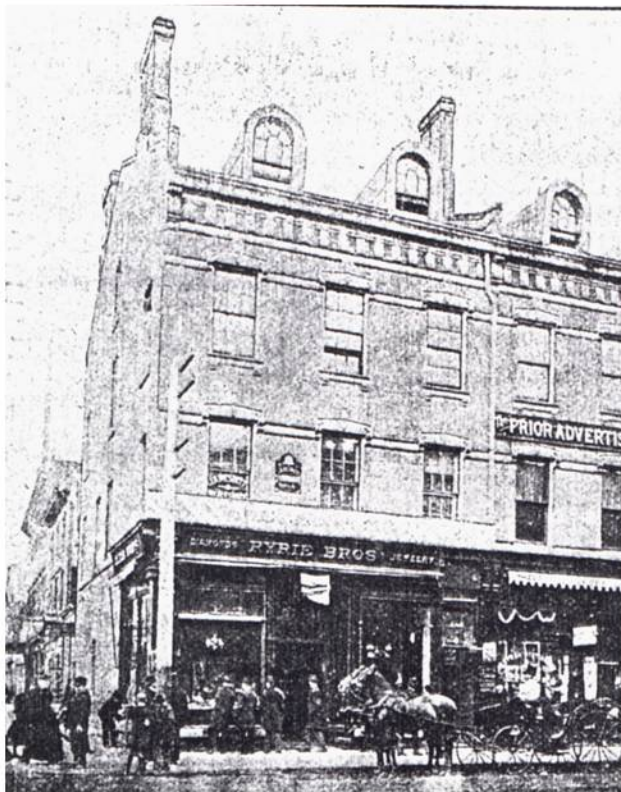
\$ 600.00, a considerable sum, but the Ryries put this down as invaluable experience and fought on. Hard work and continuous effort were rewarded; Ryrie could soon take over the adjoining stationary store. The new storefront had two large display windows, a middle entrance door, a large overhead store sign and a triangular protruding street sign, spelling out "Ryrie The Jeweler" on both sides. Pillars left and right of the storefront contributed to a very attractive and pleasing overall picture. There is no depiction of the inside of the Ryrie store at this time. We do however have an interior view of Lash & Co. as printed in the Canadian Illustrated News 1872, to give us an idea of the outfitting of jewelry stores around this time.⁵⁾ Showcases in a revival gothic style, filled to the brim with silverware and china and fine jewelry, attractive chandeliers and skylights, inviting chairs all over to make customer stay for a while and watch the comings and goings - all point to the fact that mer-

chandising concepts like attractive displays and providing the opportunity for conspicuous consumption, the main principles for selling of luxury goods, were well understood. The Canadian Illustrated News remark about Lash & Co is definitely jubilant: "We take it as an undeniable proof of commercial prosperity of not only Toronto but of Ontario at large, when it can boast of a jewelry business and store which rivals any establishment in the West End of London, it speaks volumes for the refined tastes now being cultivated by residents of the Upper Province."⁶⁾

From 1879 to 1890 the Toronto jewelry industry flourished – comparing the listings in the Toronto address book, we find in 1879: 2 firms listed as jewelers manufacturing, 3 under jewelers wholesale and 12 firms as watchmakers and jewelers, while in 1890: 19 jewelry manufactures, 2 jewelry case manufacturers, 4 silverware dealers and 3 silver-



ware manufacturers, 2 watchcase manufacturers, 7 watchmakers, 1 watchmaker supplier, 20 watches, clocks and jewelry wholesalers and 84 watches, clocks and jewelry retailers are listed. The Ryrie brothers took full advantage of this development. In 1890 they took the large step to move to **118 Yonge Street**, the North - West corner of Yonge and Adelaide Street, (see below). ⁷⁾ They opened the new premises with a festive reception and to vast crowds. "The Trader", official trade journal for the jewelry and silver industry, gives a long gushing description of the new Ryrie store: "The new premises of Ryrie Bros. is such a radical departure in the way fitting up jewelry stores, that we think it would repay every one of our readers to make it a visit and take in the new ideas which this enterprising firm have introduced into it." ⁸⁾ The interior of this store was truly sumptuous in a



late Victorian kind of way. Large plate glass and stained glass windows made by the Studio Elliott & Son, a local firm, provided a "magical" lighting, high domed ceilings with artistic relief décor, cherry wood display cases for silverware and articles of vertu, terraced stands for an assortment of clocks and bronzes and scattered throughout the store a choice collection of piano lamps, fancy onyx tables, pretty chairs and sofas in "a studied disorder give the room a very cozy and homelike appearance". ⁹⁾ The store was also equipped with modern conveniences like gas and electrified chandeliers, a patent carrier on which repair work could be conveyed from the store to the workshops, modern well-lit work shops to the rear and private offices to the left of the store behind an artistic screen of cherry wood and beveled plate glass, from which the owners could oversee store operations. The front featured gorgeous polished brass signs and railings. The "Trader" called it one of the prettiest stores in the US and Canada. The statement: "and what makes it all the more commendable is that this effect has been produced more by the exercise of artistic taste, than the expenditure of large amounts of money"¹⁰⁾ - sounds typical Toronto. After this move Ryrie Bros. again expanded their store, by taking over Fairweather, the Furrier, an adjoining store on Yonge Street and later on purchased two neighboring stores on Adelaide Street, giving them a frontage of 50 feet on Yonge and of 60 feet on Adelaide, which allowed the enlargement of the existing silverware, optical, cut glass and china departments but also provided room for the "dernier cri" of sell

ing technique – the Mail Order Department. Comparable to today's selling on the Internet and through websites the mail-order trade ignited the imagination of every merchandiser. Unfortunately just as today the start-up costs were relatively high and the sales volume - at least in the beginning years— rather disappointing. But it was exactly the mail order business, which promoted Ryrie's next move to even larger quarters. Both Birks in Montreal and Ryrie in Toronto had produced large (almost identical) mail-order catalogues, sending out tens of thousands to customers. And even though Ryrie stated: "These catalogues cost us 50c each, but they are looked for with as much interest as the visits of Santa Claus himself", ¹¹⁾ the expenditure for producing these catalogues was choking both firms. Before 1904, when the two firms combined, each company

had spent more than fifty thousand dollars a year on catalogues. ¹²⁾ A merger would therefore not only radically reduce costs of production but also give Ryrie access to silver- and glassware, manufactured in Birks' Montreal facilities, to prices eliminating the middleman and allow Birks a stronger foothold in the Ontario market. The Mail and Empire reported February 5, 1905 that Henry Birks and Sons of Montreal had secured the lease of the Boisseau building, 4 doors north of Ryrie Bros., on Yonge and Temperance Street. Subsequent negotiations brought about a merger of the two firms. ¹³⁾ Ryrie Bros. Limited was incorporated beginning of 1905 with a capital of \$ 1,000,000 with James Ryrie as president, W. M. Birks as vice-president and Harry Ryrie, secretary-treasurer. Several staff members, "who through long and faithful service

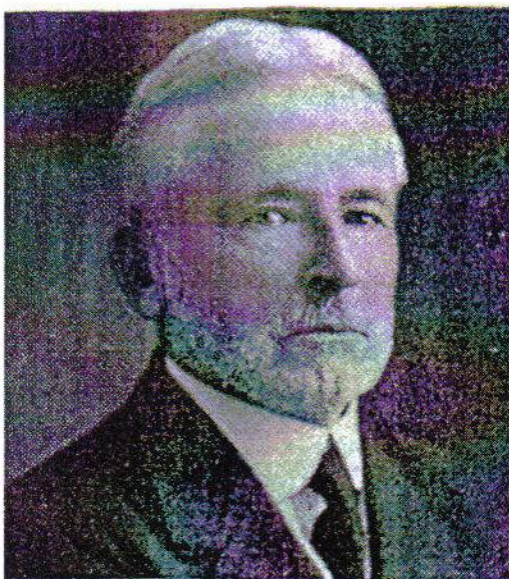


had proved their worth, were permitted to subscribe as stockholders." ¹⁴⁾ In August 1905 the Boisseau building was sold for \$ 300,000 in a real estate deal closed by G. A. Case Limited for the John Cawthra estate. Ryrie Bros. Limited took over the lease of E. Boisseau & Co., and was guaranteed a lease for duration of 21 years, renewable in perpetuity. The rent for the first 13 years was \$ 11000 per year and for the next eight years \$ 12000, which the Cawthra estate received net, since Ryrie had to pay all taxes and insurance. ¹⁵⁾ The new five-storey "Diamond Hall" premises were magnificent, situated on **132-138 Yonge Street** with a frontage of 70 feet on Yonge and 156 feet on Temperance Street. Among its many merits were "unlimited opportunities for attractive display, its dignified store front of solid bronze and mahogany, its inviting vestibule, its entire shop fittings of choicest Spanish mahogany, its massive

marble columns, its elegant diamond room where, unseen of others, quiet selections may be made, its massive vault and three safes with electric burglary protection, its ornate electric light fixtures, its automatic fire alarm system, its telephone switchboard with twenty four long distance phones from the various department, its handsome offices where the click of the almost miraculous adding machines, the ever welcome sound of the pneumatic cash carrying system, and the familiar voice of the typewriters sound like the buzzing of a busy beehive in which, however, there is to be found no place for the drones." ¹⁶⁾ Diamond Hall was the epitome of a modern retail concern, catering to customers in every possible way; conveniences such as toilette rooms, individual lockers and lunchrooms took the need of staff into consideration. It served relatively unchanged for many decades, 1924 the firm changed its



Diamond Hall, 132– 138 Yonge Street



James Ryrie

name to Ryrie, Birks Limited and in 1933 the amalgamation of Birks, Ellis and Ryrie Limited took place. At this time the Ellis twins (Charles Q. and Matthew T. – Nephews of the twins P.W. and M. C. Ellis) joined the firm as managing directors. Upon amalgamation The Trader & Canadian Jeweler printed a letter received from James Ryrie, in which he communicated his best wishes for the new company after stating that his interest in this firm had been "nominal" for the last years. ¹⁷⁾

Before closing, a few words of appreciation for the careers of the Ryrie brothers in business and public life should be added. Relatively little is known of William Ryrie, except that he served later as head of the Ryrie Paper Company and was a Great Priory of Canadian Knights Templar in 1909 and elected Supreme Grand Master in 1911. Harry Ryrie (1862- 1917) is described as a radiant personality and an ardent social worker. He was not only a vice president and later president of the Toronto Board of the YMCA, in which capacity he also directed the building fund for this institution. He was also a trustee of the East End Day Nursery, member of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, member of the foreign mission of his church and an enthusiastic Sunday school teacher, holding a young men's Bible class for many years. He participated in the war effort and was founder of the Red Triangle Club, which contributed to the feeding and sheltering soldiers. Harry died on September 16, 1917 shortly after having received the sad message that his son had been killed in action. He was married to Mrs. Christine Ryrie, who shared his dedication for social work and had

served many years as president and member of the Board of the YWCA. ¹⁸⁾

It was James Ryrie's career, which was called "... one of the business romances of Toronto and Canada". ¹⁹⁾ James Ryrie was not only a man of outstanding business acumen with interests in many companies - besides Ryrie Bros. Limited, he was a director of Imperial Life Assurance Co, the National Trust Co, Ltd, the F. N. Burt Co., the Pacific Burt Co, the American Sales Brook Corp. and other enterprises, ²⁰⁾ but also one of the founding fathers of the Canadian Jewelers Association, ²¹⁾ a councilor at the Toronto Board of Trade and a member of the Citizen Committee appointed to cooperate with the Civic Parks Committee re beautifying and improving the City of Toronto. He was an executive member of the Layman's Missionary movement and participated in the delegation with John Firstbrook to visit Baptist missions in India, Japan and Korea in 1910. He served as a member of the Advisory Board of Young Women's Christian Guild, a Baptist governor and senator of the Mc Master University, where he founded the James Ryrie prize in German. He also was part of Toronto's social scene, being a member of the National Club and the Mississauga Golf Club. ²²⁾

The assessment expressed by The Trader on the occasion of Ryrie Bros. opening their new store in 1890 - "The Ryrie brothers make a good team, they always pull harmoniously together and if their past achievements are any index for the future, they have a long and successful career before them." ²³⁾ had become true.

Endnotes:

- 1) Diamond Hall Catalogue, Ryrie Bros.Limited 1905 - "The Humble History of a great house". "And still we grew..." is a refrain used to emphasize the expansion of Ryrie Bros.
- 2) The Toronto address book lists James Ryrie at 10 Sydenham in 1877 and 1878, 1879 James Ryrie is listed as jeweler at 113 Yonge Street. 1879 Segworth & Co. is still listed at 113 Yonge Street, but also at the Pacific Building at 21 Scott.
- 3) We can assume that Henry and Harry are the same person.
- 4) Ryrie Bros. Diamond Hall catalogue, 1905, ibid
- 5) Lash & Co., in Canadian Illustrated News 1872 in "Mary Fallis Jones: The Confederation Generation, ROM, Toronto 1978
- 6) Ibid
- 7) 1899 - 118-120 Yonge Street
- 8) " Ryrie Bros. New Store" in The Trader, April 1890, page 29
- 9) Ibid
- 10) Ibid, page 30
- 11) The Diamond Hall Catalogue 1905
- 12) A. Robert George: The House of Birks, A History of Henry Birks & Sons, 1946, page 27
- 13) "Jewelry Merger has been formed" in The Mail & Empire, Feb.5, 1905
- 14) Diamond Hall Catalogue, 1905, page 3
- 15) "Bid Deal in Real Estate" in The Mail & Empire, August 1, 1905
- 16) The Diamond Hall Catalogue 1905
- 17) The Trader & Canadian Jeweler, March 1933, page 28
- 18) Henry James Morgan: Canadian Men and Women of the Time. A Handbook of Canadian Biography of Living Characters, Toronto, W.Briggs, Richmond St.W.1912
- 19) "The late James Ryrie" in The Trader & Canadian Jeweler, July 1933, page 22
- 20) George Harry: The way we were. The colorful stirring story of the Canadian Jewelers Association. 60 years and the people who built it. Page 3
- 21) Henry James Morgan, ibid page 989
- 22) "The late James Ryrie" The Trade and Canadian Jeweler July 1933
- 23) "Ryrie Bros.New Store" in The Trader, April 1890,page 29