Swiss company attains some of A.M. Todd's assets

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If motorists traveling in the 1700 block of Douglas Avenue roll down their windows, it's likely they'll enjoy the minty smell that often envelops the neighborhood.

It's the smell of history — and of an era that may be ending.

The 1717 Douglas Ave. site houses the global headquarters for A.M. Todd Group Inc., where final distillation and processing of mint oils and customized blending of flavors take place, said Charles Dodson, the company's director of consumer insights and marketing.

WILD Flavors GmbH, based in Zug, Switzerland, recently announced that it was acquiring some of the company's assets, although it did not specify what those assets would be. While A.M. Todd officials say the current plan is for the employees, building, facilities and equipment to remain in Kalamazoo, "in certain ways, it does represent the end of an era," said Raymond Hughes, chief executive officer of the company.

"The Todd family was responsible for building up the most recognizable international brand for mint expertise over the last 142 years," Hughes said.

"Going forward, the mantle will be passed to WILD, another family company that intends to build on the foundation created by the descendants of A.M. Todd over the past four generations."

Hughes said WILD's goal is to create a new organization that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The parts include the company's 50 workers on Douglas, who are among about 115 company employees in the United States and 200 worldwide that make the mint oils and flavorings used in mouthwash, toothpaste, chewing gum, candy, beverages and other products.

The company, which began operations in Nottawa and moved to Kalamazoo in 1891, has been located at the Douglas site since 1929. It does not disclose the names of its customers, brand names involved or its sales and earning figures.

WILD Flavors, launched in 1931, is much larger than A.M. Todd and part of Rudolf Wild GmbH & Co., of Germany. SNbSIt, too, develops and markets ingredients for the food and beverage industry in more than 70 countries, including the United States.

Whatever A.M. Todd's future holds, its past has shaped Southwest Michigan's agricultural, business and cultural history.

Albert M. Todd was 19 years old in 1869 when he founded the company that a few years later put Southwest Michigan on the map as the world leader in mint production and extraction of mint oil.

Todd then built massive plantations — Mentha, in Van Buren County's Pine Grove Township, and Campaignia, near Fennville, the largest plantation in the world at the time. Then in 1924, a soil-borne fungus, verticillium wilt, was discovered on Michigan mint crops — and part of the Todd company's work became developing plant varieties resistant to the serious disease.

By the mid-1970s, A.M. Todd scientists had introduced two verticillium-resistant peppermint varieties, and through the Mint Industry Research Council, donated them to the U.S. peppermint industry, Dodson said. Other Todd plant varieties, donated by the company in the 1970s, are the backbone of the mint collection at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Clonal Germplasm Repository in Corvallis, Ore.

Even with new resistant varieties, the mint industry has changed, Dodson said. The very large mint farms no longer exist, and these days, he said, A.M. Todd does not grow mint at all, nor does it purchase any Michigan-grown mint.

"All mint oils are purchased from major growers with whom we consult regularly in the areas of pest control, disease resistance and harvest timing," he said.

Not that Michigan has totally disappeared from the mint scene. But as Southwest Michigan soils became contaminated with the wilt organism, which can linger for years, what's left of Michigan's mint production has moved north and east in the state, to Clinton County's St. Johns area.

The family of Tom Irrer, co-owner of Stony Creek Essential Oils, has been growing mint in St. Johns since 1953. He said the basics have changed very little: mint fields are started from cuttings, mowed once or twice a season, the hay steamed and the essential oils captured and shipped in 55-gallon drums to companies like A.M. Todd.

Of the 2,500 acres grown in Michigan, Stony Creek grows about 2,000 acres, which annually yield about 65 pints per acre of peppermint and 85 pints per acre of spearmint, Irrer said.

Fields are rotated to avoid diseases like wilt that can linger in the soil for 50 years, Irrer said, and great care is taken to thoroughly wash all equipment as it moves from field to field. Most growers have their own distilleries and sell the oil; the only markets for mint hay are for garnishment or mint tea, he said.

Michigan's role in the mint industry, nationally and worldwide, has shrunk considerably. Most mint agriculture is now centered in the Pacific Northwest, Dodson said.

In Kalamazoo, aside from the aroma emanating from the Douglas site, the Todd legacy is probably more strongly associated with a multitude of contributions outside of the mint industry. They include:

— Massive collection of fine art donated to area educational institutions

— Rare book collection bequeathed to Kalamazoo College

— Todd farm fields in Fennville that attract tens of thousands of visitors each fall to view hundreds of thousands of migrating giant Canada geese

— Gilmore Car Museum, where a huge, five-story barn that once housed mint hay on one of the early plantations has been restored and now shelters vintage vehicles.

— The science of mint, in the field and in the laboratory, also has benefited from the Todd tradition, Hughes said. A.M. Todd was the first to create tests and specifications to guarantee the quality, purity and consistency of his mint oils, and his creation, Crystal White Peppermint Oil, developed in 1875, remains an industry standard for high quality, premium mint oil to this day, Hughes said.

He said the company has created new mint plant varieties that produce a range of flavors, are more disease resistant and provide higher yields per acre.

"This tradition of using science — biology, agronomy, botany — to create new varieties and species continues today," Hughes said, "with new cultivars being created in our plant science operations in Washington and Oregon.

"No other mint supplier or flavor house can boast a similar operation," he said. "This makes A.M. Todd's mint oils, blends and flavors unique in the industry."

While the industry has experienced plenty of change since the company was founded, Hughes said, "what has not changed is the commitment by A.M. Todd to produce the highest quality mint oils. And that commitment will not change as the company moves forward under new ownership."

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