



Thorold Volunteer Fire Department Protection Hose Company No. 1

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The Bickle Story

By Walt McCall for the Ontario Fire Buffs Association

It is not generally known that one of Canada's oldest and most famous fire apparatus manufacturing enterprises, the Woodstock, Ontario firm of Bickle Fire Engines Ltd. can be traced, at least indirectly, to a well-known pioneer motor fire apparatus builder in the United States.

Had the wife of Robert Sydney Bickle not come from the family behind the Obenchain-Boyer Co. of Logansport Indiana, the venture that began as the R. S. Bickle Co., and which ultimately evolved into Bickle Fire Engines Ltd. and then Bickle-Seagrave Ltd. and which led finally to the formation of a wholly new company, the firm we know today as King-Seagrave Ltd, may never have been launched. The founders of the Bickle legend were three sons of Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Bickle. Robert Sydney, William Russell, and Beverley Ingersoll Bickle, all born in the thriving South-western Ontario town of Woodstock.

Although, over its half-century of continuous production, Bickle manufactured under licence in Canada the products of two of the biggest and most famous U.S. fire apparatus builders, namely, Seagrave and Ahrens-Fox. Bickle at its zenith produced a complete line of rugged, dependable, distinctively Canadian fire engines in its busy Woodstock plant.

Robert S. Bickle and his wife sang on the concert stage in cities and towns across the United States before Mr. Bickle decided, in 1906, to get into the industrial world. Perhaps due to the fact that he had become acquainted with the fire apparatus business through his wife's family, Mr. Bickle made the decision to go into this specialised field in his native Canada. Thus he formed the R. S. Bickle Company in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with himself as president. Shortly after the firm was founded Mr. Bickle sold the City of Calgary, Alberta its first motorized fire engine. In the ensuing years he built many more self-propelled motorized fire trucks for Western Canadian cities and towns. Among the fledgling firm's most popular products were two-wheeled, horse-drawn chemical carts, that were particularly suited to the requirements of smaller communities. Many of these rigs remained in use up until relatively recent times, when it became impossible to any longer obtain the hand-made glass sulphuric acid bottles required to activate the chemical system,

Pioneer fire apparatus salesmen in the Canadian west were evidently, a hardy lot. Often, after spending an evening at a council meeting, Mr. Bickle was unable to secure accommodations in smaller places, and no transportation out of town until the following morning. Thus he spent many a night in tiny railroad stations, curled up as closely as

possible to the pot-bellied stove, which he sometimes had to get up and stake in sub-zero temperatures several times during the night.

Mr. Bickle carried on his business in Winnipeg until 1915, when he decided to pull up stakes and move to Chicago. The fire apparatus business, however, was moved to his hometown of Woodstock, where operations resumed in a rented building at the corner of Main and Hill Streets. The former home of the defunct Woodstock Automobile Co., one of the many early victims of the new automotive age. Later the R. S. Bickle Co. relocated into a building on Graham St. At this time, W. Russell Bickle took charge of the company and George H, King, husband of the Bickle brothers' sister, joined the firm and headed up its sales activities,

During the First World War the Canadian Government ordered from Bickle a number of two-wheeled fire engines for protection of military camps and installations. Business flourished, and Russell Bickle and Mr. King carried on very successfully until a flu epidemic struck. Mr. King passed away in February 1919, leaving his wife with four children and another Woodstock business called the Canadian Morehead Company, a manufacturer of steam traps.

As there was no one left to carry on the Morehead business, as quickly as he could settle his affairs in Chicago, R. S. Bickle returned to Woodstock to take over both Canadian Morehead, for his sister, and the fire engine company in conjunction with his brother, William Russell Bickle. In an efficiency move the R. S. Bickle Company operations were transferred over to the Canadian Morehead plant. At the same time the firm's name was changed to Bickle Fire Engines Ltd., and Beverley Ingersoll Bickle joined the company, heading up the sales department. Company officers now included: R. S. Bickle, President, W. R. Bickle, Secretary-Treasurer and B. I. Bickle, Sales Manager. Bickle Fire Engines Ltd. expanded rapidly and it soon became apparent that more room was needed to accommodate the substantial volume of business now being handled. In 1924 the citizens of Woodstock passed a bylaw permitting a much larger plant to be erected on Young St., directly opposite the Canadian Morehead Co. plant,

In order to round out operations and to more effectively meet vigorous competition from other fire apparatus manufacturers, Bickle in the early 1920's entered into an agreement with the well-known Ahrens-Fox Fire Engine Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio, which permitted Bickle to build the complete Ahrens-Fox line for the Canadian market. Ahrens-Fox used principally the piston type fire pump rather than the rotary gear and centrifugal pumps sold by most other companies. Ahrens-Fox fire engines sold by Bickle in Canada bore the name "The Canadian Ahrens-Fox" on their step plates. Four of the big, distinctive piston pumpers, with their front-mounted pumps surmounted by a gleaming, spherical air chamber, were delivered to Canadian fire departments. The first went to Kingston, Ontario in 1924 where it remains-today in a place of honour in that city's Palace Road fire station. Three others were sold to Hamilton, Ontario in 1926, 1928 and 1930.

Hamilton also purchased a Bickle-Ahrens-Fox city service ladder truck. Bickle-Ahrens-Fox fire engines were soon found in fire halls across the Dominion.

In 1926 the Bickle Co., desiring to have its products better known on the Canadian market as "Strictly Canadian, Built By Canadians", hired Vernon B. King, a bright, young nephew of the Bickle brothers. A recent engineering graduate of the University of Toronto, Mr. King proceeded to design a complete line of custom fire apparatus to augment the apparatus Bickle was then supplying on many makes of commercial chassis. The handsome, dependable Bickle fire engines with their classic gabled hoods and radiators, disc wheels, pleasing lines and distinctive horizontal hood louvers, were offered in four models with pumping capacities that ranged from 350 to 840 Imperial gallons per minute. They were designated the "Volunteer", "Chieftan", "Woodstock" and "Canadian." All components were specially selected for fire service. Fortunately, many of these fine machines are still proudly preserved by the fire departments that originally purchased them, and are highly desired collectors items today,

Bickle-built fire apparatus was available on virtually any truck chassis, from the popular Ford, Chevrolet and GMC to Packard, Ruggles, Kissel and even American-LaFrance, according to a 1930 Bickle sales brochure. The Woodstock plant produced a number of fire engines on the Walkerville built Gotfredson truck chassis. The city of Toronto purchased five big 800 IGPM Gotfredson-Bickle triple combination pumping engines, powered by Sterling six-cylinder motors, in 1927.

Not long after the new custom line went into production, Montreal and Quebec City approached R. S. Bickle with unique requirements for a short wheel-based aerial ladder truck with which to replace the long, tractor-drawn types which had difficulty negotiating some of the narrow streets in those cities. Mr. Bickle contacted the U.S. sales representative for the famous Magirus Fire Appliance Co. of Ulm, Germany. An arrangement was made whereby Bickle would be allowed to import from Germany 100 foot Magirus aerial ladders for mounting on the Bickle custom fire apparatus chassis. Several of these Bickle-Magirus aerials were built, direct forerunners to the compact rear-mounted aerials gaining such wide acceptance in North America today. Montreal bought two-100 foot Magirus serials, on Magirus chassis, in 1930. These units had wooden aerial ladders. In 1939 Montreal purchased another Magirus 100-foot aerial, this one metal, mounted on a Bickle chassis. The next was a Bickle-Seagrave metal 100 footer placed in service in Montreal's busy No. 2 Station in 1950. This unit was still on the Montreal roster in 1970. The 1939 Bickle-Magirus was scrapped sometime in the 1960's,

Due in no small measure to the loyalty of its employees, Bickle Fire Engines Ltd. successfully weathered the lean depression years, when orders dropped sharply.

In the early 1930's Bickle Fire Engines Ltd. concluded an arrangement with the Kenosha, Wisconsin firm of Peter, Pirsch and Sons Co. to build under licence in

Canada the new hydraulically operated 85-foot tractor type aerial ladder truck recently developed by the U. S. firm. Everything but the wood ladder and patented Pirsch hoist were made in the Woodstock plant. Bickle also built, under licence, the versatile Ahrens-Fox "Skirmisher" quadruple combination. One of these "Bickle Underwriter" quads was sold to Mount Royal, Quebec in 1934.

By this time an alliance with The Seagrave Corporation, of Columbus, Ohio was in the offing. The founder of this large firm, Frederick S. Seagrave, and W. E. Seagrave, had established the W. E. Seagrave Fire Apparatus Company in Walkerville (now part of Windsor) in 1900, to build and sell Seagrave fire apparatus in Canada. This firm built a complete range of horse drawn fire apparatus including chemical hose combinations, hose wagons, hook and ladder trucks and spring raised three horse hitch aerial ladder trucks. In 1907 this company delivered to the City of Vancouver, BC the first motor propelled fire apparatus to go into service in Canada, and air-cooled combination car. But intense competition from LaFrance Fire Engine Co. Ltd., a subsidiary of American-LaFrance, which built a plant in Toronto in 1914, had put W. E. Seagrave out of business by 1919. A Seagrave-Lougheed Co. was established in Sarnia in 1923 but it is not known if this concern ever built a fire engine. In March, 1930 a new company called Seagrave Fire Engine Limited went into business in St. Catharines, Ont., assembling and selling the renowned Seagrave custom fire apparatus line to the growing Canadian market.

Officials of Seagrave and Bickle visited each other's plants in the latter part of 1935 to explore the feasibility of having Bickle take over the production and sale of Seagrave fire apparatus in Canada. On January 1, 1936 Bickle obtained this franchise from Seagrave, and the Woodstock company's name was changed to Bickle-Seagrave Limited, This venture was highly successful right from the start. Bickle-Seagrave could now supply Canadian municipalities with virtually any type of pumping engines, crash trucks, combinations and the biggest aerial ladder trucks. The company was soon the largest in its field in Canada. Its products included the new, streamlined open and closed cab models powered by V12 engines and all hydraulic metal aerial ladders ranging in height from 65 to 100 feet. Tractor drawn aerials, never as popular in Canada as in the U.S., were delivered to Woodstock fairly complete from Columbus, Ohio, but Bickle-Seagrave manufactured most other models completely in its own plant.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 brought with it an urgent demand for firefighting equipment of all types and sizes. The Canadian Government awarded Bickle-Seagrave a contract for 1,000 two wheeled, hand drawn and trailer type fire pumps for civil defence service. Orders also poured in for motor fire apparatus including pumpers, crash trucks, dry powder units and other specialised types of apparatus for the protection of airfields, military bases and harbours. To meet Department of Defence production requirements for speedy delivery of this apparatus, a modern machine shop was built adjoining the main Bickle-Seagrave plant. This permitted the company to manufacture, in addition to rotary type pumps; a Bickle-

Seagrave designed centrifugal fire pump and accessory equipment previously purchased from outside suppliers.

With the end of the war and due to ill health, the Bickle brothers decided to retire. In 1945 the company was sold to a Toronto holding company which acquired the rights to continue business under the well-established Bickle-Seagrave name. Business continued at a brisk pace, Among the first post war custom deliveries were a canopy cab pumper for Ottawa. Quebec City placed a large order, which included several tractor drawn aerials equipped with turntable leveller devices. In 1952 the company moved into a large, new plant on Dundas Street at the East End of the city .By far the largest and most modern fire apparatus plant in the country. The new "70th Anniversary" Seagrave line, with streamlined grille incorporating the siren, went into production at Woodstock and the company received a large order for Civil Defence training pumpers for the Canadian Government.

But all was not well. Internal financial difficulties were encountered soon after the move into the new plant. In 1954 Bickle-Seagrave was sold again, this time to a Woodstock industrialist who endeavoured to reorganise it and put it once again on a solid financial footing. In an effort to diversify operations and increase production several new product lines were added, the principal one of these was being a highway road sander. Bickle-Seagrave at this time had on hand a number of unfilled orders for fire apparatus to be built on GMC truck chassis. General Motors, however, had been hit by a prolonged strike, cutting off the vital supply of these chassis, and production was curtailed. This, compounded by other financial difficulties, forced Bickle-Seagrave Ltd. into bankruptcy in February 1956, ironically, the company's 50th-anniversary year. The big plant was closed, then sold.

Another entirely new chapter, however, was about to begin. Vernon B. King, the man who had designed the highly successful Bickle custom line back in the 1920's, was still very prominent on the Woodstock industrial scene. His truck body and trailer business had done remarkably well, and his plants were among the largest employers in the city. Mr. King was a natural to step in and pick up the remnants of the fire engine business and start anew. Operations resumed in one of his plants within a matter of months, The new company was called King-Seagrave Ltd. It continued to build Seagrave fire apparatus under licence, as well as a full range of commercial chassis jobs built up almost entirely in the Woodstock plant.

In 1962 King-Seagrave Ltd. moved into a spacious new plant on the city's north side. This plant has nearly doubled in size since. Production is about evenly divided between fire apparatus and road sanders. Everything but some custom chassis components and aerial ladder assemblies, brought in from the Seagrave Fire Apparatus Division of FWD Corp. in Clintonville, Wisconsin, is fabricated right on the premises. King-Seagrave began deliveries of elevating platforms in mid 1960. A number of these aerial towers, mounted on heavy-duty commercial chassis, were delivered to Canadian cities, These

units were equipped with "Strato-Tower" articulating booms made for King-Seagrave by a division of Paul Hardeman Inc. of Bowling Green, Ohio. In 1969 King-Seagrave obtained exclusive Canadian franchise rights for the famed products Of the Snorkel Fire Equipment Co. of St. Joseph, MO.

Under the Canadian designation of "Sky King", these 50 to 85 foot elevating platforms, "Squirt" master stream booms, and "Tele-Squirt" combination aerial ladder, water tower units are now being supplied in increasing numbers mounted on all types of commercial chassis specified by fire departments, large and small, across Canada.

Pumpers built by King-Seagrave Limited are equipped with Hale pumps. In mid 1972 King-Seagrave took over the manufacture of Duo-Safety fire service ladders from LaFrance, which ceased operations in Canada the previous year. In keeping with the current industry trend most King-Seagrave fire engines are built on commercial truck chassis. The King-Seagrave product line ranges from small, front mounted pumpers, to diesel powered 1050 IGPM jobs, tankers of up to 2500 gallon capacity, 65 to 100 foot aerial ladder trucks with mid-ship and rear mounted ladders, elevating platforms, and quadruple and quintuple combinations of the most modern design. The company is proud of its tradition and craftsmanship and has its own large engineering and drafting department.

Not surprisingly, the City of Woodstock has always purchased Bickle build fire engines. In 1972, a chrome yellow 1050 IGPM King-Seagrave pumper joined the Woodstock Fire Department, perpetuating a proud Woodstock heritage. And the classic 1928 Bickle pumper it replaced, designed by Mr. King himself, awaits restoration and enthronement in a planned King-Seagrave museum.