

Baker's Apprentice

Trade



George Weston, ca. 1899.

George Weston was still a boy, just twelve years old, when he was apprenticed to a Toronto baker. For young George, the day started early and the hours were long. But he applied himself and learned all that he could about his trade.

Two decades later, George Weston was Canada's biggest baker, known throughout Toronto for his *Real Home-Made Bread* and some years later as the maker of *Weston's Biscuits*. A prominent local businessman who actively took part in the civic and religious life of the city, he laid the foundation for an enterprise that, over succeeding generations, would expand beyond national and continental borders to become an international concern.

Born in 1864 at Oswego, New York, George and twin brother Joseph were four years old when their parents, William and Ann Weston, returned to Ontario with their family. They had immigrated to Canada from England a decade earlier but continued to struggle. George's father, who found various employment, wasn't known as especially ambitious. If George got his drive from anyone it may have been from his mother, who did what she could to keep the family's head above water.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Should be Learned



George Weston, standing far right, with his father and brothers, ca. 1890.

From an early age, George Weston aspired to become a “minister of the gospel” — he remained a devout Methodist throughout his life — but the family lacked the finances to fund a higher education. With public school under his belt, young George was sent out into the workforce to help supplement the family income.

George was first apprenticed to a steamfitter but apparently didn't like the work. He then became an apprentice to a baker by the name of C.J. Frogley at 497 Yonge Street, north of College Street, in Toronto. It was here where George learned the art of making bread. For his labour, he earned \$1.75 a week. George must have shown promise, since he was soon given added responsibilities, such as bookkeeping. He remained with Frogley for a number of years, as the baker moved to larger quarters further north on Yonge, towards Bloor Street.

Another baker, Gilbert H. Bowen, took over Frogley's original location but after a year moved the business to 1 Sullivan Street, not far from today's Art Gallery of Ontario. Bowen hired George and took enough interest in the lad to see that he “learned the business the way it should be learned.” As a salesman for Bowen, going door-to-door with a wagonload of bread, George became ever more familiar with the retail side of the trade.

Over the course of his young career George had done everything from harnessing the horses to baking and delivering bread to checking receipts and keeping the books. He was now ready to strike out on his own.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Called on Every Customer



Bakers and bread route salesmen at George Weston's bakery on Sullivan Street, Toronto, ca. 1895.

In 1882, George Weston went into business for himself, buying a bread route from his employer. His business prospered and two years later he bought the bakery from Bowen. Years later, George Weston recalled those early days:

"I baked 250 loaves the first day. I delivered them — drove my own wagon — called on every customer myself."

Weston soon hired his first employee, and then a second. It was on Sullivan Street where George, with one old wood-burning oven and two young journeyman bakers, developed his *Real Home-Made Bread*. He used the best of ingredients, namely Manitoba No. 1 hard wheat and Ontario fall wheat, combined "in about equal proportion." As his bread became increasingly popular, he found it necessary to expand his premises at least four times.

George Weston also began introducing the latest equipment to modernize the baking process, such as mechanical mixers to prepare the dough. By the 1890s, he had renamed his bakery G. Weston's Bread Factory. But while modern machinery and a bigger bakery made for a more efficient operation, George attributed the success of his business to one thing. "Merit did it — the merit of my bread. You won't find any better bread made than mine. Folks all like it. Every year adds new customers."

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Model Bakery



George Weston's Model Bakery, Soho and Phoebe streets, Toronto, ca. 1897.

As his business outgrew the bakery on Sullivan Street, George Weston made plans for a new, much larger, and very modern bread factory, which he called his Model Bakery.

In the fall of 1897, the Model Bakery swung into production with an initial output of 20,000 loaves a week and the capacity to double that number. Soon, George Weston's new factory was turning out more bread than any other bakery in Canada. No fewer than 30 different kinds of bread were baked, with his *Real Home-Made Bread* still the most popular.

In addition to its ability to turn out thousands of loaves of bread, the Model Bakery quickly gained a reputation for being spotlessly clean. While bakery, wagon room and stables were all housed under one roof, each was kept separate to ensure a product free of contamination. *The Evening Telegram* told its readers of the "exquisite cleanliness and neatness" of the operation, and how "one could spread a white cover anywhere without in the least soiling it." The paper was impressed enough with George Weston's Model Bakery to write, "it should be an incentive to every young man who starts life with brains and determination as capital."

The Model Bakery was less well received by other bakers, though. When they tried to secretly cut their prices, contrary to a local bakers' agreement, George Weston left their association and lowered his price from 12 cents a large loaf down to ten. In spite of the resulting price war, the Model Bakery prospered. In addition to making the city's most popular loaf, within a couple of years it was shipping *Weston's Home-Made Bread* to no fewer than 38 cities and towns throughout Ontario.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Superior to Most



Weston's packaging, ca. 1920.

George Weston had built his reputation on his bread but early in the new century he began moving beyond bread into biscuits. Cakes and confectioneries had been a profitable sideline for sometime but now his Model Bakery Co. started baking fancy biscuits, or what we would today call cookies. Sold in brightly coloured tins that served as in-store displays, the new line quickly began selling beyond Toronto. By 1904, some 35 stores in Ottawa were receiving regular shipments of *Weston's Fancy Biscuits*, along with cakes. The company also started selling soda biscuits. One advertisement for *Weston's Royal Cream Sodas* described the new product as “superior to most other Biscuits” and noted they were the only “air-tight packaged” sodas available in Canada.

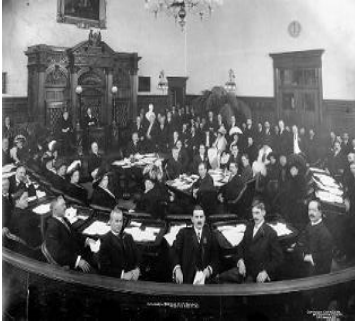
Meanwhile, the bread business remained as competitive as ever, with profit margins thin. There were economies to be had, though, what with delivery routes of different bakeries criss-crossing and duplicating one another. That may have led to the decision by a number of manufacturers, including George Weston, to amalgamate and form the Canada Bread Company, Limited in 1911.

As part of the deal, Weston and his fellow bakers agreed not to compete with the new firm by staying out of the bread business for the next ten years. George Weston Limited would instead concentrate on biscuits, a business with better margins. As the Model Bakery became part of the assets of Canada Bread, a new four-storey Weston's Biscuit Factory, at the corner of Peter and Richmond streets in Toronto, went into production.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Alderman Weston



Alderman Weston at the inaugural meeting of Toronto City Council, January 9, 1911.

From baker's apprentice to bread route salesman, to local businessman and manufacturer, George Weston next tried his hand at municipal politics, winning a seat on the Toronto City Council of 1910. During his election campaign he expressed support for "the tubes", a proposal to build a subway system for the city. On the occasion of his first, successful bid for public office, *The Toronto Daily Star* had this to say of the new alderman:

"George Weston made such a success of 'raising the dough' in his own business that his friends wanted him to try his hand at raising it for the city. He claims that he was not elected by any political party, but that everyone who eats his bread in Ward Four, where he has been in business for thirty years, *voted for Weston.*"

Weston won four successive one-year terms on council. Described as a "progressive legislator", he received the endorsement of the city's newspapers. In backing his re-election, *The Toronto Daily Star* noted that "Ald. Weston is not a noisy member of the Council, but a useful one." He was even urged to run for mayor, but turned down the idea in favour of one last term as alderman. At the end of 1913, George Weston left city politics to return full-time to his business, which had suffered in his absence.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Our Soldier Boys



An overseas shipment for Canadian troops, Weston's Biscuit Factory, Toronto, 1915.

In August 1914, war broke out in Europe and thousands of Canadians signed up to fight for King and Country. As the Great War dragged on, shortages developed and some biscuit lines had to be discontinued, but George Weston Limited struggled through and remained profitable. Weston's Biscuits were also part of the war effort. One overseas shipment, destined for Canadian troops, proclaimed across its delivery wagons, "Ordered for Our Soldier Boys Fighting in France."

George Weston and his family were also personally touched by the war. Much to the worry of George and his wife Emma Maud, their eldest son Garfield volunteered for duty with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Garfield had left school vowing never to return when the principal of Harbord Collegiate berated the boys in his class for not being in uniform. George, however, refused to give his son permission to join up. Garfield had not yet turned 19, the legal age of enlistment, and his father insisted that he wait another year before going off to war. In the meantime, he was put to work in his father's biscuit factory, cleaning and repairing the equipment.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Try Very Hard



"Sapper" Garfield Weston,
Canadian Expeditionary
Force, March 1917.

In February 1917, a few weeks before his 19th birthday, Garfield enlisted in the Canadian army and soon found himself on a troopship sailing for England. As a young soldier on the frontlines of France, he had his share of harrowing experiences but would return from the war unscathed.

It was back home in Canada, though, where tragedy struck. Garfield's youngest brother, Grant Clifford Weston, died from burns suffered in a terrible accident, when his nightshirt caught fire as he dressed one morning in front of a gas grate.

Distraught over the death of his son and the terrible suffering of his wife, who sustained severe burns trying to save the boy's life, George Weston now considered selling his business. A competitor, Christie, Brown & Co., had made an offer to buy George Weston Limited. Not knowing what to do, George wrote to his son overseas. He told Garfield of his little brother's death and asked for his advice.

Garfield wrote back from the trenches of war-torn France. He asked his father not to sell and promised his help once he had returned from the war. "I know it's asking an awful lot, but could you hold on until I get back? If I come back with health and strength, I'll try very hard to work at it and see what can be done."

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Go Slowly



A sampler tin of *Weston's English Quality Biscuits*, which became the best selling box of biscuits in Canada.

In 1919, with the war over, Garfield returned home to a soldier's welcome. George Weston had decided to keep the business and Garfield now rejoined his father's firm. As he took on more administrative duties, Garfield was eventually made vice president. Eager to move forward, he proposed the company import biscuit-making equipment all the way from England. While in uniform, Garfield had toured the world-famous British biscuit factories and was convinced that the same sort of product could be manufactured and sold in Canada. The result was the successful launch of *Weston's English Quality Biscuits* in 1922.

But while George Weston went ahead with many of his son's ideas, at times with some apprehension, he often advised caution — "go slowly, Garfield, go slowly." Other ideas he vetoed as too risky. At a time when George did not want to jeopardize the business that had taken him a lifetime to build, Garfield was more willing to take a chance. One story tells of his father's displeasure on learning that the company's bank balance had been reduced to almost nothing — the result of Garfield's decision to spend money on an elaborate advertising campaign to promote the new line of *Weston's English Quality Biscuits*.

Still, as Garfield assumed more responsibility, his father seemed to generally approve. On Garfield's 25th birthday, George wrote to extend his congratulations. He recalled his early days in business and assured his son that he had a "much brighter future" than his own at that same age.

[\[next\]](#)

Baker's Apprentice

Busy Life



George Weston, ca. 1911.

In February 1924, on his return from an out-of-town business trip, George Weston reached Union Station by train as the season's worst snowstorm paralyzed Toronto. With no streetcars or taxis running, he decided to trudge home on foot through the snow to his Palmerston Boulevard home. On his arrival he collapsed and was rushed to bed by his family. Weeks later, George Weston was dead of a stroke at the age of 60. In its obituary, *The Toronto Daily Star* noted a career of various accomplishments, not only as a businessman but also as a public servant and churchman — "George Weston, Baker, Dead After Busy Life."

At his father's funeral, Garfield Weston vowed to make the name of George Weston known throughout the world. He proceeded to transform his father's Toronto bakery into a multinational food processing and distribution concern.