

T.B. Reece Founded Westbank Packers in 1930 by Gordon H. Ficke

“My dad, Thomas Benjamin Reece and his wife Eleanor and three children Adrian, Temie and Nelson moved from Scotia Manitoba to Westbank in 1922.” Milton stated. He had immigrated to Canada from Wales in 1905 and had worked in Manitoba as a farm labourer for a number of years. Later he and his brother-in-law were employed with the C.N.R. in British Columbia building and repairing bridges and trestles. “My father later was trained in carpentry and he had the opportunity to work on the construction of the Saskatchewan Legislature Building in Regina in 1910.” Reece recounted. After that job was finished he returned to Manitoba and would contract out, using his carpentry skills building barns, finishing houses, etc. In 1917 Thomas married Eleanor Angus, born in Canada and her parents were Scottish immigrants.

Around 1919 or so Reece, along with some other fellows decided to drive out in a Ford Model T and explore British Columbia. It was quite an adventure traveling those narrow winding mountain roads in those days. When they arrived in Westbank, Thomas liked it so much that he decided to buy 4 acres from Mr. Hurlburt on Main Street where Westridge Mall is today. Reece remodeled the old home on the property. He also bought a one-acre lot adjoining the back of that lot where he eventually built a packing shed.

When he first moved to Westbank he had the contract to move the Westbank Co-op Packing House from its location where the Westbank Lions Community Hall is today to a new site where Hoskins Road is today and was subsequently enlarged. There were a number of packinghouses in town at the time, including B.C. Fruit Shippers, R.A. Pritchard had his own packinghouse by the lake where Pritchard Drive is now and Grieve Elliott also had a small packinghouse for his fruit. These independent farmers sold their own fruit as far away as Saskatchewan. They didn't necessarily have their own labels on their fruit boxes, but by law they were required to stamp each box with their name to indicate the fruit grower that produced the fruit.

During the 1920s Reece was also contracted to build the irrigation flume that ran from the Powers Creek intake to connect with other flumes that provided water to the various Westbank orchards.

In 1930 T. B. Reece built the first packing shed on their property on Elliott and Main Street. It was an open structure and the workers spread the apples out on a table. The packers were skilled to sort and pack the apples according to size and they had to do their job quickly.

Three more children, Gwenith in 1925 (married Ken Harding), Milton in 1926 and Elizabeth in 1932 (married Phil Weddell) were born to the couple. “Dad used to say that every time we have another child we needed to buy another five acres!” Milton chuckled. Mr. Reece bought Mrs. Daisy Hardwick's adjoining orchard and home, John Dobbin's orchard, property where Western Financial Services is located including the land where Westbank Towne Centre Shopping Centre is located on the south side of Dobbin



Road. This was necessary to expand both their fruit growing and packinghouse operations.

Around 1934 Thomas built their first packinghouse on Brown Road. Long time residents referred to this property as old John Robinson's 'shack town.' This site would be the home of Westbank Orchards. The operation started small and over the years more buildings including a cold storage facility and controlled atmosphere area, were added. Modern sorting equipment was installed and allowed them to put out more tonnage than the old system. Up to 210 bins in a 7½-hour shift or the equivalent of 5000 apple boxes of fruit!

“In the early 1940s dad purchased Harry Grant's diesel plant that had provided Westbank with its first electrical power. The new role for this generator would be to supply the power required to run the packinghouse. Around 1946 this power plant was sold to the B.C. Power Commission.

In 1947 Adrian, Nelson and Milton were handed the reins of the business from their father. In 1956 Adrian sold his interest to Nelson and Milton. The two remaining partners continued to expand their land holdings by purchasing ten acres across from where Alpine Helicopters is today. It was here that they operated a fruit stand into the early sixties.

Thomas and his wife Eleanor now had the freedom to travel that they did on numerous occasions. In 1959 the couple had planned another trip, this time to include Australia when tragedy struck. They were heading to Kelowna to pick up their passports when they were involved in a two-car accident. Four people were killed, including Eleanor. As a result of the crash Mr. Reece was hospitalized for a long time.

The Westbank community was shocked. Mrs. Reece was very active in the community, especially with the Westbank United Church and Westbank's Women's Institute, of which she was a charter member. Thomas had drawn up plans for the Westbank United Church and was instrumental in overseeing its construction. In 1973 Thomas Reece died.

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Nelson and Milton continued to expand and modernize the packinghouse operation and a revolution in fruit growing took hold. Hedge rowing of the apple trees by grafting the tops of the new trees onto dwarf rootstock and then planting those trees close together resulted in shorter branches, thus allowing the sunshine to reach every apple on the tree. This new method replaced the large trees that were spaced thirty feet apart where the sunlight was impeded from reaching the apples growing on the lower branches. As a result too many 'C' grade apples were produced.

In 2002 Nelson and Milton leased the packinghouse to another company and they kept the operation going until 2006. For the 2006 to 2007 season the company sent the fruit to Kelowna and the Westbank Packinghouse ceased its operations. In the late spring of 2007 an arson fire completely destroyed the last packinghouse in Westbank.

Photograph:

Milton standing beside the 1940 two-ton truck taken in 1945. Due to a shortage of apple boxes, his father asked him and Adrian to pick up a load of fruit boxes from Vernon. This load consisted of around 1000 apple boxes.