

Keeping Gander clean - the old laundry and dry-cleaners

(2nd version 2017-07-21)

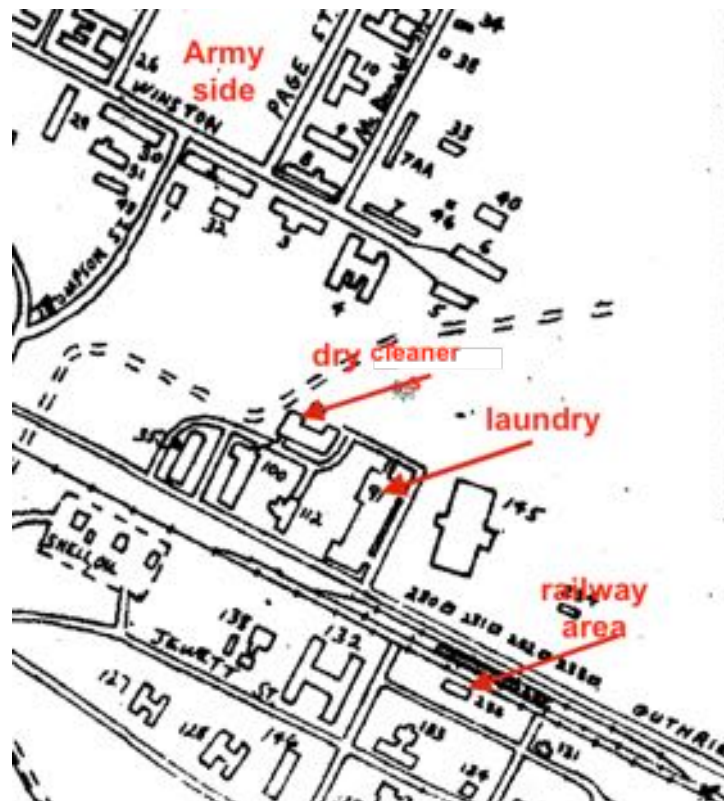
(by Robert G Pelley, 28 June 2017)

Old Gander had many firsts. At the time, it was considered the largest airport in the Commonwealth. It had the widest runways in North America. The lighting system was state of the art. The meteorological service was known as an overall splendid operation.

So were the laundry and dry cleaning facilities.

According to documents from the period, notably the RCAF's "The Gander" from August-September 1943, it was the first of its kind to be operated by the RCAF and was met with great approval. The plant boasted of being the most modern in the North American continent and within its walls were the most modern machines available.

This complex was located near the railway station, with the laundry in bldg 91 and the dry-cleaners, added in summer 1943, in bldg 111.





(Gander laundry 1940s-50s)

The slogan of the laundry was "we deliver by air", as the semi-weekly laundry of two other R.C.A.F. stations was flown there, and returned in a like manner in short order. This was the only known place in the world where this service was available. The two RCAF stations were not identified but one would most likely have been Torbay, while the other was quite possibly Goose Bay.

It would appear that US forces in Gander also used the RCAF laundry and dry cleaning facilities. A document of the US-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) of early November 1941 gives the following information:

The War Department has asked the U.S. Army members of the Board to request the Canadian Government to complete, without delay, the laundry and dry cleaning building at Newfoundland Airport, and to install therein the laundry and dry cleaning equipment which is now available at Newfoundland Airport. As reported at a previous meeting, the R.C.A.F. agreed to provide the building and utilities if the U.S. would furnish the equipment.

For a certain period during the war, the staff of these facilities was not provided by the RCAF but rather by civilians. Reference was made to this situation, in the document below of 08 November 1943, sent by the Canadian High Commissioner in Nfld to the Secretary of State for External Affairs:

bound to cause trouble and uncertainty.

20. I understand also that the contractors are employing about 18 girls in the laundry which is being operated by them, and this is a matter with which the O.C. of the Airport will have to deal. This difficulty, however, will disappear, because I understand that the work of the contractors will be finished within the next two or three months.

Prior to the opening of these facilities, as reported by an American Lieutenant John AC Watkins, the situation was very difficult. There was a very expensive and excruciatingly slow service via the “Newfy Bullet” train to the Bishop Falls-Grand Falls area. Much washing of personnel clothing was done by hand and dried on makeshift clothes lines, quite often inside the barracks.



John CA Watkins in 1943
in the cockpit of a P-40 fighter

This job was taken over primarily by the WDs (Womens Division) of the RCAF with some help from male personnel.



This task was more complicated than one might think. Here in brief are some of the main steps :

1. Collection of soiled linens and clothing

It could not be expected that all military personnel would bring their linen and clothing individually to the cleaners as one does in modern day. A system had to be put in place as well for central pickup and return, from both Canadians and Americans, including from other bases.

2. Sorting

All linens, in muddy Gander, had to be opened up fully to look for stains and to shake out any loose items/soils wrapped up in the linen, that were then sorted by load type and by degree of soiling.

3. Identification

Where bed clothes was standardized, it was not a problem if a general got a blanket formerly used by a private. But this obviously does not apply to personal uniforms. In cases where there was no individual identification, clothes could be separated by rank and size, for example, pants, size 38. However, when the clothing had a nametag, as was often the case with shirts, everything had to be listed to get the right person.

4. Washer-Loading

Ideally each wash should weigh out to within 90 to 100% of the recommended load. If a washing machine was overfilled, the quality of wash would suffer. Under-filled loads wasted money and time.

5. Washing

This was fairly standard in as far as the proper detergent and the right quantity was used with respect to the colour and dirtiness of the load. The starting times of the washers were apparently staggered at least 2 to 5 minutes to spread current load.

6. Extraction and drying

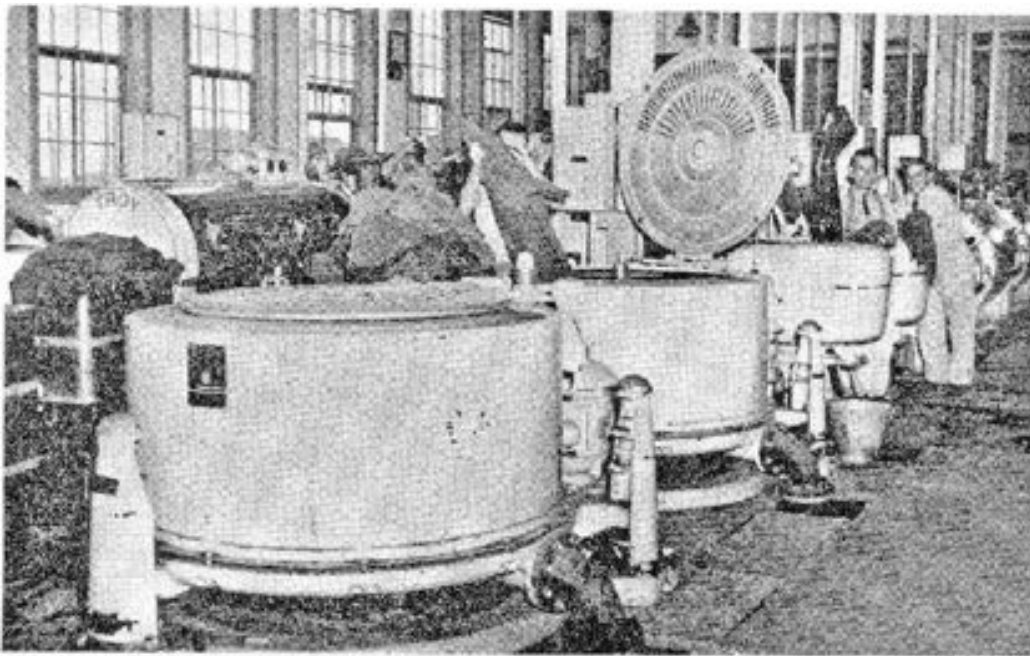
Linens were supposed to be only slightly damp after the wash cycle is completed. If there was water dripping from the linens, the extraction time had to be modified. Lint filters were generally cleaned at least once per day and there were strict rules concerning the drying, ironing and storage. All bedclothes and clothing was re-checked before shipment.

Here are several scenes from the RCAF period.

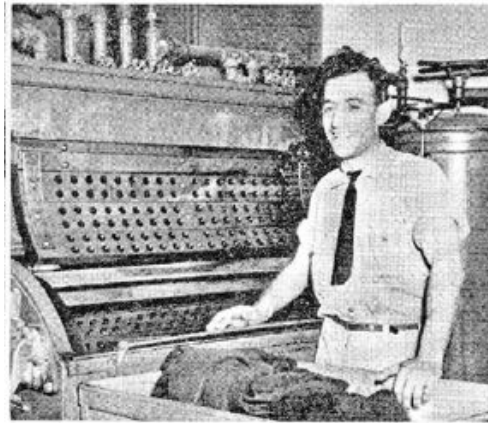
° One of the laundry shirt-pressing units that took up a whole wall:



° This photo shows a row of washing machines “slightly” larger than the usual household version.



° A dry cleaners washing unit:



After the war, these facilities were taken over as a civilian operation. Given that perhaps 4-5000 military left Gander at the end of hostilities and families in Gander did pretty much their own laundry, a much smaller staff was needed over the years. The final turn of the wringers was apparently around 1964, when the new John Paton Hospital opened and several former staff of bldgs 91 and 111 went to work in the hospital laundry.

The peacetime owner was Mr Simmons. The on-site manager was Harry White, and at one time over two dozen civilians worked in the laundry with half a dozen more in the dry-cleaners, with a large volume of work coming from the Sir Frederick Banting Memorial Hospital and the Airlines Hotels. Among the employees were Ray Young, Victor Stead, Margaret Butler, Harry White, Isabelle Yetman and Beatrice Lannon who was seamstress.



(Names unknown, Atlantic Guardian 1947)

Leo Lannon, in the old “Faye’s Pages” produced by Faye Raynard, spoke of his father and many other men who at that time wore a white shirt and tie everyday, and most of them had their shirts washed at the laundry. He remembered going there on his bike to pick them up for his Dad. They were always wrapped in paper and tied with string.

Ordinary staff would have been paid around 70\$ per month in 1946 and about 90\$ in 1952.

The phone number after the war for the dry cleaners was 333, while that of the laundry was 169.

But the real miracle of old Gander was not the RCAF or civilian operation of these laundry and dry cleaning facilities. Gander had three heating plants, all using black coal and constantly spewing equally black soot. The miracle was that the mothers in old Gander still managed to successfully use, winter and summer, an outside clothesline.



(Bldg 108 Foss Ave, Canadian/RCAF side)