

# TILLSONBURG:

## A town of innovators

194 YEARS AGO, ONE MR. GEORGE...

Tillson discovered a beautiful area nestled along the banks of the Otter Creek. While he claimed the land then as Dereham Forge, this was the true beginning of the town know today as Tillsonburg and the start of a long legacy of entrepreneurs



VISIT E. D. TILLSON'S FORMER HOME,  
ANNANDALE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE.

E.D. Tillson, George's son definitely got the same entrepreneurial genes and became the town's first mayor. Along with that he created loads of successful businesses including a brickyard, pea mill, barley mill, an extensive model farm with Ontario's first silo...you get it. The guy had his fingers in loads of pies. Most notably however, was E.D.'s incredible oatmeal business that put Tillsonburg on the map. E.D. came up with the company when he came down with typhoid fever and was told to eat more fibre because of gastro complaints. Well! It's amazing how a little necessity will create a ton of ingenuity and E.D.'s oatmeal empire was born!

Flash forward to the 60s and 70s when Tillsonburg's sandy soil was a hot commodity for growing big, leafy fields of lush tobacco crops. The Ontario Flue Cured Tobacco Marketing Board set up shop in town in 1957 and for years (well beyond the 70s), you'd be hard pressed to find somebody in town that didn't have some sort of connection to tobacco. In fact, you'd still be hard pressed. Tobacco was a way of life in Tillsonburg. High school students were accommodated with a late start to the school year so they could finish off working in the field for their summer jobs. The tobacco board chairman election was announced over the P.A. system at school. Even Stompin' Tom wrote a song about Tillsonburg!

As we know however, the tobacco industry didn't last.

When it all came crashing down, farmers and board employees were left in its wake asking one big question: what's next? Like we said though, a little necessity can create a ton of ingenuity and soon, new businesses were popping up all over.

Quickly, Tillsonburgers learned new ways to use their unique soil, other skills they possessed and more. The businesses in this article mustered all their gumption and created something truly unique. They channeled the creative ingenuity of George Tillson and followed in the footsteps of some of Tillsonburg's greatest entrepreneurs. Some are ex-tobacco farmers and others forged new paths all together. We highly recommend checking them out next time you're in good ol' Tillsonburg

## Annandale NHS

30 Tillson Ave. Tillsonburg, ON.

Why not start where it all began? Annandale NHS is the former home of the aforementioned E.D. Tillson and site of his model farm. Discover this home, decorated in the Aesthetic Arts Movement Style and inspired by a speech Oscar Wilde gave in Woodstock. With three floors of absolute beauty, you'll love learning about all of E.D.'s entrepreneurial pursuits. Bring a picnic and enjoy a lovely lunch on the spacious front lawn, catch a lecture or just take your time meandering through the house.

# Y U Ranch

460 Plowman's Line, Tillsonburg ON.

**Cathy and Brian Gilvesy of Y U Ranch know a lot about innovation.** Making their start in tobacco farming on the sandy plains of southern Tillsonburg, they've always known the value of hard work. They farmed tobacco all while Brian went to school at University of Western Ontario! Flash forward to the crash of the tobacco industry and they were faced with new questions and a new business. What they decided to do was amazing. What would happen if they put sustainability at the forefront of ranching like it had never been done before? The result was a Texas Longhorn Cattle Ranch with a focus on Tall Grass Prairie and regenerative land use. Focusing on this native plant which removes 1.5 tons of carbon from the air per acre each year, and doing more all the time, The Gilvesys have created a ranching oasis with well-fed cows and land bustling with life.



The beef itself is popular and widely known beyond Tillsonburg. With both wetland and fresh water running through the property, Y U Ranch has worked with MNR to repopulate brook trout back into their streams. They actively manage the Carolinian forest on their property to continue providing a great wildlife habitat through the removal of invasive species. They have pioneered the restoration of Tallgrass Prairie in an agricultural setting. They are propagating endangered species of trees and doing all they can to reduce the carbon footprint of their cattle farm. In short, they're blazing a new way of life in cattle farming that puts Mother Nature at the forefront. This is all just to name a few of the amazing things this small town farm is doing. Don't get us started on their amazing beef.

# Koteles Farm

164700 New Road, Tillsonburg, ON.

**For Koteles Farms, that sandy soil that Tillsonburg** is so well known for held other potential and this family knew just what to use it for: asparagus. For three generations and now heading into their fourth, the Koteles Family has been farming fresh asparagus and selling it all over Ontario. Every year they grow 90 acres during late spring and early summer. Head to their on-farm location during the season and you'll be pleasantly surprised to find local shoppers picking up their share of fresh asparagus as well as their famous pickled asparagus.



# Coyle's Country Store

Corner of Airport Rd. & Hwy 19, Tillsonburg ON.

Now this is a family with a super cool history. Starting way back in 1899 in King Lake along Lake Erie, Coyle's started as a small spot to grow and process fruits and vegetables and sell in the store. In 1924 however, Aubrey James Coyle (grandfather of current owner James Coyle), moved the shop to Tillsonburg where they've decided to stay! Over the years, Coyle's has made everything from parts for The Model T to instant chocolate powder and more. Today they roast all their own nuts on site at a new facility they moved to in the 1970s. They also create delicious, fresh fudge right in house and have all your confectionary and home ware needs. This landmark shopping destination is steeped in a history of entrepreneurship that continues to grow every year so come down and see what it's all about!



# Bre's Fresh Market

224276 Ostrander Road, Tillsonburg, ON.



Bre of Bre's Fresh Market comes from a long line of tobacco and cash crop farmers but she blazed a new trail for herself in farming. Bre started with a picnic table outside of a convenience store selling "Bre's Sweet Corn" which she grew at home to fund her university education. Locals loved the corn which wasn't just delicious but also synonymous with summer for them. They loved it so much that soon she had her own stall and after that, a small market in town where she was able to sell a few other local products: think baked goods, flowers and some fresh local produce.

Just a few years ago however, Bre moved to the outskirts of Tillsonburg with her husband Kyle where the two of

hem established Bre's Fresh Market- a local hub for doing all your grocery shopping in one place. Bre's Fresh Market focuses on getting produce, baked goods, artisan goods, cheese, meat and more all from as nearby as possible. Traceability is huge at this market where they have all their farmers pinned on a map and grow much of what they sell too. Bre and Kyle do all of this on top of Bre's career as an established speech pathologist. Talk about commitment! These entrepreneurs have created a community of local food supporters that love knowing where their food comes from, eating with the seasons and standing by their local economy.

# Ottercreek Woodworks Inc.

**Find boards at Pedlar's Quay in Tillsonburg or participate in Tree to Table: A build-your-own board experience**

The land we interact with is just as important to Ottercreek Woodwork's David Schonberger as it is to any farmer, but for completely different reasons. Schonberger's passion lies in the Carolinian Forest where a vast array of tree species grow with gnarls and twists, each as unique as the next. The good folks at Ottercreek Woodworks specialize in creating artisan-crafted charcuterie boards from sustainably harvested lumber. Those wishing to purchase a board can find them in Tillsonburg at Pedlar's Quay in the downtown.

However, if you're dying for a chance to get a glimpse of the workshop- it's possible. Ottercreek Woodworks has launched an award-winning experience called From Tree to Table. Offering up an amazing day spent in the forest



and the woodshop with the woodworker, participants will be led on a guided walk through the forest, enjoy a spread of local charcuterie and work with David to craft their own artisan charcuterie board in the woodshop. You can let your innovative spirit soar as you reconnect with Mother Nature and create with your hands.

**To learn more about Tillsonburg and get exciting trip ideas head to:**

[www.TourismOxford.ca/Tillsonburg](http://www.TourismOxford.ca/Tillsonburg)