

David Wesley Bole

**Pharmacist, Manufacturer, Wholesaler
Leader**

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David Wesley Bole was born in Watford, Ontario in 1856, the eldest son of Irish immigrants, James and Anne Bole. He received his early education at the Watford Public School, graduated from Woodstock College and worked as editor of a Watford weekly newspaper before enrolling as an apprentice in the study of pharmacy. Just before his graduation in 1880 from the Ontario College of Pharmacy he married Isabella Lennox, daughter of Thomas Lennox, a merchant in Thedford, Ontario and within a few months became involved in a retail drug store business in Brighton, Ontario. But, with the opening of the CPR, the challenge and opportunity of the rapidly developing Canadian West beckoned - and in 1882 the young couple moved to Regina.

Immediately upon taking up residence in Regina David Bole set to work establishing what is said to have been the first drug store between Brandon, Manitoba and Kamloops, British Columbia. The business was soon expanded to include wholesale as well as retail trade when brother-in-law John Dawson became a partner and, under the name Dawson, Bole Company, it became a highly successful enterprise. Meanwhile, Bole's interest in civic affairs led to his appointment as a member of the Regina Provisional School Board, and to his election as president of the Regina Board of Trade.

But Bole's ambitions were rapidly outpacing the limited opportunities available in the local pioneer community and, in 1885 he moved to Winnipeg. Together with Mayor Wynne and E.D. Martin they formed Martin, Bole and Wynne wholesale company. Bole withdrew in 1898 to form the Bole Drug Company Limited of which he was president and majority shareholder. This firm operated in competition with his former partners. At that time Winnipeg was the booming financial centre, commercial distribution hub, and gateway to the rapidly growing Canadian West. David Bole was now settled in Winnipeg where he became involved in a number of business ventures.

The Bole Drug Company enjoyed rapid growth and within a short time became the leading drug wholesaler in the prairies; so successful was it, in fact, that within five years of its incorporation it had outgrown its leased premises and constructed a new ultra-modern warehouse facility – the Bole Drug Building – now designated as a Winnipeg heritage site. During this same period Bole's interest in civic affairs grew apace with his business success. He was an active member (and for three years president) of the Winnipeg Board of Trade, served as a Winnipeg alderman, and was elected eight times to the Winnipeg School Board (three years as chairman).

For many, this record of achievement might have been seen as an enviable lifetime accomplishment – but not for David Bole, who at this point was not yet fifty years old. In the general election of 1904 he was elected by a sizable majority as the Liberal Member of Parliament to represent the City of Winnipeg in the House of Commons until the dissolution of the 10th Parliament in 1908.

Bole's pre-eminent accomplishment, however, was the result of his ability to bring about an innovative solution to what was, by many, perceived as a problem. In the early years of the twentieth century a unique opportunity for bold action presented itself.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century both retail and wholesale trade of all types was largely in the hands of independent entrepreneurs each serving a relatively small, local market; the various business ventures in which Bole was involved were typical. But as the new century began the Canadian drug industry was entering a period of dramatic change – brought on, in part, by this absence of strong, nationally positioned wholesale suppliers. While most of the early drug wholesalers carried a wide yet fairly standard range of nationally recognized drugs, toiletries and home remedies, the comparatively weak regulatory measures of the day allowed them to produce and market their own brands or versions of many of these products. As a result, the quality and consistency of such products could, and often did, vary considerably to the extent that there remained some serious concern as to the efficacy and purity of many products found on Canadian drug store shelves. This led to the federal governmental examining a regulatory response beginning about 1900. The opportunity for bold action to deal with this situation became obvious to Bole and would occupy the remaining years of his business career.

Bole's plan was to bring together into one nationally-based corporate entity the strongest and most successful regional drug wholesalers from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Secondly, the new company would establish its own manufacturing facilities for the production of a complete range of consistently high quality drug and toiletry products to be distributed through its wholesale branches. For almost three years David Bole traveled back and forth from coast to coast meeting with fellow-wholesalers to negotiate the terms of such a merger. Following many months of negotiation and planning Bole had convinced sixteen of the leading regional drug wholesalers from Nova Scotia to British Columbia to merge their individual business interests into one nationally-based company.

On November 9, 1905 the legal process of incorporation was completed and National Drug and Chemical Company of Canada, Limited with authorized share capital of \$6,000,000 and its Head Office in Montreal was born. David Bole was elected president and within a few short years National Drug and Chemical Company had become recognized not only as Canada's pre-eminent drug wholesaler and manufacturer but also as one of the largest drug companies in the British Empire.

Manufacturing was an early priority as the quality of many drug products handled by pharmacies was poor. Governmental analysis showed a wide variation in strength and adulteration. In addition there was deterioration of the products on the pharmacy shelves and even good quality products were often not made to the same standard. The first step was to create the new Chemical Works followed by a new Pharmaceutical Laboratory to produce fluid extracts, elixirs, syrups and tinctures. These plants were located in Montreal.

The objective was to produce only the highest quality products under the National name so that pharmacists purchasing these products would be assured of consistent quality in the products used in dispensing. Professor Alex B.J. Moore of the Montreal College of Pharmacy was appointed to direct the operations of the Pharmaceutical Laboratory. Professor Moore continued in this position for more than a decade after his appointment as Dean of the Montreal College of Pharmacy.

The products manufactured were distributed through the National wholesalers and they did not carry competing lines. From the pharmacists' point of view, high quality products were immediately available in their area and there was no incentive to look to other suppliers. As the largest wholesaler in Canada this was an important competitive edge.

Physicians were also aware of the quality of the products and many began to prescribe the National brand. Further endorsement of the quality was the contract with Eli Lilly Company of the US in 1908 to manufacture and sell Lilly products in Canada.

A parallel stream of products was produced for the consumer market under the Na-Dru-Co name. A large 5 storey manufacturing facility was built in Toronto. Beginning with 20 products in 1907 the product line grew to over 125 products including baby products, cough and cold remedies, laxatives, and stomach preparations, tonics, shampoos, liniments and skin creams. A strong consumer advertising and promotion program accompanied the introduction of these products. Pharmacists supported the sale of these products as they were assured of a reasonable margin during a period of price cutting.

A Patent Medicine line of products was also produced and distributed as a separate division. The best known of these was Gin Pills, formulated and introduced by David and Walter Bole in 1902. This product was one of the major selling products in Canada and was also sold in the US, UK and Caribbean. Other products were National Lazy Liver Pills, Powells Pimple Pills, Roborgen and Tonol. These products were heavily advertised in the manner of the day and were very profitable to the company.

A wide range of other products were also produced for the pharmacy market including perfumes, gopher poison, Fly Shields to catch flies, etc.

National Drug was a major manufacturer by 1914 when David Bole met with Charles E. Frosst, who left a sales job with Wampole to start Charles E. Frosst Compny in 1899, and Frank Horner, who had just established a manufacturing firm, to create a new organization, the Canadian Association of Manufacturers of Medicinal and Toilet Products. The next year the cumbersome name was changed to the Canadian Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association and later to Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association of Canada (PMAC). David Bole was

also active in the Canadian Wholesale Drug Association being named Honorary President in 1910.

In 1922 at the age of 66, having led National Drug and Chemical Company for almost two decades from its inception to its dominant position in the industry, David Bole retired from business and returned to Winnipeg where he resided until his death on June 23, 1933 as the result of a stroke. More than a century later, National Drug (now McKesson Canada) remains Canada's leading drug wholesaler.

David Bole demonstrated courage, leadership, and vision. From a small pharmacy in a tent city (Regina) just two years after qualifying as a pharmacist to the creator of the largest pharmaceutical company in Canada and possibly the British Empire is a remarkable achievement. His continuing sense of civic duty throughout his career is equally noteworthy.

Bibliography & Sources

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