

History Of The Scotch Settlement From Pioneer Days

By the late Mrs. John Sutherland,
Bradford in 1928

When we speak of the Scotch Settlement, we mean that part of the township of West Gwillimbury, in the County of Simcoe, which lies south of the old plank road, now better known as the Bond Head Road.

The main vein of the settlement was known as the Scotch line, by which name it is still known, getting its name from the number of Scotch settlers who lived there in pioneer days.

The history of the Scotch Settlement takes us back to 1815, when a band of settlers were forced to leave their homes on the Strath of Kildonan, in Sutherlandshire, Scotland.

The good Earl of Sutherland had died, and the parish of Kildonan had passed into the hands of the Duchess of Sutherland, who unlike her father, was very exacting in her rents and she placed a hard landlord, or agent, over them by the name of Sellers. Unfortunately for them their crops and pastures failed for two years, and in most cases their rents were unpaid. So great was their need that even the lambs were slaughtered in order that the sheep could more easily be driven to market. The parish of Kildonan which was so dear to the hearts of the Scots was rented to men from the south, who were cattle-raisers.

It was just at this time that Lord Selkirk, who had become deeply interested in the hard lot of hundreds of Scotch peasant tenants, had undertaken to bring colonists out to America. He had purchased 116,000 square miles of land from the Hudson Bay Company along the Red River in Assiniboine and had already taken out two bands of colonists—one band coming from Ireland.

where else to turn, decided to go to Assiniboine, where it was said the black muck was seven feet deep, with stones, wood in abundance, fish and game for catching, and great stretches of grass as thick as heather. True, they had also heard of the red Indian savages, but as one James Sutherland put it—It is a sad day for the Strath but it is the hand of fate and we must go. So full arrangements were made with Lord Selkirk, to whom they bound themselves. He made ready for their journey, and they set sail on the ship called "The Prince of Wales", under the leadership of a very capable man—Archibald MacDonald. No doubt things would have been much easier for them in the new country had Lord Selkirk not been disappointed, at the very last, in accompanying them, but he promised to follow with some more emigrants.

At this time the Great North West Company, which was in the fur-trading business, was incensed against Lord Selkirk for bringing out colonists, as they suspected that the real object of the colony was to interfere with their trade and, the two companies, the North West Company and the Hudson Bay Company were enemies. Selkirk was a member of the Hudson Bay Company, so the colonists soon found there was a great conspiracy between the far-reaching power of the ironmen of Montreal and their agents in Scotland to suppress all colonists coming west.

When they had gone some distance out to sea there was a severe outbreak of ship's-fever caused by stale water in the tanks. The only cure which the ship's doctor had was leeching, which, of course, only weakened the patient. Every morning the bedding would be turned back from a poor cold body from which

the life had flown during the night. Yet the hearts of those people were undaunted in the midst of that gruesome drama. Those who were well nursed the sick. Among those dying at sea we find the names of Hugh MacDonald, age 27, William Sutherland, aged 19, and Catharine Gunn, aged 20. Captain Turner of the Prince of Wales was very much alarmed by the sickness and, before the people had regained their strength, he landed them at Fort Churchill, refusing to go to York factory, as was his agreement with Lord Selkirk. This gave the colonists a tramp of 100 miles to York factory, which they could not take until the following spring, and as a result they were forced to build log huts in which to spend the winter. It was while living here that scurvy broke out, caused by the lack of green food. This was very serious as they did not have the proper medicine to cure it. It was said that cranberries and porter would cure it, but these were unavailable. Finally however, they got an Indian cure by making spruce beer; this was a very bitter dose, but it made a rapid cure.

Among the deaths at Fort Churchill we find the names of John Sutherland, died Sept. 2, (great-grand father of John and Dave Sutherland, who are living in our midst). Christine, wife of Alex Gunn, died Sept. 20, and Donald Bannerman, died Sept. 24.

When at last the spring had come after the severe winter, they moved on, travelling by foot, under the leadership of MacDonald, to York factory, covering a distance of 100 miles. Here they were able to get supplies and they built their boats ready for the journey to the Red River, which was about 815 miles.

Having prepared everything, they started on May 14. Sometimes they

found the travelling smooth, but at other times they had to take to tracking, that is, some of the men took a tow line and jumping ashore, harnessing themselves with portage straps over their shoulders, they scrambled along the muddy banks, towing the boats along. After an hour's labor the trackers would be changed with other men from the boats. After about a month's travel, they found themselves at the mouth of the Red River.

It would be impossible to tell of all the hardships endured between the Strath of Kildonan and the Red River. It was their faith in a living God which enabled them to go forward in peace and fortitude; for had not God said "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee. Fear not, for I am with thee: thou shalt walk through the fire and not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. Fear not, for I am with thee."

The men of Montreal were soon to learn that there was blood that ran hot and courageous in the teeth of adversity and oppression. And, when spirits ran low, was there anything that could take the place of the bagpipes, and surely there was no one who could play them quite as well as Duncan MacDonald and as they listened to the mellow tones of the pipes was there ever a true Scotch lad or lass who could not join in a Scotch reel or step the Highland fling?

And we might call the roll, which reads like the great Highland regiments of former days. There were the Mathesons, Bannermans, MacFays, Murrays, Rosses, Sutherlands, MacBeths, Bruces, and Gunns. Upon arriving at the Red River, they met bitter disappointment, for here they found that the parties which had preceded them had been driven out by the Northwest Company. Although Earl Selkirk owned the land, the Northwesters at once showed their teeth, and were minded to run the settlers out of the territory. They

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had a hard time of it that winter, being unskilled in the hunting of buffalo and further handicapped for want of horses. The Nor'westers on the other hand were well supplied, and also had the half-breeds at their beck and call. These half-breeds were half French and half Indian, their fathers being French. They made great slaughter among the buffalo herds, storing up vast quantities of pemmican. Thus the herds were driven deep into the plains, where the settlers could not follow. Thus the Nor'westers and their half-breed friends waxed fat in the land that belonged to Lord Selkirk, while

settlers starved. However, they spent the winters at Pembina, a distance of 70 miles, hunting buffalo and each spring returned to the junction of Assiniboine and Red Rivers to sow their patches of grain. These people were Manitoba's first settlers. They named the place Kildonan after their parish in the homeland, by which name it is still known, being at the edge of Winnipeg. It would be impossible to tell of all the hardships which these people suffered. It was here that the battle of Seven Oaks was fought, in which Governor Semple lost his life. This is marked by the Seven Oaks monument.

We find in the spring about 1820, a party of the Selkirk settlers determined to abandon the settlement, and set out for what was known as Canada. The Nor'westers had made them a tempting offer to transfer them to the fertile township in Upper Canada. This was in order to promote their removal from the country. This company provided all the means of transportation, promising them free lands. Full arrangements were made. A supply of canoes was obtained and on July 15 they embarked and drifted down the river on their voyage of more than 1,000 miles.

They were put in charge of the Couriers-de-bois (runners of the woods). These were half-breeds who carried the furs from Red River to Montreal. No one knew the treachery of the lakes better than the

Couriers-de-bois, who were the guides of the party. They had nothing with which to brave the storms, save their birch bark canoes. They had to match their skill and the strength of their arms against the treachery and power of the mighty deep. They travelled by day and camped by night. As night drew on, the canoes crept closer to the shore. The shadows of the forest could be seen creeping over the waters and ere darkness fell a camping place for the night was selected.

Disembarking from their canoes, the youths of the party were solemnly warned by their elders not to wander away nor to eat any strange berries to be found along the forest's rim. The women busied

themselves with the preparation of the evening meal. The men gathered firewood for the camp-fire, while the guides looked for game, which the forest yielded to them in abundance—rabbits, partridge, and wild ducks. There was no lack of provisions and no lack of water. After the evening meal, the whole party drew about the camp-fire while James Sutherland led in divine worship. The silence was unbroken save by the lapping of the waters upon the shore, and as the familiar word that they had read so often fell upon their ears, the men and women of the party were once again in thought back in the hills and glens of their highland homes. The silence of the eventide was softly broken as they lifted their voices in the pilgrim's

song of their fathers. The low mournful sound of the Gaelic giving utterance to their hopes, their fears and the longing of their souls as they sang:

Through each perplexing path of life

Our wandering footsteps guide,
Give us each our daily bread
And raiment fit provide.

Oh, spread Thy covering wings
around

Till all our wanderings cease,

And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.

Crossing Lake Superior in safety, the party arrived at Sault Ste. Marie. Here they rested for two weeks before venturing out upon the treacherous waters of Lake Huron. Clinging still closely to the lake shore, they came at last to a point where the guides said farewell to them, this place is thought to be the French River. The settlers proceeded on their way until they came to where Penetanguishene now stands, where a portage was made and they came to the waters of Lake Simcoe. Passing along Lake Simcoe they came to the Holland River and then to Holland Landing which is 40 miles north of Toronto. They landed here on Sept. 5.

It is hard to find a parallel for such a journey. They were a company of men, women and children, continuously journeying for 82 days, through an unsettled country, running dangerous rapids and exposed to storms.

They finally received their lands, some in the township of West Gwillimbury and some in the Talbot settlement near St Thomas. Among those coming to the Scotch Settlement were the MacKays, Bannermans, Gunns, Sutherlands, Mathesons, Rosses, MacBeths, and Murays.

The descendants of these pioneers are numerous and some are still in

our midst. It has been humorously told of one named MacBeth, who weighed 250 pounds, that he had been carried all the way from the Red River. Of course, the explanation was that he had been brought as an infant.

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John Matheson was a schoolmaster and a prominent worker in matters pertaining to the Presbyterian church of the settlement. For many years, he conducted the Sabbath School and is described as an excellent translator of the sermons in the Gaelic tongue. He afterwards moved to Talbot Settlement. The first place of worship was a log cabin built in 1823 near the Old Kirk, which is a brick building, built in 1869. James Sutherland, an elder, was authorized by the Church of Scotland to baptize and marry before they had a settled minister looking after the flock.

A great grand-daughter of James Sutherland, in the person of Mrs. William Johnston, is still in our midst filling the position of elder's wife. Also the Misses McDonald—Dollina, Janet Ann, Christina, and Ada are great grand-children of James Sutherland.

Not till some years after they settled, did the Highlanders receive the patents for their land. In 1827 we find these men received their first vote. The contest was between Cawthra and Robinson. The voters had to walk to Newmarket. It was open voting and the polls remained open for several days. The little party of Highland voters started out for Newmarket led by MacBeth. These men were greatly impressed with the responsibility of their position. It weighed upon them and they duly appreciated the high gift of their franchise. As they drew near Newmarket, the whole party adjourned to a neighbouring bush where, removing their bonnets, and kneeling under the shadow of the trees, they followed in reverence while MacBeth implored divine guidance, that they might honorably discharge their duty.

We also find in 1834, the nearest wheat market was at Hogg's Hollow on Yonge St. where Mr. Hogg was the buyer. We also find that Gooderham was buying at Bay front in York, now Toronto. The settlers teamed their wheat mostly to Hogg's Hollow and received 50 cents per bushel. With true Highland thrift, they took their lunch with them.

Such hardships as these were all overcome and these people and their descendants proved to be a valuable acquisition to the population of the county of Simcoe.

These first settlers were afterwards followed by many others, almost all coming from Scotland. It is said that birds of a feather flock together. This can surely be said of the Scotch Settlement. There were the Frasers, Grays, Sinclairs, Mc-

Donalds, other families of Sutherlands, also three Irish families, Faris, Watson, and Armstrong. Each of these families have an interesting history, were it written.

All of these pioneers have gone to their reward, many of whom are buried in God's acre around the Old Kirk. But the fertile fields and the waving grain stands as a monument to their industry and toil.

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