

A History Of West Gwillimbury

(Contributed by M. C. Wilson)

During the past week I have been asked by the editor of the Bradford Witness to contribute a portion of the early history of West Gwillimbury Township for publication in the Centennial Edition of the paper. I count it a great privilege to have this opportunity and would extend to the Village of Bradford my best wishes on having been an incorporated village for a century and congratulate those who have had the enterprising ingenuity to mark the event with a celebration of the manner planned.

West Gwillimbury enjoys the distinction of having been the township in which the pioneer location of permanent settlers of Simcoe County was effected. To have a clear idea of the difficulties of settlers in obtaining entrance to West Gwillimbury we should have some idea of the geography of the township as it was in 1819 when the first settlers arrived. At the south-east corner and extending across the southerly end we have what we now call the Holland Marsh. In 1819 when the earliest of settlers started to come to the township, this area was practically impossible to cross at all times of the year. At the north of the township what was called the Cookstown Swamp, was another wide area of undrained, unbridged land, which meant that all settlers had to either wade, swim or enter by boat. It was considered at that time to be a rather undesirable feature for a generally fertile township.

The first of these settlers were three Irishmen — James Wallace, Lewis Algeo and Robert Armstrong. Mr. Armstrong settled on the sixth concession, almost south of the present site of Bradford, and Mr. Wallace on the farm to the east of him. Mr. Algeo settled, I believe on the farm now owned by Mr. Ivan Metcalfe and his wife was a daughter of Robert and Mrs. Armstrong. It is believed that she was the first white woman to cross the Holland River. They resided on this farm a short time and sold it to a Hugh Scobie, then moved into Bradford and started a store.

William Milloy, who had settled with his brother, Timothy, at an early date near Coulson's Hill, became the pioneer of Bradford in 1829 by erecting a tavern on the fork of the road leading to the Scotch Settlement and other branch northward. A year or two prior to William Milloy's advent at the forks of Yonge Street, a small log house had been built to the west of it by Theodore Sherwood, on the property of Letitia McGee, where he made spinning wheels and wooden chairs for a few years. The early names in Bradford, as far as the information I have reveals, were the Edmansons, who erected the building now occupied by the Quality Food Market and Ritchie's Drug Store; James Drury, who operated a store; Thomas Drifill, of whom (if I'm not mistaken) Mrs. Sinclair Mills and her brother, Harry Wilcox are descendants; the Maconchys, who operated a saw mill, and Gibson Cook, who bought wheat for a Thornhill elevator.

The first Stoddarts mentioned in early history resided in 1829 on the farm now owned by Mr. Ernest Hodgson, before that by Mr. Walter Palmer, and it was in their house that the first Anglican Church service in the township was held. In the early twenties a William Armon took up residence on the farm now owned by Robert Wood. As you may well realize there were no township or county councils in the twenties, the municipal affairs being governed by the home district council in Toronto. At a meeting of the inhabitants of West Gwillimbury held in 1842, Mr. Armon was elected to be the township's first representative to the Home District Council. By '46 Simcoe County had a council of its own and Mr. Armon was elected warden. In 1850, the county council purchased from the Government the road leading from Holland Landing to Bradford thence to Bond Head. They had in view the planking of it and authorized the issue of county debentures for approximately \$25,000.00 to plank or otherwise improve it. They entered into contract for the materials, the average price being \$4.98 per one thousand feet for three inch plank. The road was completed in October, 1851 and a toll gate established south of the Holland River with John Raper being the keeper, and a second one

was established at Middleton, of which William Collins was appointed keeper. The road was a paying proposition for the county for about six years, but by 1857 the road was so in need of repair that the County Surveyor was authorized to remove the plank and to have the holes levelled.

In 1815 a group of settlers, who had become discouraged with conditions in Lord Selkirk's settlement in Manitoba, decided to leave for Upper Canada. In order to promote their removal from the country the North-west Company fitted out a fleet of small boats and it was in this small fleet they transported themselves down the lakes, thence along the Notawasauga River, across the nine mile portage to Lake Simcoe and along the Holland River to the third concession of West Gwillimbury where they settled and took up residence.

As far as can be ascertained the settlers consisted of the following seventeen men,—some had wives and families:—The Sutherlands, Donald, Haman, William, Robert, James and Angus.—The McKays—James, Broderick, Robert and Donald. John Mathewson, (there were two men of this name—Red John and "Black" John)—Charles and Andrew McBeth, George Ross, Arthur Campbell and George Bannerman.

Those then were the pioneers of the Scotch Settlement and indeed, Simcoe County.

Owing to their poverty many of them, both men and women, were obliged to work out in the Frontiers Settlements on Yonge Street for the first year after their arrival.

As an instance of the hardships of the settlers, a Mrs. Kelly, the wife of a pioneer on Lot 6, Concession 9, (the farm later owned by Fishers, and now Ben Steers) got word that a letter was waiting for her at Holland Landing. She made ready some butter and carried it to the store in Holland Landing and on arrival was advised that she could not dispose of her produce. She went on to the Soldiers' Landing and obtained cash for the butter, paid the postage on her letter, and walked the ten miles to her home.

From 1825-30 a group of Irish inhabitants settled to the north and west of the Scotch Settlement, these being John Long, Andrew Hericane, Robert Atkins and George Sparling. Atkins settled on the farm now owned by Marcus Ross, John Long on the first farm west of that, and Sparling on the farm north of Wm. Armon's.

Another notable settler of the township was Robert Jeffs, on Lot 3, Concession 6, who with his son, Edward and the rest of the family made their home in the bush. Later Edward started farming on the north half of Lot 3, Concession 6, and was a very progressive farmer. As early as 1834, he built a barn with a stone foundation and in 1837, a stone dwelling house. He and Thomas West had a McCormick reaping machine in 1845, the first machine in the province, and the sickle of this machine is preserved in the museum of the Ontario Agricultural College at Guelph.

Joel Robinson settled and had a store and became the first postmaster at Bond Head in 1837. This village became an important place. Besides stores, mills, tannery, etc., it had a grammar school and in those years was a centre for educational work.

One of the first settlers north of Bradford before the town came into existence was William Robinson, who came to Canada in 1822. He bought Lot 15, Concession 8, two hundred acres from the Canada Company. (This land is now owned by Mr. Seward Lee, whose ancestors date back to the early settlers on the eleventh concession north of Newton Robinson). When Mr. Robinson's wife and family arrived in 1829, they settled upon the land. At the wedding of their daughter the guests arrived by ox team, sixteen yoke no less, and the only horse in the township, but, I have never been able to find out where the one horse came from. When Gilbert, the eldest son, married in 1835, he settled on the north half of the lot and it is at this point that my ancestry dates back to the pioneer settlers. Their daughter, Nancy being my grandmother on the Wilson side. My grandfather, the late James Wilson, came from Gifford, County Down, Ireland, and taught school at Coulson's Hill, Pipperton and Newton Robinson, later purchasing the farm where I live, and although he did not obtain the land from the crown, it was but a few years removed. The crown deed

written on sheep skin is still in my possession.

About the time William Robinson came, John Thorpe and Mark Scanlon took up lots in the ninth concession. They went into mill operations soon after arrival and received from the government grants of land for mills on the stream.

Others thought Thorpe and Scanlon to be making money from this business so opposition mills were established. There were as many as six sawmills on the Scanlon Creek at one time owned as follows: Mr. Mackie (whose mill Mr. Wood ran), Mr. Scanlon (two mills), George Thorpe, Enos Rodgers and Isaac Rodgers, whose mill passed into the hands of Zachariah Evans.

George Evans and family came to this neighborhood about 1826, originally from Ireland. In this family there were seven sons—John, William, Thomas, James, George, Samuel and Arnold, also two daughters, Jane and Catherine. James remained on the original homestead, Lot 14, Concession 10. A son of the latter was George M. Evans, who was reeve of West Gwillimbury for some years and Warden of the County in 1883. Zachariah Evans, who was clerk of the township for more than twenty-one years and who died in 1906, was the third son of James Evans.

In 1822, John Coulson took up Lot 15, Concession 11. West of the Coulsons on Lot 13, Concession 11, the Kneeshaws settled early, William Kneeshaw being the head of the family. The settlers of this family were Thomas, John and Robert.

About 1830, James Tindall settled on the north half, Lot 16, Concession 12. He took an active interest in education and was one of the promoters of Ebenezer Methodist Church. His son, William was an early teacher at the "Hollows" school and afterwards became a minister in the Methodist denomination.

About 1823, the Scotch Settlers united their efforts to build a log cabin on Lot 8, Concession 6, which was intended for a school and also for a place of worship, and obtained the services of John Carruthers as teacher in 1826. In 1832, Mr. Carruthers was appointed a Catechist by the Presbytery of York in connection with the church of Scotland, and it was at this time Presbyterianism started in the township. The first minister to hold religious services at this log cabin church was the Rev. Wm. Jenkins of Richmond Hill. The first stationed minister was the Rev. Peter Ferguson. He was succeeded by Rev. Wm. McKillican. When he left the charge in, I believe, 1847 it had been extended to include appointments at Bradford and Cherry Hill.

The Scotch Settlement congregation became divided in 1835, and a new congregation started at Bond Head with the Rev. Wm. Fraser, D.D., as the minister, and he remained for a period of forty-four years.

In 1837 the Rev. Featherstone L. Osler took charge of a new Anglican parish in Bond Head and these two gentlemen combined their efforts to promote education in the township.

Prior to the year 1843, which we may regard as the close of the pioneer period, there were only six schools in the Township of West Gwillimbury and fifty in the County of Simcoe.

The first teacher in the Scotch Settlement as has already been stated was Mr. John Carruthers. Susan Cassidy was the first teacher at Bradford where she began in 1837 at the age of fourteen, and remained to 1838 to be followed by John Dissett. In 1831, a Mr. John Garbutt taught at No. 9, (known as Belfry's Schoolhouse in the early days).

About 1834 or '35, John Macannloy was the first teacher at Fisher's Corners in a log building which was replaced by the present school in 1877. Although the original teacher's desk had not been preserved, one that was used in the old log school is in use at the present time and on the door there remains the signature of practically all who have taught in the school in the last hundred years.

Respectfully submitted for publication.

C. M. Wilson.

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