

LOOKING BACK OVER THE CENTURY

THE AULD KIRK

By Jessie Fraser MacLeod

On Sunday, July 23rd, 1967, the Auld Kirk in Scotch Settlement will hold a centennial service. This church, for many years has been closed, but on that day memories will be revived by the old and the not-so-old as they greet one another and talk about the past and the days when their parents and grandparents lived there.

A few words about the Scotch Settlement, its two churches and the people of the community may recall something of the past.

The Scotch Settlement itself is a highly productive community of uncertain boundaries lying in West Gwillimbury Township, County of Simcoe and extending roughly from about three miles southwest of Bradford, along the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Concession lines some 5 or 6 miles, a little beyond Highway 400. The southern boundary is the Holland River and marshlands, now a tremendously rich gardening area, but at one time an uncultivated waste and barrier between Simcoe and York counties.

The first people to take up land in this district were the "Selkirk Settlers" who came in the early 1800's. These were

followed by friends and relatives, and later by a small group of Irish.

The Selkirk Settlers were crofters from the Highlands of Scotland forced from their homes by landholders, after the Napoleonic wars, who found it more profitable to rent wider sheep runs to larger proprietors. Only a few of these evicted persons could be absorbed in the fishing industry, their only alternative, and their plight was pitiful. Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk began organizing groups to emigrate to British possessions overseas. After two successful settlements — one in Prince Edward Island, one in Upper Canada — a tract of land was purchased, in 1810, from the Hudson Bay Company in the Red River District of what is now Manitoba. A group of Scots sailed to Hudson Bay and travelled south to the Red River district. Disease and hardship followed them, and after their arrival, lack of food and warm clothing combined with harassment by the North West Fur Trading Company to reduce their numbers. In 1815, Lord Selkirk sent out as reinforcements, a party of 100 Highlanders from Kirdonan Parish near Helmsdale, Sutherlandshire, Scot-

land, but the arrival of these contingents increased the opposition from both Indians and fur traders. Houses were burned. The massacre of Seven Oaks took place, and finally the North West Fur Trading Company (anxious to be rid of them) persuaded over ninety settlers to leave, and conveyed them by land and water south-east through Georgian Bay, where many settled in Upper Canada, Gwillimbury Township, south of Lake Simcoe. Thus the Scotch Settlement began.

Among the independent arrivals who followed the "Selkirkers" was my grandfather, a young stone mason from Helmsdale, Simon Fraser by name. Simon bought land on the 4th Concession road which, because of the Holland River marsh, could go no further and conveniently turned up Simon's lane. He lived in a log house but in time moulded and pressed mud bricks for a larger home, still standing on its original stone foundation. Simon's son, Robert, took up land on the 3rd Concession line. Simon's farm passed to his son William, who at an early date promoted a plan for marsh drainage. (This, however, was never realized during his lifetime, nor until the counsel of Professor Day of the Ontario Agricultural College carried out the undertaking in 1925.) Simon's step-son, Gordon Gray was the grandfather of John Gray, now located on a fine farm near Highway 400.

There are still two churches in the Scotch Settlement, the Auld Kirk on Line 5, now for many years closed, and facing it about a mile south on Line 4, the Scotch Settlement Church. Both are Presbyterian, red brick, almost identical in appearance, both surrounded by cemeteries. This duplication was brought about by what was known as the "Disruption" in Scotland. In the 1800's, Scotland had a state church but because of state restrictions, the "Free Church" about the middle of the century, withdrew from it, erected new buildings and schools and prepared for active missions. Following this split in Scotland, the Auld Kirk congregation broke apart, the stronger portion eventually erecting the Scotch Settlement Church. The Auld Kirk later unable to support itself, finally closed.

The oak trees at the back of the Auld Kirk, undisturbed, grew to great heights. The cemetery was tended spasmodically by those who had parents buried there. Services were held only in the summer when painting and repair work was done in the newer church. Well do I remember the joy of the Auld Kirk services — quite an adventure to go to another

church in the warm sunny days, the doors open and breezes blowing in, especially one time when sheep walked almost in at the open door baa-ing loudly in on the sermon. Then followed the joy of Sunday School, sitting on the hill at the back of the church under the great oaks. We wandered around the church yard looking at the tombstones—Sutherlands, Bannerma's (one of them the grandmother of the Hon. John Diefenbaker), Grants, Gunns, MacKays, Farises, Broomheads, MacBeaths, and our grandfather and his wife Betsy Sutherland, their three infant sons, all successively named Donald, and a son who had died in California (away off somewhere "like India"). The inscription on the stone read: "Natives of Sutherlandshire, Scotland".

For Christmas celebrations, the Auld Kirk was often opened. The two little box stoves at the back were kept full of wood, great twin lengths of stovepipe rose to the ceiling and crossed the entire room creaking and groaning with the heat. These were special times, of course. Once the Coombs brothers, teachers in adjoining schools, combined in a big concert; the Jeffs sisters in appropriate costumes "blue gingham pinafores, stockings of red" starred in "Don't Want to Play in Your Yard". Once a narrator spellbound the audience with the romantic story of a beautiful girl chased by a bull, and in the nick of time rescued by her lover—all enacted by pantomime in shadow behind a white bedsheet—the lights were set too low; only the shadows of legs crossed the sheet. The act ended abruptly by the sheet falling to the floor. At a more ambitious undertaking here, "Portia" playing a modern version of "Merchant of Venice" (no dress rehearsal having been held) was greatly startled by "Antonio" suddenly appearing in a very blonde, very bristling wig home-made from binder twine. But the show went on.

Even though several families of Irish settlers bought farms in the community, the name Scotch Settlement persisted.

The Irish were industrious and progressive. Our nearest neighbour was Peter Faris, out early in the fields calling to his horses. He was sometimes even accused of "pushing on the lines". Peter had two brothers, John and Will, an Uncle James and Uncle Robert, all Faris farmers in the community. Peter's father Matthew (I never saw beyond his boot tops) was "the tallest man in the County" married to a petite little woman. Peter's son, Donald, has just recently returned home after serving most successfully as an agricultural missionary in China and Thailand. Sgt. Keith Faris was

mourned by all as a casualty in World War II, another sorrow for the community at the sad loss of Lt. Matthew Archer in 1917. Murray Faris, Keith's brother, lives on the beautiful farm of his grandfather, Matthew Faris, named as the century farm of the community. The Farises were musical and could sing well. Aunt Katie Faris gave lessons on the piano.

The Watsons were another Irish family. John Watson married a Banting, cousin of Sir Frederick Banting of insulin fame. Moses Watson, another Irish pioneer, had a wonderful wife, a great favourite with the children to whom she passed out peppermints in church.

Thomas Rowe, a godly elder in the church (and uncle of our present Lieutenant Governor, Hon. Earl Rowe) who invariably prayed that "our last days might be our best days", was known to the children as the "man with the hundred whisks".

One of the MacBeaths was credited with being drawn on a sleigh by his wife much of the way from the Red River Settlement. Dave Sutherland (now residing in Bond Head) added to this tale by saying that a man weighing over 200 lbs. was carried over the same route in his mother's arms—only, of course, the 200 lbs. came later—the man was an infant at the time.

Amusements in the community were plentiful enough. The Sunday School picnics in the John Sutherland bush were events but garden parties on one of the Faris lawns were better still. An excursion up the Holland River as far as Jackson's Point on the lake was a real occasion. In the winter, there were parties and square dances. Dave Sutherland, Frank MacArthur and William Johnston all played the violin. (William Johnston, as Proctor in the church, struck the tuning fork and "gave out" the lines before an organ was purchased, and hymn books were still scarce). Willie George McLellan could call a lively square dance. The Sutherland family, Dave, Jim, Jack and the sisters Isobel and Frankie played and sang, and formed the best orchestra of the community. Here I should say that Sutherland was perhaps the most used surname in that community, though many were only distantly related. This, of course, was natural when so many came from the same district of Sutherlandshire, and resulted in distinguishing nicknames. We had among others, Red Johnny, Black John, Big Bill and Big Bill's Alex. just so the conversation could be kept straight.

The community was a good God-fearing one. The Scotch Settlement Church was one of three communities served by the same Minister. The Rev. Fred Smith, Dr. Frazier Smith, Rev. Laughlan McLean, Rev. D. N. Morden are those I best remember. One of these drove a horse "Frank", a poor old stumble-bum of a creature that required much urging, but following him came a Minister with a spanking team that could pass anything on the road. That drew a bit of criticism, but I fancy it was worth it.

Meanwhile the Auld Kirk settled back into silence. The shed was removed, the roof began to leak, the stove pipes came down, the windows were broken. A committee was formed to decide the fate of the old building. Money was given by the MacKay family, and others, and collections swelled the repair funds. The roof was restored, the walls of the church banked up, new front steps built, window panes replaced, and shutters added. The Ontario Government was approached to declare this an historic site and some ten years ago, a crowd gathered to unveil a plaque detailing the history of the place in 1958. This still stands at the entrance to the church, and signs along the road show visitors how the Auld Kirk may be reached.

Much more could be written, very much more, about our primitive schools, about our teachers, mostly good, but one unbelievably cruel, about the work and excitement of the threshing bees, the wonderful cooking of the women, the kindness and helpfulness of our neighbours, about the beauty of the pitcher plants in the marshlands and the trilliums in the woods, about the solemn joy of singing the psalms in church. And when voices were raised for "Unto the Hills" was it the picture of Scottish hills that rose before our eyes? When "God Our Help In Ages Past" deeply moved the little congregation, did it call to mind the long hard way from another land to the industry and peace of the new homes here in the Scotch Settlement?

I have already written too much and gone too far afield. I hope the gathering at the Auld Kirk will be an eventful one and bring back many happy memories.