

Kent  
Historical Society

Papers  
and  
Addresses

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Volume 9

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# Kent Historical Society

## Papers and Addresses

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### Volume 9

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# Chatham, Canada West, and the Great Western Railroad Disaster

By Robert S. Mitchell

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In the autumn of 1854, Chatham, Canada West, was a prosperous and fast-growing community. Although there were only 3,500 inhabitants, it was a trading and export centre for a large trading area from which it received agricultural and forest products. As a result, the industrial and commercial enterprises located in Chatham were more numerous than would be expected in a town of this size. There were twenty-eight industries (mainly steam-powered), manufacturing a wide variety of goods needed by the residents and the pioneer farmers, as well as twenty dry goods stores, and fifty grocery and provision shops where barter was the normal medium of trade. It could boast of ten churches, whose good works were somewhat offset by three distilleries, two breweries, and twenty-two taverns and drinking establishments. The many and varied medical needs of the little town and its surrounding area were looked after by seven physicians and surgeons. These 'medical gentlemen' as they preferred to be called, with their assistants, treated to the best that their abilities and medicines allowed, the accidents and diseases (including malaria, typhoid, diphtheria, and smallpox) that unfortunately were so prevalent. In 1854, they were advising the public through the newspaper, that fresh supplies of cow-pox had been received that they would administer to ward off the dreaded smallpox. In a pioneer settlement with a large lumbering industry, serious accidents were far too common and so great was the fear of gangrene that their principle seemed to be "Never hesitate - Amputate".

For years, the River Thames had been Chatham's only door to the outside world and its banks were lined with shipyards, warehouses, and wharves. Shipbuilding had been the reason for the original settlement at Chatham and the yards continued to launch fine steamers and sailing vessels. There were direct weekly sailings to Montreal for connections with the Liverpool steamers. The export trade, valued at £65,000 in 1854, was mainly in lumber. The United States, chiefly through the port of Buffalo, was the market for surplus agricultural products, with the vessels starting out from Chatham and loading additional produce at various wharves downstream. A regular passenger service was maintained to Detroit, Goderich, and Montreal.

The profitability of commerce was being reflected in improvements to the community. Brick buildings, or blocks, as they were called, began slowly to replace the wooden shacks lining King Street, the main street which followed the curving course of the Thames and McGregor's Creek. The finest of these



was Colonel Rankin's building at the corner of King and Queen (later Fourth) Streets. Chatham's pride was the new Town Hall where the council chambers also served as a magistrate's court, with the police station and cells in the basement. The volunteer fire department was also stationed here. Behind the Town Hall stretched the market for which Chatham had long been famous with traders regularly coming from as far as Wardsville. Across the creek, beyond the barrack grounds and the clergy or glebe lands, the County had erected an imposing stone court house and jail. (Strangely enough, this fine example of the stonemason's art still stands in Chatham, as the space it occupies has not been wanted as yet by developers.)

The main reason for this upswing in Chatham's economy was the Great Western Railroad Company. In January of 1854, the Company opened the link between London and Windsor, and now had 241 miles of track between its terminals at Suspension Bridge in Niagara Falls and Windsor. This was a very important link since it joined the New York and Michigan railroads and tickets could be purchased at Chatham, not only for stations along the Great Western, but for points as distant as New York City, Boston, Albany, Buffalo, and Chicago. It brought new markets for the many manufacturing plants in Chatham and opened new easy-to-reach worlds for the citizens. Property values in Chatham rose 100% in 1854 and such was the optimism that the Chatham council promised great improvements over the next two years, during which time Chatham would officially become a town. All town streets would be gravelled and the main ones illuminated by gas lamps. To facilitate trade, fifty-four miles of gravel and plank roads leading into Chatham would be put under construction.

Under the terms of the franchise and the various subsidies granted, the Railroad was under great pressure to complete the line. The first train was run from Niagara to Windsor on January 17, 1854. The Great Western had nothing to learn from modern publicists; the first train, at stops along the way, picked up various politicians and public figures, the mayors and councils of towns on the line, and the publishers and editors of several newspapers who gave the opening ceremonies a good press. This latter group was much favoured and those representing the more important journals were given passes for the line and promises of lucrative printing contracts. During the journey, as liquid and other refreshments were served, the guests were entertained by brass bands at the various stops. On arrival in Windsor they were ferried to Detroit where a monstrous celebration and reception was held, culminating in a grand banquet which was followed by three hours of toasts and oratory where the wine flowed freely.

The road, however, had been rushed to completion. The track had been laid, the trains were running, but nine months after the opening, the road bed was still being ballasted with gravel by private contractors. This was forgotten in the great success of the Railroad and the prosperity it brought to the towns along the line.

It is true, however, that there was grumbling about the railroad from some quarters, mainly from newspapers such as Chatham's **Western Planet** whose publisher and editor had not been favoured with printing contracts or free passes. The **Western Planet** continually publicized the Great Western's poor safety record, pointing out that in the nine months since the grand opening, seventeen accidents had occurred on the line and all but one had been accompanied by loss of life. Either the newspaper was not widely read or the public chose to ignore the danger, since, by the Autumn, the railroad was carrying over 10,000 passengers a week.

On October 27, 1854 an event occurred near Chatham that would turn the citizens' minds from approval of the Great Western Railroad Co., its management, and directors, to contempt.

On October 27th at 5:10 a.m. at Baptiste Creek, about fourteen miles west of Chatham, the westbound Great Western express passenger train collided with a gravel train that had blundered onto the main track. Forty-eight persons were killed on the spot and nine died shortly afterwards from their injuries. Forty-six others were maimed or injured. This accident became known as the Baptiste Creek Disaster, but by the **Chatham Western Planet** as the 'Baptiste Creek Massacre'. The **Planet**'s editor, after the shock of viewing the dead and mutilated at the scene of the accident, immediately wrote an almost hysterical account in which he charged that the Great Western and its Directors had slaughtered the innocent victims. He ended his tirade by demanding "that it was high time the Legislature should put a stop to railroads altogether and let the people return to slow coaches and muddy roads, where we are free from the tortures of continued anxiety for present death."

The story of the express train's fateful journey reads as if it had an appointment with disaster. The train was made up at Suspension Bridge and consisted of a locomotive and tender, one express car, a baggage car, three first class and two second class cars. G.F. Nutter of Stratford was the conductor and Thomas Smith of London, the Engineer. (Earlier historians erroneously have claimed that at the time of the accident, the engine was driven by David Walker, who later founded Toronto's famed Walker House.) A full load of passengers was on board and as there was not enough room for all of the second class passengers in their cars, places had been found for them in the first class cars. Most of the passengers were Americans from New York State going to Michigan, but also on board was a newly-arrived Scottish immigrant family consisting of father, mother, four sons and a daughter from Tullynessel, Aberdeenshire. The train left Niagara on time at 2 P.M., October 26th but had not gone far when it was held up by a gravel train off the track. Another delay occurred when the train found itself following a slow freight as far as Princeton. When it left London at 9:30 P.M., it was two hours behind schedule. (This was nothing unique as it was later stated that the Great Western hadn't run a train on time for three months.) Only three and one-half miles west of London, the cylinder head on the engine burst. The conductor set out red



warning lamps, walked back to London and obtained an engine to tow the train back to London, where it was coupled to a new engine and continued its journey, after a further three hours delay. The train, with the disgruntled passengers, arrived at Chatham at 4:20 a.m. on the 27th. By now the passengers sat in total darkness, as the candles that had been placed in tubs had burned away. As the train neared the swamps and marshes west of Chatham, it ran into a fog so dense that the engine's large head lamp with its reflector was almost useless. The engineer cut his speed to twenty-two miles per hour and the passengers, many of whom were now fitfully dozing, complained of the driver's unnecessary timidity as the train was already seven hours late.

At Baptiste Creek, meanwhile, the other participants were preparing for their appointment with disaster. Patrick Pine had been hired three weeks previously by the conductor of the gravel train as an engine cleaner, stoker, and call boy. In accordance with his routine, on the morning of the 27th, after firing the boiler of the gravel dredge and the locomotive (which took three or four hours), he awakened the crew at their boarding houses at 3 a.m.

Although the Great Western had been operating over the track for nine months, the work on the road bed was not complete and ballasting continued. The Railroad had run a spur line from the gravel pit to the main line and then tendered out the work to a private contractor. The Great Western supplied the locomotive, the gravel cars, and the train crew, but these men were paid by and were under the orders of the contractor, whose concern was to move out to the main line the largest amount of gravel in the shortest time. The contractor's authority and interest had been delegated to his foreman at the pit. In the past it had been customary for the gravel train to go out on the main line at 6 a.m., but recently in an effort to move more ballast, the train had been going out from 4:00 to 5:30 a.m.

The conductor of the gravel train was D.W. Twitchell who was up and already at the gravel dredge when Pine called the rest of the crew. When Pine woke John Kettlewell, the engineer, Kettlewell asked him if a train had passed. He replied that he had heard one train going east about 1:00 a.m. Kettlewell was a frightened man. He had been ordered several times to run the train out on the main line when express trains were due. Recently, they had been on the main track when they saw another train approaching them on the long stretch of straight track. He just had time to get his cars back on the siding before it arrived. But that had been in daylight and not on a dark, foggy morning when his lamps would be useless. His complaints to Twitchell had been laughed off and Kettlewell had gone to his superior, the Chief Engineer, to complain. He was told that responsibility lay with Twitchell and he must obey his orders. If he did not, he would be dismissed immediately. Word of Kettlewell's official complaint passed back to Twitchell and relations between the two men were strained.

Twitchell had no misgivings. Despite the Great Western's horrendous

schedule-keeping record, it never occurred to him that there might be another train out in the fog on the main line. He had held his present position for only a month, but the amount of gravel his train had moved had brought him to the favourable notice of the contractor. This morning he saw that his train was made up of 15 fully loaded gravel cars and the engine was positioned to push the train onto the main line. On the farthest car, the lead car, he had placed two red lanterns and had himself climbed aboard with one of the labourers. He signalled the timid Kettlewell to proceed.

The train had been pushed about two miles down the main line when Twitchell, staring idly into the fog, was horrified to see the light of a locomotive bearing down on them only a few feet away. Frantically, he waved his lantern, at the same time screaming to his companion to jump. Twitchell threw himself into the darkness as splinters from the wreckage whistled over his head. Miraculously, he landed uninjured. His companion was dead before his body hit the ground.

A survivor on the express train who had been dozing, said he was awakened by a deep rumbling sound which he compared to a large wave breaking on rocks. This was followed instantly by an ear-shattering crash and the ripping of timbers mingled with screams and the sound of escaping steam. He was crushed into his seat by the roof of the car, which had collapsed. Writhing to escape, he found his foot was trapped between the seat and the broken floor. Finally managing to draw his foot from the trapped boot, he succeeded in getting to the nearby rear door of the carriage, where he stumbled over the body of the brakeman, John Martin. Martin was horribly injured with both arms and both legs broken and deep wounds to his head. Nevertheless, before he died, he whispered "Never mind me - help those who are living - I'm done for."

The dazed survivors and the injured who were able, crawled from the wreckage and were gathered into a group by Grafton Nutter, the conductor of the passenger train, who fortunately had escaped injury. Nutter immediately took charge and started rescue operations with the help of the uninjured passengers. Fires were started along the embankment to enable them to see to carry out the rescue work. A messenger was sent back to Chatham for help as soon as the enormity of the catastrophe was realized. By the light of the fires, the full scene of horror could be viewed. One of the passengers, who likened the scene to a vision of Hell, gave the following description:

"The passenger engine and tender were lying on their sides, embedded in the marsh and smashed into fragments. The fire had been thrown out and was smoking on the wet grass. Strangely, the first baggage car was undamaged but the second was dashed into the next passenger car and formed an immense mass of splintered wood work, iron, mangled flesh and bones, bodies and dismembered



limbs, broken rifles and loaves of bread jumbled together in a mound. The next passenger car had been thrown on the roof of that behind it, crushing it half way down its length. All this was viewed while continuous screams came from the people trapped in the wreckage. On both sides of the embankment, below the cars, were the wounded and dying. Some had been flung out violently from the wreck, others having crawled there with broken legs, to join those who had been carried near the fire by passengers."

Nutter arranged for boards to be placed over the backs of seats in the undamaged cars and directed that the horribly mutilated survivors be placed on these, where they were tended by uninjured passengers as well as circumstances allowed. The dead were carried to high ground above the marsh where they were covered with canvas torn from the cars. It was four hours before all the dead and injured were removed from the wreckage as darkness melted to a grey day. The rescue work continued. Dazed survivors limped from the wounded to the dying, searching for members of their families. A man from Iowa found in the rows of the dead, his two uncles, two aunts, and two cousins. Some families had all the members killed while others had both parents so severely injured that they were unable to search for each other or their children.

After Nutter had his rescue parties organized, he walked to the front of the train to survey the damage. Here he met a man helping to remove the dead and injured who was identified to him as Kettlewell, the engineer of the gravel train. He shouted "For God's sake - why is your train here?" Kettlewell replied that he had been following orders.

The rescue work was still continuing when the first attempt to cover-up and select a scapegoat was made. Pine, the engine cleaner, had just gone to bed in his boarding house at Baptiste Creek when he was told of the accident. Getting dressed, he started walking down the track toward the scene when about a half-mile from the wreckage he met Twitchell hurrying from it. Twitchell charged that Pine should have warned him that the westbound express had not passed. Pine retorted that he had never been hired as a watchman. Twitchell tried unsuccessfully to get to Windsor and finally went to the home of Thomas Mason. Mason was just returning from the accident and Twitchell said to him, "Mason, what shall I do? I have caused the death of forty or fifty poor souls who never did me any harm and for God's sake, what shall I do, what will they do to me? They will hang me I suppose." He asked Mason to hide him until he heard how things were. Mason told him to stand his own ground, to act like a man and not to run away under any consideration. Twitchell then asked to stay in the house for two or three hours. There, in an upstairs bedroom, he was visited by D.W. Pollard, the foreman of the ballasting operation, who had been in Windsor at the time of the accident. Afterwards, about 4 P.M., Pollard searched out Pine and requested a private conversation. Pollard said "Pat, you had better clear". When Pine asked why,

he was told that, while he did not know it, among his other duties, he was also the watchman. Pollard told him he would be held responsible for all the deaths and if caught, would be arrested. Pine stated that he wasn't frightened as he had never been hired as a watchman and had witnesses present at this hiring. At the same time, he said he couldn't go as he had no money. Pollard gave him \$2.00 and promised to mail him the balance of his wages with his clothing. Pine, after changing his shirt, walked to Windsor and later crossed to Detroit.

When the messenger brought the news of the accident and its magnitude to Chatham, a rescue train was organized as quickly as possible and the Managing Director of the Great Western Railroad in Hamilton was advised by the recently installed telegraph. Two of the town's doctors volunteered to go with the rescue train. One of these, Dr. Cross, combined his practice of medicine with his other profession - editor of the **Western Planet**. Officials of the Railroad would later regret this dual role. The other doctors agreed to meet the train on its return to Chatham to render their assistance. Some charitable ladies tore sheets into a large supply of bandages and the carpenters of the town were told to start making rough coffins for the dead who would be brought back. A Coroner's Jury of twelve citizens was empanelled to investigate the accident.

On the rescue train's arrival at the scene of the disaster, there was some delay in collecting all the wounded. After receiving minimal medical attention at the scene, they were placed in the cars and returned to Chatham. For many years, residents of Chatham recalled with horror the arrival of these cars with blood dripping from the floor boards. The injured were carried into the freight house where the town's doctors had assembled, but the wounded were only bandaged at this time and no effort was made to set the many broken arms and legs. These unfortunate people were then loaded on wagons and carried a mile to the town centre. Some were distributed among the hotels and the army barracks, but by late evening shelter still had not been found for many. Some benevolent citizens opened their homes to the wounded, especially to the injured children. Two of Chatham's councillors, seeing the injured lying on litters in the street, offered the Town Hall as a hospital where the remainder were carried.

While the wounded were thus being tended, the train returned to the scene of the wreck with the Coroner and his jury. The dead were loaded on the cars and brought back to Chatham where the freight house was used as a morgue. The jury listed the money and valuables found on the bodies, identified those they could, and listed the dead by number with a brief description. Even today, this list makes poignant reading:

No. 4 A female, about 24 years, black hair, black silk bonnet with artificials, fur cuffs, calico travelling dress, white and pink, unknown.



No. 17 A boy, 10 or 12, light hair, check cotton jacket, black vest, brass buttons, unknown.

No. 20 Charles Robinson, light hair, a Bible with name, dated Oct. 22, 1849, 2 keys, \$58 in gold and 85 in silver, supposed to be English.

No. 42 An old man, sandy hair, \$2, unknown.

No. 43 An old female, grey hair, brass ring on forefinger. Supposed to be wife of No. 42.

The coroner adjourned his jury until 10 a.m., the following morning and although they were to meet for eight consecutive days, calling many witnesses, they were to be discharged without reaching a verdict.

When C.J. Brydges, the managing director of the railroad, received the telegram informing him of the accident, he immediately ordered a private train, telegraphed the company's surgeon in London, and left for Chatham. He wisely obtained the company of his solicitor as, unknown to him, a Chatham constable was en route to Hamilton with a warrant for his arrest. The train stopped in London to pick up Dr. Brown, the railroad company's surgeon, later described by his critics as young and inexperienced. He was told to spare no expense in the relief or treatment of the injured. Mr. Brydges was arrested on his arrival in Chatham and taken before the magistrates. He was released on his parole pending the findings of the Grand Jury and the Coroner's Inquest.

Dr. Brown's arrival in Chatham was a catalyst that caused an outbreak of pettiness, spite, and pompous pride among the local doctors that would have been laughable, were it not for the consequences for the severely injured. When he had met with the local doctors, Brown's first orders were that nothing further be done in the way of treatment until all the injured had been moved to the Town Hall and proper bedsteads erected. He indicated that after assessing the wounds, he would be in a position to say how many doctors he would require to assist him. The local practitioners disagreed with this brash, young, out-of-town doctor, but with his arrival on the scene, the injured were now his patients. Piqued by his abrupt manner, they went haughtily to their homes with the vague understanding that they would all convene at the Town Hall in the morning. During the night, some of the wounded with unset broken limbs were moved from other locations to the Town Hall. Screams came from the litters being carried on the rough streets, until complaints by citizens forced a dressing of the wounds before others were moved.

The next morning, Dr. Brown, with notebook in hand, went to the various locations where the wounded lay, making a list of the wounds and treatment required. He ordered the carpenters to stop making coffins for the dead and

start making splints for those still living. He was quite critical that this obvious work had not been ordered by any of the Chatham doctors on the previous day. The medical gentlemen of Chatham, after their voluntary services on the arrival of the wounded, stood by all day Saturday with folded arms and refused to treat the wounded, although begged repeatedly by the magistrates and other leading citizens. Dr. Brown finally indicated he would require the services of three of the local doctors whom he designated. He later said the other doctors refused to treat the wounded as he would not guarantee their future care.

It was 5 p.m., on Saturday before the setting of broken limbs and treatment of the wounds began in the Town Hall, thirty-six hours after the accident. The results of the neglect soon became apparent. Bandages that had been put on broken arms and legs in the excitement following the accident, had become tourniquets due to the gross swelling of the injured limbs and gangrene had made its deadly appearance. Treatment now consisted of amputation and in such numbers that the over-worked carpenters were told to make crates in which to bury the severed limbs. When one of the doctors was told by another that the injured were growling about not having their wounds dressed, he replied charitably, "Let them growl and be damned." Dr. Brown later complimented himself on the relief and comfort afforded the injured on the loosening of the bandages and the application of cold cloths, although why this simple procedure had not been done earlier is not clear. Nine of the wounded died of their injuries shortly following the accident but no record was kept of the number of amputations. The tragedy of the Scottish immigrant, however, was well documented in the inquest and in later charges of neglect raised in the press. He may serve as an example.

A large, robust man of strong constitution, he suffered a simple break in the tibia and a minor wound to the same leg. Before either of these had been treated, gangrene set in because the tightened bandage had cut off the blood supply to the leg. The leg was amputated on Sunday but his constitution had been so weakened that he did not survive the operation. It is not known if he learned of his family's fate before his death. Three of his sons, ages fourteen, four, and one, were killed in the accident. His six-year-old son had a leg amputated and his wife lost an arm to the knife. Only his two-year-old daughter had escaped serious injury.

The wounded who were in private homes had been taken in by leading citizens of the community. In response to their pleas, they were successful in getting their patients treated by the local doctors on their own responsibility. These citizens, at the request of Dr. Cross (who had not been chosen by Dr. Brown to treat the wounded), wrote letters to the newspaper complaining of the lack of treatment by the railroad's doctors. Dr. Cross attacked Dr. Brown in an article, accusing him of "gross and culpable neglect manifested towards the unfortunate sufferers." The two medical gentlemen entered into a mud-slinging match through the press, until Dr. Brown saw the error of quarreling



with a colleague who had a newspaper at his disposal.

While these days of tumult wore on, the Coroner's Jury was in daily session. The Grand Jury had been in session at the time of the collision and the accident was added to its agenda. In addition to the conductors and engineers of both trains and the railroad officials, many other witnesses were called by the Coroner. Patrick Pine, who had run away to Detroit, heard he was wanted as a witness. He crossed back to Windsor, gave himself up to the magistrates, was arrested, and returned to Chatham to testify. The Great Western was allowed the then-usual privilege of being represented at the inquest by its lawyer, who cross-examined those witnesses whose testimony in any way reflected on the management of the railroad. He was successful in showing bias in the testimony of some disgruntled former employees of the company. As the inquest went on, the Grand Jury finished its other business and was adjourned by the Chief Justice until such time as the Coroner's verdict was reached. After seven days of hearings, the Coroner's Jury was locked up to arrive at their decision. They deliberated all day, then announced that it was impossible for them to agree and requested that they be released from further deliberation. It was learned that ten of the jurors had agreed to bring in a verdict of manslaughter in the first degree, due to willful negligence, against Twitchell (the conductor of the gravel train) and culpable negligence on the part of the Directors of the Great Western, which would have rendered them criminally accountable. There were two dissenters to this verdict who insisted on exculpating the Directors from all guilt. The jury was discharged and immediately a new jury of twenty-two persons was empanelled but not before Twitchell, who saw which way the wind was blowing, disappeared.

The comic opera continued. As the second Coroner's Jury was considering its verdict, the Grand Jury, on the advice of the Chief Justice, brought in its verdict. True bills of manslaughter were brought in against Twitchell and his engineer, Kettlewell. The Directors were pronounced worthy of censure for the lack of a watchman, but they were not charged. The Coroner, while his jury was still deliberating its verdict, went into the jury room and took the extraordinary step of announcing the verdict of the Grand Jury. Sixteen of the jurors thereupon agreed on the same decision but six held out, as they wanted the Directors charged as well. They finally signed the majority verdict under protest, after being told by the Coroner that their alternative was being placed in the custody of a constable.

Following the verdict, Twitchell could not be found but Kettlewell was arrested and lodged in the Kent County Jail to await his trial at the next Spring Assizes. Charges against Patrick Pine, the deceived engine cleaner, were dropped as were those against C.J. Brydges, the Managing Director. The Government appointed a Commission to investigate this accident and the other fatal accidents that had been so prevalent on the Great Western Railroad.

The **Western Planet** attacked the verdicts. Kettlewell was referred to as

"an innocent, unfortunate and basely used man." The paper's strongest criticism was reserved for the freeing of the Directors from criminal charges. Dr. Cross wrote scathing articles and he, in turn, was attacked by other newspapers friendly to the railroad. They accused him of political motivation and professional jealousy from being deprived of his share of the medical attendance.

Months passed and Chatham slowly returned to normal. The dead had been buried in potters' field, the injured and maimed hobbled to their distant homes, orphans were taken in by family, and the **Western Planet** ceased its attacks on the Great Western, as Dr. Cross became a town councillor and found other targets for his virulent pen. The Town of Chatham came close to suing the Great Western. The Town had submitted a charge to the Railroad for fifty pounds for the use of the Town Hall as a hospital. The Railroad refused to pay, expressing shock that the councillors would have charged for what it thought was a freely-given charitable gesture. The dispute was finally settled by a payment of twenty-five pounds. During this wrangling, the Coroner made the mistake of appearing before Council to speak on behalf of the Great Western. For his trouble, he had his laundry exposed to public view in the **Planet**.

The Coroner's fee paid by the County in case of an accidental death was one pound fifty pence. It appears that the Coroner visited the wreck and as no medical examination was necessary, declared all the victims met their deaths as a result of a train collision. For this bit of medical wisdom, he multiplied his fee by forty-eight and submitted a bill for sixty pounds to the County Council, which vowed it "would resist payment to the last."

The Commissioners' Report on the various accidents on the Great Western Railroad Co., was released in March 1855 and it completely substantiated the **Planet's** position. In dealing with the Baptiste Creek accident, it criticized the higher officials of the Great Western in the most severe language for not exercising their supervision or their authority with becoming vigor, for not having a watchman at the site, and for having the ballasting operation and the crew of the gravel train under the control of a private contractor. It also completely exonerated Kettlewell, the engineer, from all blame, stating that he was under the conductor's orders. The report praised Kettlewell for complaining to the Chief Engineer previously about the conductor's actions by saying "he showed a degree of moral courage equally rare and commendable in a man of his class." Kettlewell, who had been imprisoned immediately after the inquest and was later released on bail, had his case heard at the Kent County May Assizes. He was discharged, as the Grand Jury could find no grounds for action.

Several damage actions were brought against the Great Western by survivors of the accident in the following months. The Company was successful in obtaining a change of venue from Kent County, claiming that the **Western**



**Planet** had so inflamed public opinion in Kent against them that a fair hearing would be impossible. The cases were ordered to be heard at the Lambton County Spring 1855 Assizes and were entered with that court. A search of the Upper Canada Common Pleas Reports and the Upper Canada Queen's Bench Reports fails to show these cases ever coming to trial and it is believed that out-of-court settlements were arranged. As far as can be learned, only the maimed widow of the Scottish immigrant, her daughter, and the son whose leg had been amputated, made their home in Chatham after the accident.

Today in Chatham, this weekend of horror has been forgotten.

Note: The writer of this article is a grandson of the six-year-old Scottish immigrant boy whose leg was amputated.

# A Short Sketch of Colonel Arthur Rankin and Chatham's Rankin Hotel

By Robert S. Mitchell

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We would be hard pressed to have the Rankin Hotel of today declared an Historic Site. It is, however, one of the oldest buildings in Chatham, even pre-dating the now destroyed Eberts Block. It still retains much of its original architecture and construction, as may be seen from old photographs in the Chatham-Kent Museum. It is also interesting to us, as there was very little of the social, political, and business life of Chatham in the 19th century that didn't revolve around the Rankin Hotel and its bar.

Today's Rankin Hotel was built in 1852 as a business block by the enterprising Colonel Arthur Rankin, who at that point in his career was speculating in real estate and shipbuilding. The contractor was William Reid. Old Lot #93 in Chatham originally took in all the land between Fourth, Fifth, Wellington, and King Streets and was granted by the Crown to Alexander McKee. For years, this land was treated as common grazing land by the less than 2,000 inhabitants. A few squatters had built shacks there, the militia sometimes drilled there, and in 1842 Chatham's first Fair, a Cattle Fair, was held on the site. In 1838, this block of land was divided into smaller lots. The lot bordering on King and Fourth Streets was sold to John Watson, then to Edwin Larwell, who sold it to Arthur Rankin in 1849.

Arthur Rankin was such a flamboyant and larger-than-life character that I am perplexed that many books have not been written about this man's life. He was born in Montreal in 1816, the son of an Irish immigrant. At the age of 15, he ran away from school to go to sea and became a cabin boy on a ship on the New York-Liverpool run. After a few years at sea, he returned to Canada, moving to Sandwich where his father was then teaching school. After an attempt at homesteading in the Owen Sound area, he once more returned to Sandwich when the Rebellion broke out, and was made an ensign in an infantry company stationed there. In this period of his life, he fought several duels on what is now Belle Isle – the cause, always a young lady and the weapons, pistols. He gained fame at the Battle of Windsor when he captured several prisoners and the invaders' flag. Eventually he rose in the militia to the rank of Colonel – a title he cherished for the rest of his life. In 1845 he went on a mining expedition to the Lake Superior region and discovered the St. Ignace copper mine. He now entered into his real estate and shipbuilding speculations and was a major shareholder in a fleet of vessels – a steamer and two large sailing ships – plying between Chatham and Montreal. The year he



built the Rankin Block he ran in the Kent riding in the general election as one of the two Conservative candidates. The Reform Party brought in the Hon. George Brown of the Toronto Globe who won easily over the split Conservative ticket. The Colonel later moved with his ambitions back to Essex where he was successful in the next election and served two four-year terms as Member of Parliament while retaining his rank in the militia. All his life, Rankin was a militant abolitionist and had by physical force freed slaves who had been captured here by slave catchers. When the American Civil War broke out, he immediately offered his services to the Union Army. After a meeting with President Lincoln who approved his plan, he raised a Company of Michigan Lancers with British officers and N.C.O.'s and with himself, naturally, as Colonel and with British officers and N.C.O.'s. The fact that he was simultaneously a Colonel in the Canadian Militia and a Member of Parliament does not seem to have bothered him. After the TRENT Affair, when war between the United States and Great Britain became a possibility, there was a great public outcry against the Colonel's position and he and the other British officers resigned their commissions in the Lancers and returned to Canada. He then offered to raise a volunteer militia company in Essex to defend the border against his former comrades. His offer was declined and when he went to Toronto for a sitting of the Legislature, he was arrested on the charge of seducing British nationals to enter the services of a foreign power and his commission in the Canadian Militia was revoked. The criminal charges, however, were not pressed by the Government and Rankin resumed his political career.

The Colonel was always a showman and in 1860 he gathered together a group of Walpole Island Indians. He taught them a little about appearing before a crowd, choreographed some more blood curdling war dances than they had ever imagined and packed them off to England to appear on the stage as a Wild West Show where they made two appearances before Queen Victoria. The tour was so successful that Rankin, a staunch abolitionist, sold his whole troupe of Indians to an English promoter at a huge profit.

The Colonel was the first private owner of Bob-Lo Island, having in 1874 used his connections and bought the whole island from the Government for \$40. Never one to let sentiment get in the way of a nice profit, three years later he sold it for \$15,000 to his son, who tried to turn it into a private game reserve. His son, on his divorce, turned it over to his wife in lieu of alimony and in 1887 she sold the island to developers for \$40,000.

Colonel Rankin had married Mary McKee of Chatham. They had two sons and the elder, Arthur McKee Rankin, following his father's example, ran away from Upper Canada College when he was 17 for a life on the New York stage where he became a renowned actor, manager, and producer under the name of McKee Rankin. McKee had three daughters. One married Sidney Drew, brother of the actor John Drew, who was the uncle of Ethel, Lionel, and John Barrymore. The youngest daughter, not to be outdone, was the first wife of Lionel Barrymore. So today, when you see Drew Barrymore on the

movie or TV screen, remember there is a Chatham connection.

(Perhaps with his show business background, the Colonel wouldn't be too distressed with the Rankin Hotel of today! Well, back to the hotel.)

From the first, Colonel Rankin's business block in Chatham was a success, as this substantial brick building in its prime location met a need in the fast growing little community. The town, in 1852, was coming of age and engineers were staking out the road bed of the Great Western Railway that would pass through the town. Advertisements called for one hundred labourers to work on the Raleigh section of the railway. John Chrysler (whose descendants were to found Chrysler Motors) was a blacksmith making wagons and carriages in his shop on Wellington Street. While cattle and hogs still roamed the muddy streets and the eight licensed inns and taverns did a roaring business, culture was not missing from Chatham. A concert of vocal music was held with William McKenzie Ross as choral director. Mr. Currie was receiving monthly from both London and Paris, the latest fashions for sale to the ladies of Chatham. The school trustees were looking for two additional female teachers whose salaries were not to exceed 40 pounds per annum.

In the distant outside world that year, the Duke of Wellington died, Dickens wrote **Bleak House**, and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote **Uncle Tom's Cabin**. This was also the first year that the first house sparrows were seen, as the United States imported house sparrows from Germany to combat the caterpillars that were destroying the elm trees.

While this was taking place, William McKenzie Ross started in business for himself, and opened a store specializing in woolen goods in the the new Rankin Building, taking over the prime ground floor location. The balance of the ground floor was occupied by the Headquarters Saloon, where Charles Jubenville advertised that besides selling the best of liquors, he always had on hand fresh oysters, lobsters, pickled pigs' feet, and pickled tripe. Next door was O'Donnell's Drug Store. I am sure that it was a busy place, as he advertised widely both in the **Planet** and by handbills, that he had a wide selection of nostrums that would cure any known disease of man or beast (most of these remedies would be proscribed today). Across the street on the Fourth Street, two young mechanics named McKeough and Smith had opened a tinsmith shop.

The second floor of Rankin's building was occupied by dentists, lawyers, insurance offices, land agents, and real estate offices. The Masons and the Oddfellows took over the upper floors for their lodge rooms and were very gracious in lending their commodious quarters to organizations like the volunteer fireman for their annual dances and balls. These balls must have been like something from **Gone with the Wind**, with the ladies in their hoop skirts, the gentlemen in their firemen's dress uniforms or their red militia jackets, lamps, candlelight, wine, a tasty buffet, and an orchestra brought in all the



way from Detroit.

In 1861, for reasons known only to himself, Colonel Rankin sold his building to the Bank of Upper Canada for \$10,000. It was then purchased by a partnership of Messrs. Coles, Rose, and Campbell, who turned it into a hotel in 1862. They retained the Rankin name and so it remains to this day. In the 19th century, prior to the Pleasance era, I have been able to trace seventeen proprietors and I am sure there were more. At times, it seems that every time a mortgage payment came due, the hotel got a new owner. However, each owner modernized the building and made improvements and in its great days before the construction of the Garner House in 1883, the Rankin Hotel was known as the finest hotel in Western Canada (as our area was then called). All social events of any importance in Chatham and Kent were held there. Political and business deals were made in its extensive bar room, which was of course, strictly a male preserve. Even after the Garner House was opened, the Rankin maintained its position with the local establishment, somewhat as the Royal York does today with its more modern competitors.

For decades, the Rankin Hotel was the travellers' first stop in Chatham. An omnibus met all trains and the passengers of the steamers and schooners as they disembarked just across the street. The hotel supplied porters to carry their luggage up the muddy slope. As business improved, so did the hotel. Large stables were added. Sample rooms, parlors, and a billiard room were installed, and the ground floor was inlaid with walnut and maple. Eventually in the latter part of the century, the giant step was taken and indoor plumbing, central heating, and electric lights were installed. In 1875, iron balconies opening on the second floor were erected, where on festive occasions bands would play and from which political speeches were made to the citizens on the street below. These events always seem to have been followed by an oyster supper in the hotel.

In the 1890s the ground floor contained offices, waiting rooms, sample rooms, the bar room, the kitchen, and a dining room seating one hundred guests. The second floor had more sample rooms, a ladies' parlor, a gentlemen's parlor, and eight bedrooms. The third floor was taken up by nineteen bedrooms and the fourth floor had twelve more bedrooms, which were divided between the boarders and the staff. The basement was fitted up with what were called elegant bathrooms with hot and cold water service. As you see, Colonel Rankin built his building with four storeys. As yet I have been unable to discover when the top storey was removed. It only extended back half the depth of the building and from old photographs, was still there in 1913.

Of course, all this luxury did not come cheaply. For his well-furnished room, the use of the hotel's amenities, and three gargantuan meals each day, the guest was required to pay \$1.00 per day. In 1880, this was raised to \$1.50.

I find it hard to believe the eating capacities of our ancestors. The

**Chatham Planet** writes in lyrical style of the 1875 Wardens' Dinner held at the Rankin House. After describing the decorations in the dining room, we can almost see the reporter salivate, as he details the menu which he describes as near to perfection as possible. We can only read it with awe, considering that everything was available to the guests, before mechanical refrigeration. After starting with oyster soup, there was a choice of roast beef, mutton, chicken, turkey, and venison, or boiled mutton, turkey, or chicken, all served with the appropriate sauces. Then came what were then called entrees – fricasse of chicken, quail on toast, lobster salad, chicken salad, pork pies, curried mutton and rice, and macaroni and cheese. Next the guests chose between wild turkey and wild duck, or if they fancied something cold, they could have boiled ham, spiced beef, buffalo tongue, or ox tongue. The vegetables were potatoes (boiled, baked, and mashed), cabbage, parsnips, carrots, cauliflower, tomatoes, and salsify. The relishes (all home-made) were tomato catsup, anchovy sauce, mixed pickles, mushroom catsup, cauliflower pickles, and piccalilli. Dessert came next, with plum pudding, apple, mincemeat, and pumpkin pies, raspberry and grape tarts, sponge, jelly, or fruit cakes, and brandy or port wine jellies. For those still in need of some kind of nourishment, apples, almonds, filberts, raisins, celery, and cheese were placed on the table with coffee and tea. Various wines were served throughout the meal, but it was after dinner that the serious business of toasting began. The **Planet** lists three columns of toasts and ends its article by stating that the affair ended at 2 a.m. It is no wonder that for years all public dinners were held at the Rankin. Incidentally, this dinner was not exceptional, for in the Chatham-Kent Museum you can see other Rankin House menus of that era with the same quantity of food.

Through advertisements in the **Planet**, we learn that the sample rooms at the hotel were often rented by all types of itinerant salesmen and an amazing collection of charlatans – 'painless' dentists, faith healers, fortune tellers, hypnotists, and patent medicine salesmen whose products, consisting mainly of alcohol, always seemed to make the user feel better. Many of these salesmen left town leaving unpaid hotel bills and unserved warrants. The rooms were also used by a much more respectable class, such as visiting medical specialists (to whom the local doctors referred their patients), travelling artists, photographers, and in 1885, by a North West Mounted Police recruiting officer. He was looking for able-bodied men of Chatham and Kent, between the ages of twenty-two and forty, of exemplary character, and able to ride well. Recruits were offered a five year engagement with a free kit and service pay of 50 cents per day which could rise all the way to 70 cents per day after five years of good conduct.

I was rather amazed that in my research, I found that the Rankin had escaped any major fires over the years. There was a fire in 1872 that started in the lamp-filling room behind the bar room. The **Planet's** story on this is rather amusing. The firemen arrived in good time with their new steam pumper that was positioned on the Rankin dock. At first they couldn't get it



started due to green wood being in the fire box but when they did, they were so fascinated by the powerful twin jets of water that they aimed them into the building for forty minutes. The proprietor claimed that they did far more damage than the fire, which he said could have been put out with a few buckets of water. At this fire the constable stood guard at the bar room door to stop the citizens from rushing in to rescue the bar inventory.

In 1902, a penniless alcoholic dropped dead in the Rankin bar, possibly from the shock of the beef tea he had just drunk. He was W.E. Hamilton, no doubt the greatest intellect Chatham has seen. Descended from the British aristocracy and a graduate of Dublin's Trinity College at the age of 17, he was a world traveller, linguist, poet, inventor, teacher, and newspaper editor, but each year dropping lower in his lifestyle. He came to Chatham when hired as editor of the **Planet** but had to be let go on account of his drinking. During his tenure, however, he was responsible for a great many improvements in the practical and cultural life of Chatham. He ended his career editing a one-page giveaway Market Guide for whatever advertising he could obtain and sleeping on a cot in the back room of a shop through the kindness of a friend. His funeral and burial at Maple Leaf Cemetery were paid for by public subscription and the leading citizens of the community were honored to serve as pall bearers. Few people today know that this man wrote the poem "The Maple Leaf Forever", which was later set to music.

A couple of the many proprietors are interesting to me. David Walker was the engineer of the passenger train involved in the 1854 Great Western Railway disaster. Although he was found blameless by all the investigations after the accident, with public sentiment very anti-railroad, the management did not feel he could be returned to his former position. He was offered the management of the railroad restaurant at the Chatham depot and later took over the depot hotel. Walker found hotel-keeping very much to his liking and in 1864 became proprietor of the Rankin House. From there, he went on to bigger and better things as founder of the renowned Walker House in Toronto.

A few years later, during the American Civil War, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, rejoicing in the name of Abraham Soop, came to Canada to escape the Union Army draft. After owning Chatham's Rutley House, he took over the Rankin Hotel in 1879 and put his daughter in charge of the dining room and kitchen. He was joined by a young Scotsman - my grandfather - as a very junior partner, who following the precepts of good business, married his senior partner's pretty daughter and the next year was the sole proprietor. From this union of my grandparents, my father had the dubious distinction of being born in the Rankin Hotel.

In 1903, the Pleasance era started when John "Irish Jack" Pleasance purchased the Rankin from William Peck for \$14,500. Through his sons and grandson, this ill-fated family was to run the hotel for more than sixty years. Irish Jack was what was known as a "character" and his abrupt and somewhat

abrasive manner hid his kindly and generous nature. At that time in Chatham, everyone had their favourite Irish Jack story. He reigned like a king from behind his bar and would make a great show of throwing out a tramp who was cadging food from the free lunch counter and at the door whisper in his ear to go around to the back, where he would be given a good meal in the kitchen. Irish Jack was the Liberal Party leader in Kent and no Liberal candidate would dream of running for election without his approval and advice. His fame as a political organizer extended far beyond his own riding. He loved politics and played the game hard, so much so that near election time he became quite abusive towards his customers of the opposition party. In the 1905 provincial election, the local Conservative Committee warned that they would get even with Irish Jack if they won the election. They did win and appointed their own Liquor Commission Board, which promptly lifted the Rankin's licence with no reason given and no appeal allowed. For a year, as the hotel came close to bankruptcy, the bar sold only temperance drinks and cigars. All this time the outraged citizens of Chatham and Kent of both political persuasions, who had lost their favourite recreational spot, bombarded the legislature with petitions for a reversal of the ruling, as did both the town and county councils. The licence was restored in 1906 and at that time there were 13 licensed hotels in Chatham. Little did anyone think then that prohibition was in the near future and the days of glory of the Rankin Hotel and Bar were to disappear forever.

I have ended my research with the sale of the Rankin Hotel in 1962 when Joe Pleasance, his mother, and local businessmen formed Pleasance Hotels Limited, to purchase the bankrupt William Pitt Hotel.

I have spent about a year on this project and have given you just a small sampling of the material I have. However, I feel that I have only scratched the surface, as many of the records I require seem to have been destroyed or are unavailable.

Presented to the Kent Historical Society on April 15, 1987.



# St. Joseph's Hospital: Share the Journey

By Agnes Doyle

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I feel privileged to be asked to address the Kent Historical Society and to "Share the Journey" of St. Joseph's Hospital. You are all quite familiar with the hospital as it is today, so my remarks this evening will deal mostly with the progress made in the earlier days. For those of you who have already acquired a book, you do not want to hear what has already been written and for any of you who hope to read the book, I do not wish to spoil it for you, so I shall try very hard to tell you about experiences that have not been published.

It was in 1650, in France, that the first five Sisters of St. Joseph pronounced their vows. Their numbers grew steadily and everything went well for them, until the time of the French Revolution when five Sisters were put to death on the guillotine.

In 1868 the Sisters first established a residence in London, Ontario. On October 15, 1890 they opened their first hospital in Chatham, on Centre Street.

Can you imagine a nurse today looking after her patients, scrubbing the floors, washing the windows, doing the laundry, and preparing their meals? It also meant carrying in the coal and cleaning out the ashes. They did not have a lovely lounge to relax in at the end of their day. They had one room large enough for five beds, and their kitchen was where they ate and said their prayers. One bathroom served Sisters and patients alike and water was pumped with a hand pump.

When the present site was purchased it had very little going for it. The lot was unsightly and seemed to be off in the wilderness. Its one redeeming feature was the river, until it started to erode its banks and work had to be done to preserve them.

The work progressed rapidly on the new hospital and on June 14th, 1891 Bishop O'Connor laid the cornerstone. He arrived by carriage, in a procession from St. Joseph's Church, headed by the city band and riders on horseback. In his address, Bishop O'Connor reminded the audience that all clergy would be encouraged to visit their people. Judge Woods expressed his gratitude to the Sisters for the loving care received by his brother before he died. Dr. J.L.

Bray, an Episcopalian, rejoiced in the erection of this building and from his experience, felt sure there would be no sectarian lines drawn. Mr. W.E. Hamilton read a letter of appreciation from Mayor Carpenter.

On completion of the hospital, ten patients were moved in sleighs filled with straw from the facility on Centre Street.

While the new hospital was a great improvement over the first one, it is interesting to note that for the first three years there was no system for heating water on the floors, which of course meant that all water needed by patients and nurses had to be heated in the kitchen and carried to the floors. This also applied to water needed in the operating room on the second floor. The sterilizer was a common boiler. Not only were water and food carried up the stairs, but patients were also.

The laundry was a labourious job. The Sister who worked nights would settle her patients and then, between three and four in the morning, go down and start the wash, returning numerous times to the floors to check on her patients.

Every Sister was instructed to visit her patients at least twice a day and no dying patient was to be left alone.

There was no provision made in the new facility to accommodate patients in quarantine. In the winter they were located in a hallway adjacent to the Sisters' refectory and there were four Sisters in particular who spent long periods of time in quarantine and often melted snow to procure water. In the summer, quarantine patients were housed in tents on the grounds.

The first patient to receive anti-toxin treatment in Chatham or Kent County was a young lady sent in by Dr. McKeough on Christmas night.

In 1901, it became apparent that there was a great need for secular nurses, so a number of doctors offered their services, conducting lectures and teaching techniques. The first class produced three nurses: Miss Frances Berhurst, Miss Fay Wing, and Miss Annie Dunn.

The Sisters and nurses were incredibly dedicated. For example, the Administrator in 1901 buried her father one week, and became ill herself the following week. One evening she felt somewhat better and insisted on getting out of bed to assist at the death bed of one of the patients. On the following morning, however, her condition worsened and she was diagnosed as having pneumonia. Not long afterwards, she passed away. Her beloved brother, who was a priest in a parish in Raleigh Township, was also very ill in the hospital. The Sisters carried the coffin containing the Administrator to the Father's room so he could bid his sister a last farewell.



After about twenty years, the Sisters, having had no place to take recreation in the open air, were provided with a door from the community room to a spacious balcony. There they could spend their time in solitude after their strenuous day's work.

A \$40,000 addition was opened on December 1, 1913 and among the notables who spoke were Bishop Michael Francis Fallon, Dr. J.L. Bray (whose suggestion brought the Sisters to Chatham), and the Honourable A.B. McCoig, Member of Parliament, Magistrate Ward Stanworth, and Dr. R.V. Bray. In his remarks, Dr. Bray stated that sixteen rooms had already been furnished and that he hoped the citizens of Chatham and Kent would soon complete those remaining. Special mention was made of the building committee which consisted of Reverend Father James, Mr. John Pleasance, Mr. J.T. O'Keefe, Dr. H.J. Sullivan, Mr. J.A. McNevin, and Mr. James Taft.

A week-long bazaar was held in 1914 in the Knights of Columbus hall on King Street. Given the low prices charged in those days, you can imagine how much work must have gone into the bazaar to have raised \$6,022! It has been noted that there were five hundred dolls in the doll booth alone.

It was around 1917 that the first elevator was installed through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. William Birmingham, out of gratitude for the care received by Mrs. Beech, mother of Mrs. Birmingham (and Mrs. Connolly and Mrs. Malcolmson).

It was in 1918 that a typhoid fever outbreak hit Chatham and extra beds were put in private rooms, the sunrooms, hallways, and even in the office. Extra nurses had to be called in and all had to be inoculated. Although some had rather severe reactions to the serum, they still performed their duties to the suffering patients. Mr. Charles Lyons of the Standard Bank procured Bell tents from the sugar factory and had them set up on the roof garden of the hospital, so that the nurses could have some undisturbed rest. During this time, the Catholic women of Chatham came to the aid of the Sisters by canning fruits and vegetables, baking, and sewing to assist the hospital in the only way they could.

It is interesting to note that of 133 cases of typhoid fever taken care of, only three died. Dr. Brisson was one of the casualties. He had worked tirelessly day and night and became ill himself. Ignoring his own illness, he had continued to look after his patients. He paid for his dedication with his life, which was a loss to everyone.

It was during the height of the typhoid outbreak, when the staff seemed taxed to their limit, that the stillness of the hospital was broken by a cry of distress. Sister Bertrand had become pinned between the brick wall and the dumbwaiter, mid-way between the first and second floors. The fire department was summoned and by removing bricks from the wall, Sister was

released. Because the moaning had ceased, it was feared that Sister had died, but in less than a year, she had resumed her duties.

In 1926 the first x-ray equipment was installed. The first patient x-rayed showed an aneurysm and the second, a gastric ulcer. These x-rays were taken by an agent of the company which installed the machine. The first x-ray taken by a member of the staff was taken by Sister Raphael and showed that the patient was suffering from a compound fracture of the tibia. The attending doctor was Dr. J. Moriarty.

Because of the large number of indigent patients unable to pay their hospital bills, Mr. J.A. McNevin, K.C. appeared before City Council to ask for a grant of \$2000 – he settled for \$1000. He also appeared before County Council with a request for \$3500 and again, settled for \$1300.

Over the years, departments were added, facilities were up-dated, and additions were made as the caseload increased. One of the most popular places proved to be the roof garden. Besides being a place for off-duty nurses to relax, it was also popular with convalescing patients and provided a beautiful view of the surrounding country.

In the early 1940s, while trying to enlarge the Nurses' Residence, and after a building permit was granted by the City of Chatham, a citizens' group wrote a letter to the Mayor and City Council requesting that they revoke the building permit and halt the construction. Their complaint was that their view would be obstructed, their properties would drop in value, and the attractiveness of the neighbourhood would be ruined. This letter was signed by seventeen people. It is most interesting to note that some of these people lived in areas completely out of site of the Nurses' Residence, even as far east as the vicinity of the Civic Centre. (As we all know, there is a bend in King Street at Lacroix, so there was no way that person's view was affected.) They also contended that the residence would extend over the property line when, in reality, it was seven feet farther back than the law demanded. After much time was lost and expenses incurred, three Judges of the Appellate Court dismissed the action and the residence was completed.

During the Second World War, St. Joseph's Hospital conducted classes in home nursing, first aid, and war emergency, along with the St. John Ambulance Corps. Each class was of six weeks duration.

Today, with our chronic care wards, it is not unusual to have patients for several years. Back in the early days of the hospital, patients were not discharged as quickly as they are today – we did have one patient from 1914 to 1947. Miss Effie Lafferty was admitted as a result of a train accident and remained with us until she died. There is an excellent article, written by Miss Lafferty herself, published in our book.



In the spring of 1951, the west end of the basement hall was partitioned off and furnished as an Emergency Room. The number of patients who received first aid treatment in this room totalled 720. Quite different from the thousands treated today, wouldn't you say?

As the hospital grew, so did the number of volunteers, most belonging to the various organizations operating to meet the special needs of various areas of the hospital. Today, there are two very active groups, as well as the Alumnae, still operating.

It is hard to imagine the confusion there can be in a hospital when certain systems have to be updated. On December 1, 1955, frequency standardization came about when we converted from 25 cycle to 60 cycle frequency. In 1956, the new dial system came into effect.

These were all changes that we had time to prepare for, but one of the most devastating events took place on November 2, 1985, when our switch-board received a bomb threat in the early morning hours. I reported for duty immediately after receiving a call and I cannot describe the feeling that I had as I parked my car, seeing all the school buses lined up at the Admitting Office door, and ambulances lined up to the street at the emergency entrance, and staff arriving from every direction. Even though we were well known to the male staff manning each entrance, we all produced our emergency passes, as we had been taught to do.

The decision had been made by the Administrator, in consultation with the police, to evacuate all patients and staff. The very ill patients went to the Public General Hospital, the chronic patients went to The Pines, other patients to Thamesview Lodge, and patients well enough were taken to their homes.

We in Admitting procured a large supply of warm blankets and checked each patient as they were wheeled out to make sure that they were well covered. The staff accompanied these patients and had to be sure that their medication went with them also.

If we had rehearsed this procedure for weeks, it could not have gone more swiftly or efficiently. I was one of about a half-dozen people requested to remain at my post. In all my forty-one years of working at the hospital, I had never seen it completely without patients. It was quite an experience when the police officer arrived in the office with his dog trained to sniff out explosives. As soon as the leash was removed, that dog went systematically in and out of each cubicle and did not miss any corners in about two minutes flat. And we refer to them as dumb animals...

By four o'clock in the afternoon, shortly after the 'all clear' had been sounded, the patients were returned and life returned to normal at the hospital.

No matter what, there is usually something good that comes out of something evil and in this case, it was the marvelous spirit of co-operation among the various institutions. None of us stand alone; we need each other.

On May 3, 1970, the last graduation took place in St. Joseph's Church.

In 1971, a campaign was launched to replace the original building and the first three additions. Following a successful drive to raise the money needed for the project, in July 1975 the present building was completed and officially opened.

And so, my friends, by now you probably feel that I have just written a second edition. I have informed the Centennial Committee that if there is going to be a two hundred year history written in the year 2090, it is not too early to start. I thank you for your kind invitation and your attention this evening.

Presented to the Kent Historical Society on March 20, 1990.



# A History of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, Tilbury East: A Living Heritage

By Gloria J. Vollans

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On Sunday, September 1, 1985, the parishioners of St. Peter's Church, Tilbury East Township, gathered to celebrate the dedication of a plaque presented by the Ontario Heritage Foundation in honour of the historical significance of the site and the church. The monument was constructed of brick from the recently-demolished Ursuline Convent, Villa Angela, built in the town of Tilbury in 1897. A plaque on either side of the monument, one in English and one in French, is inscribed as follows:

St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church The religious centre for a thriving Franco-Ontarian community, this substantial brick structure was built to serve la Paroisse de St. Pierre sur la Tranche, the second oldest Roman Catholic church in southwestern Ontario, established in 1802. It was erected in 1896, with volunteer labour provided by parishioners, and replaced an earlier building destroyed by fire the year before. Prominently situated in a rural setting overlooking the Thames River, St. Peter's is distinguished by its tall square tower, spiral steeple and decorative brickwork. The church's most notable features, however, are the 18 ecclesiastical paintings that grace the interior. Commissioned in 1920, they are the work of Marie Joseph Georges Delfosse (1869-1939), a French-Canadian artist noted for his religious and historical tableaux.

To appreciate more fully the significance of this honour, we will now take a journey back in time. In the year 1790, Patrick McNiff, the famous pioneer surveyor, was assigned the task of surveying the river Thames (called La Tranche by the French because it cut so deeply into the land, Eskunissippi by the Indians, and receiving its present name Thames from Governor Simcoe in 1792). McNiff entered the river at Lake St. Clair and found at the mouth, and for six miles up (to approximately where St. Peter's Church stands today), marshes, meadows, and scattered trees extending farther back from the river in Dover than in Raleigh.

McNiff came across the first settlement on the south bank about eight miles upriver. He travelled, we think, about to the present site of Thamesville. During this trip and at least one other in the following year, McNiff laid out the lots fronting the river in Dover East, Chatham, Raleigh, Harwich, and parts of Howard and Camden townships. He did not survey the stretch from

the mouth to the Raleigh-Tilbury East Townline because the land was so low and wet; this area was surveyed much later by others.

In May 1791, McNiff wrote to the Surveyor-General that he had found twenty-seven houses (some vacant) between the mouth of the river and the present location of Chatham – nineteen on the south side and eight on the north, with a total of twenty-eight families. The considerable improvements to land and buildings suggested that the settlers had been there for some time, perhaps having arrived as early as 1775. These settlers were French-Canadians who had come via Detroit, and United Empire Loyalists who had come by the same route when British rule ended and Detroit was no longer a part of the Thirteen Colonies. Many of them were of the Catholic faith and their only access to spiritual guidance came from travelling Jesuit missionaries. It has been said with no definite proof that Father Brebeuf, one of the Canadian martyrs, came down the Thames to visit an Indian village located on Lot 5 of Tilbury East. (There is, however, accurate evidence of an Indian village having been there.)

Some time in the late 1700s, Father Hubert, parish priest of Fort Detroit and later Bishop of Quebec, made an historic journey up the Thames in his capacity as Vicar-General of the Detroit district, a diocesan region which encompassed all of Michigan, Ontario, Ohio, and other areas of the United States, reaching as far south as Baltimore. This district of Detroit was part of the greater Diocese of Quebec, which encompassed all of Canada. Father Hubert's purpose was very different from McNiff's. He sought to establish new missions between Amherstburg and Chatham. On passing the picturesque bend in the river where the present church of St. Peter's now stands, he was impressed by the location and the natural beauty. He envisioned a church there one day to serve the scattered Catholic families of the area.

In June 1802, Father Hubert's dream came true. A small chapel was erected by Reverend Jean Baptiste Marchand, who travelled on horseback from his Assumption Church parish in Sandwich to serve the parishioners of this new district once a month. With this chapel Father Marchand formed what would be the second oldest Catholic place of worship in Western Ontario and a parish that would spawn fifteen more. The limits of his parish were not defined, as forests covered the area between East Kent and the Detroit River. His parishioners travelled by canoe to Detroit to have their grain ground and later, when trails were established along the waterways, they used ox-carts ("charettes") to make the three or four day journey.

Records, handwritten by each pastor from Father Marchand's day to the present, have been preserved. They list every birth, christening, marriage, and burial, recording the complete life cycles of the early settlers. (Some deaths may not be recorded due to migration, particularly to lumber camps in Michigan, but they would be recorded in some other church register.) The original registers for the years 1802 to 1888 were becoming fragile and had survived



one fire, so they were transferred to the Archives of the Diocese of London. Microfilm copies were made and deposited at the Hiram Walker Historical Museum in Windsor, Ontario and the Detroit Public Library. In 1981, the Mormons of Utah microfilmed all registers to the year 1910.

In Father Marchand's own hand is recorded the first baptism, that of Michael Desloges, aged ten months, apparently on the same day as the dedication of the parish to St. Peter on July 8, 1802. The first burial was that of Jaque Delise (although two unnamed burials took place before the blessing of the cemetery). Father Marchand also made an entry for the first marriage, that of Charles Peltier and Genevieve Balard in 1806.

In 1832, 210 acres of surrounding land was purchased by Bishop McDonell from Mark Sterling for 125 pounds, to be held in trust for the use and benefit of the church and its people. Eight acres were subsequently sold to the Great Western Railway. Today, the remaining land is still a possession of the parish and is commonly called the Church Farm.

The first assigned pastor was Father Crevier who, in 1824, built a new, larger white frame church. At that point, the original hewn-log chapel became a school. No trace of the original building remains today.

The new church became a landmark on the Thames and was known as "St. Pierre sur la Tranche" or "The French Church". It was destroyed by fire on October 28, 1895. Apparently, a group of men had been burning piles of grass, mown days earlier, and left that evening with coals remaining. A wind blew up and the smouldering coals ignited the dry stubble. The housekeeper first discovered the fire about 11 o'clock that night - too late to save anything but an old chalice and the church records. The **Chatham Daily Planet** devoted a full column to the calamity, entitling it "A Prey to Flame - St. Peter's Church, Tilbury, Utterly Destroyed." The article also stated that, "providentially, the wind was from the south and the parsonage, large barns, and out-buildings were spared." That parsonage, incidentally, was built in 1892 by Father Parent and is in use to the present day. The **Planet** further stated that the church was "handsome and commodious with fine interior appointments." Vestments, statues, and the organ were destroyed, with the losses placed at \$5,000. "I do not think," said Father Parent to a news reporter that morning, "that the insurance of \$1,000 in the Waterloo Mutual will make up the loss on the furnishings and vestments, but we must not rebel. It was the will of God."

By 1896, one year later, with the help of the parishioners, a new red brick structure was ready for services. Of Gothic design, the present church measures 80 feet by 40 feet. Bricks were shipped down the Thames from Chatham; sand for the mortar was brought by horse-cart from Lake St. Clair. Records indicate that a beautiful lawn sloped 300 feet to the river from the white frame church which had been destroyed. Because of the dangers of

constant erosion from the Thames, the site for the present church was wisely chosen 200 feet back from the previous location. No doubt, today, that original spot is now part of the river bed.

Father Morin (who had served as Pastor from 1834-46 and had initiated the construction of a small chapel to serve the Catholic population of the Pain Court district) had been buried under the sanctuary of St. Peter's. After the fire, his remains were placed beneath the new structure. A plaque on the wall of the church today bears witness to this fact.

In 1902, St. Peter's Parish celebrated its one hundredth anniversary with its pastor, Father Ladouceur. Pontifical High Mass in the morning was followed by a picnic in the afternoon at Bagnall's Grove across the river in Dover.

During the ministry of Father Martin from 1910 to 1928, renovations were undertaken. Cement walks were poured, gas heat installed, and new Stations of the Cross purchased. Most notably, eighteen beautiful and expensive paintings by Georges Delfosse, the noted Canadian artist from Montreal, were purchased. The larger ones are reported to have cost \$500 each. Mr. Delfosse did portraits of famous individuals including Sir Wilfrid Laurier and nearly two hundred of his large paintings with religious themes hang in churches in Canada and the United States. Today, the paintings in St. Peter's Church are considered priceless.

Until 1924, Dover parishioners could reach the church only by a pulley-type ferry, by boat, or by crossing on the ice of the Thames in winter. In that year, however, the Prairie Siding Bridge was built, connecting Dover to the township of Raleigh and making land travel possible.

In the early 1940s, erosion caused by the Thames River forced the closing of the old River Road from Prairie Siding to St. Peter's Church. The new roadway was constructed facing the rear of the buildings located along it, including the church.

During the time of Father Scalisi (1945-1953), renovations to the church, cemetery, and rectory were undertaken. Tie rods were installed in the church to reinforce the walls and the beautiful paintings (which were beginning to leave the plaster and were dull and dingy) were refurbished and restored. Also, the parish, the oldest in Kent County, celebrated its sesquicentennial, 150 years of service to the community. A native son, Father Boudreau, celebrated Mass. The 1952 event was headlined in the **Chatham News** under "Bishop Cody Attends Pontifical Mass as St. Peter's Celebrates Anniversary." Two services were held and more than one thousand people attended.

Until the 1950s, services at St. Peter's were conducted in French and English. Now, only English is used and few families speak French at home.



On July 11, 1977, while Father Robert was pastor, Bishop Sherlock presided at the 175th anniversary of the parish.

Over the years, much of the land (including gravestones) was lost to erosion. In the 1970s, the bank of the Thames was built up as it is today. Headstones, including that of Lambert Labadie (buried in 1872), were moved back from the water's edge. The oldest marker remaining, Labadie's tombstone carries the inscription:

Farewell my wife and children dear  
I am not dead but sleeping here  
I was not yours but God's alone  
He thought it best and called me home.

The monument of Elizabeth Keller, who died in 1878, carries the words:

Kind friends beware as you pass by,  
As you are now so once was I,  
As I am now so you must be,  
Prepare therefore to follow me.

As 1990 heralds the last decade of the twentieth century, the parish of St. Peter consists of approximately 130 families of varied ethnic backgrounds. It is no longer "The French Church." Many have been baptized, married, and may, one day be buried there. The oldest living parishioner is Beatrice Volans, aged 92, whose hasty baptism took place on February 9, 1898, at the tender age of three days, as the annual spring break-up of the Thames River was imminent and her home was in Dover Township.

Thirty-six pastors have guided the parish through the years; six are living today. The present pastor is Rev. Father C.W. Janisse, who began his duties in 1981. Everyone who is proud to be a member of St. Peter's Church is keenly aware of the historic legacy that is theirs and the urgent need to preserve it. They realize that they who ignore the past, do so at their own peril, for it is

in its lessons we learn,  
in its memories we find kinship,  
in its adversities we find courage,  
in its dreams we are inspired,  
in its faith we find the strength to persevere.

And above all else, because of it, we can create, from our own present, a future past, worthy, in its own turn, to be remembered and cherished.

Presented to the Kent Historical Society on April 16, 1986.

# The Prairie Siding Bridge, 1925-1984

By Dan Peltier

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For fifty-nine years, the old Prairie Siding Bridge spanned the River Thames west of Chatham, linking the townships of Dover and Raleigh. It was formally closed in the fall of 1984, upon the opening of the new Prairie Siding Bridge. Built by the Dean Construction Company of Belle River, Ontario, the new span lies only a few hundred yards east and upstream from the foundations of the old bridge.

The original bridge had been conceived, designed, and built during the time of the farm horse, horse-drawn wagons and equipment, steam power, and threshing bees. It fell prey to the ravages of economics, speed, heavy farm machinery, tractor trailers, and time. The old bridge had been born in an era dominated by rail and water travel, but with the dawn of extensive highway travel for pleasure and commerce, it could not withstand the pressures of our modern modes of transportation.

The river had been crossed for many years by means of a hand-drawn ferry, but even in the early part of this century, people felt that a faster method of negotiating the Thames was necessary. Sometime in 1905, in the house of George Bruette of Prairie Siding, during a banquet given for county and township officials, the idea of a bridge was formally presented. It would be another twenty years before that idea would be translated into concrete and steel.

A committee was formed in 1921 to study the question of a bridge at Prairie Siding. Following are excerpts taken from the minutes of this committee.

## Report on the Prairie Siding Bridge

First meeting – June 16, 1921 – Harry Smith, Chairman . . . favoured location near present ferry; committee favoured double leaf type bridge; committee wants to incorporate bridge into county roads system.

Second Meeting – June 7, 1922 – James St. Pierre, Chairman. Committee concerned about getting a Lease of Occupation of part of the bed of Thames River for location of bridge; also approval sought for general plan and site from Department



of Public Works; also proceedings being undertaken concerning acquisition of lands required for approaches.

- Third Meeting – December 6, 1922 – James St. Pierre, Chairman. Awaiting issue of License of Occupation so formal approval of work can be received; committee went to Chicago to see many different types of bridges; engaged firm of Kellar and Harrington of Chicago to design the superstructure; total charge not to exceed \$3500; call for tenders early in 1923.
- Fourth Meeting – January 25, 1923 – James St. Pierre, Chairman. Kellar and Harrington retired from designing project and Strauss Bascule Bridge Company was offered the job; plans to be ready within two months of receipt of final data; fee not to exceed \$5000; License received and sent to government.
- Fifth Meeting – December 4, 1923 – James St. Pierre, Chairman. Sub-structure underway by William Birmingham and Son of Kingston for \$36,450; superstructure being done by Canada Des Moines Company for \$78,340.
- Sixth Meeting – March 18, 1924 – Goldwin Russell, Chairman. Three-phase equipment to be used for electrical power for operating bridge; committee, with council approval, will arrange shop inspection in connection with steel work; Road Superintendent Mr. Colby is relieved of any engineering in connection with the construction of bridge; W.G. McGeorge to continue as engineer till bridge done.
- Seventh Meeting – June 7, 1924 – Goldwin Russell, Chairman. Considerable progress has been made in construction of the bridge; it will perhaps be necessary to make a change in location of River Road in Dover for bridge approach.
- Eighth Meeting – December 4, 1924 – Goldwin Russell, Chairman. Total costs of piers and abutments is \$38,695; there is a delay in erecting the lift span due to late arrival of machinery parts; approaches are being made but won't be completed till next spring; a portion of the River Road on Dover side near approach to be raised.
- Ninth Meeting – June 5, 1925 – Goldwin Russell, Chairman. Work commenced during April and there should be no further delays; the question of a caretaker and operator for the bridge being considered by committee and County Roads

## Superintendent.

Tenth Meeting – December 9, 1925 – Goldwin Russell, Chairman. Bridge is completed; at a cost of \$131,526.82, work was completed well within estimate of \$150,000; bridge was opened formally on Saturday, October 3, 1925 at 4:00 P.M. Mr. Alec Reaume was appointed caretaker, at an annual salary of \$800, starting January 1, 1926; care of bridge was given over to the County Roads Superintendent.

In short, this sums up the progression of the construction of the bridge itself. For a technical breakdown of the structure, here are the official dimensions:

Total Length: 375 feet  
Drive Width: 18 feet  
Spans Dover Side: 100 feet  
Raleigh Side: 160 feet  
Centre Span: 145 feet  
Height above normal water level  
Centre Span: 22 feet  
Ends of bridge: 17 feet  
Amount of steel: 250 tons total  
(160 tons in lift spans)  
Amount of concrete:  
1200 cubic yards in piers & abutments  
110 cubic yards in each counterweight  
300 wooden piles underneath the piers  
240 pieces of 12" × 12" × 30' used for sheet piling  
Four 5-horsepower motors used to lift the spans

The day before the bridge was opened, the final inspection by W.G. McGeorge, W.D. Colby, and a representative of the Strauss Bascule Bridge Company took place. At 5:00 P.M. on October 2nd, the old ferry made its last crossing. The final preparations were in place for the official opening of the bridge and the plans for the celebration party to be given by the ladies of Prairie Siding were in place. Warden Thomas Heatherington would set the machinery in motion on the following day, elevating the two big spans marking the official opening.

The bridge was formally opened on Saturday, October 3, 1925. Here is the account found in the October 5th edition of the **Chatham Daily News**:

"With George Bruette of Prairie Siding and Stanislas Gervais of Pain Court holding the ribbon firmly, W.G. McGeorge severed it with a pair of scissors. . . . Both Mr. Bruette and Mr. Gervais are seventy-



seven years of age and are two of the oldest residents of Raleigh and Dover townships respectively.

It was in the home of Mr. Bruette, where twenty years ago, the need of the bridge was emphasized at a banquet given to the township and county officials. The late R.J. Morrison was reeve of Raleigh at that time. Mr. Gervais, who is postmaster of Paincourt, and has been assessor of the township for 38 years, was the first French Canadian to be taught the English language in that settlement."

After the ribbon was cut, the spans were lifted and then lowered. Then a procession of cars passed over the new bridge.

"The cars and their respective occupants passed over the bridge in the following order: First car, Warden Heatherington, W.G. McGeorge, County Engineer W.D. Colby, R.C. Muir, Chief Engineer of the Department of Highways, and President Jackson of the Des Moines Steel Company. Second car, Reeve Goldwin Russell, Raleigh, Chairman of the Bridge Committee, County Clerk J.P. Fletcher, Reeve Bateman, Chatham Township, Reeve Mathew Rankin, Dover, and J.A.P. Marshall, District Engineer of the Department of Highways. Third car, Engineer Bodenshats of the Strauss Bridge Company, George Bruette, Prairie Siding, S. Gervais, Paincourt, Reeve Beamish, Bothwell, M.J. Wilson, Harwich, and Warden Byron Robinson, Romney."

During the gala party given by the ladies of Prairie Siding, a gold medal was presented to Mr. Alec Reaume for his many years of service as operator of the ferry. He was also appointed the operator of the new bridge. The old ferry was floated downriver to Bradley farms where a ferry service existed for a few years longer.

The bridge acted as an important link between the townships of Dover and Raleigh. It gave farmers a faster and more reliable means of crossing the river, either to the land they worked or to the grain elevator at Prairie Siding, operated by Hiram Walker and Sons. The Canadian National Railway, which passes through Prairie Siding, also made regular stops at the village.

The bridge was quite an improvement over the ferry. Mr. Reaume operated a general store at the foot of the bridge on the Dover side. Now instead of contacting Mr. Reaume to cross the river, traffic moved freely from side to side. During the early years of the bridge, however, river traffic was still quite popular and economical. The bridge had to be lifted to allow these ships to pass.

The lift spans were counter-balanced with concrete, so they were easily lifted by the 5-horsepower motors in the power houses. Of course, this was

in the early days of electricity and many times it could not always be counted on. In the event of a power failure (during most of the more severe storms), if the bridge had to be lifted, it could be raised by using two hand cranks, one on each side of the bridge. Quite often, Mr. Reaume would ask my grandfather, Wesley Peltier, to help him lift the bridge, one man to a side.

Up until the early 1950s, there was quite a bit of river traffic. Tugboats like the JOHN R. STOVER pulled barges up and down the Thames carrying freight, grain, or one thousand tons of coal. The barges were towed from Windsor to Chatham where the coal might have been delivered to coal yards such as Terry's or Daniel's, both located on the river.

Freight could also be brought upriver by large freighters such as the P.L. CALDWELL, which had to be towed by a tug because the ship was too large to navigate the turn on its own.

Excursion boats such as THE THOUSAND ISLANDER and THE OSIRAGE also plied the river from Detroit, Windsor, and Bob-lo Island to Chatham. By the end of the 1940s, however, river travel had fallen out of favour. The last coal boat came upriver in 1951.

There was not much river traffic then until the 1970s, when pleasure boats began coming up the Thames River to Chatham. Today, many hundreds of yachts and sailboats use the waterway.

After Mr. Alec Reaume retired, the next operator was Mr. Steve Thomas. He operated a gas station and store at the foot of the bridge on the Raleigh side. He was succeeded in turn by Mr. Alvin Benninger. Mr. Benninger was the last full-time bridge operator.

By the end of the 1970s, it became apparent that the old bridge had to be replaced. The machinery still functioned reasonably well, but the bridge was no longer able to handle the traffic. It was not wide enough for some farm machinery and, in some cases, not high enough. It shook violently when heavy vehicles crossed the span.

Construction of the new bridge at Prairie Siding began in 1983 and was completed in the fall of 1984. The old bridge was quietly and unceremoniously closed on the day that the new bridge was dedicated. Its spans were lifted, signalling its demise.

Demolition of the old bridge began almost immediately, and because of the deteriorated condition of its iron and concrete, the contractor felt that the old span would be down in a matter of weeks. The superstructure was removed in pieces that fall, and work began on the sub-structure. Not much progress had been made by freeze-up, and it would take until the next summer to remove all of the concrete. No matter how large a wrecking ball the demo-



lition crews used, the concrete would not split. Finally, large drills were brought in to bore holes vertically through the piers, and hydraulic cement used to split the piers to facilitate removal. After the concrete was removed below the level of the river bed, the 12" x 12" x 30' sheet piling was pulled up, piece by piece. The original fir timbers had been underwater for sixty years and except for the outer half-inch or so, remained in perfect condition.

Today, only the old concrete approaches are left of the original structure, and a few memories.

Presented to the Kent Historical Society on March 19, 1986.

# A Brief History of Union Gas

By Winn Miller

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The merger that produced the Union Natural Gas Company on December 19, 1911 was the first indication that the Southwestern Ontario natural gas industry was prepared to come to grips with reality.

Natural gas was discovered in Tilbury East Township in 1906 and companies were hurriedly organized to get their share of what seemed to be a limitless natural resource. A symptom of that over-optimism was a move by Ridgetown Fuel Supply in May 1911 to extend a pipeline to supply London. The Ridgetown company was one of several drawing on the Tilbury East field.

A series of fortuitous developments stopped that project, but the proposal had encouraged the companies to look more carefully at the field and its future. As a result, Union Natural Gas Company Limited came into being, merging the assets and experience of Volcanic Oil and Gas Company Limited, Ridgetown Fuel Supply, and United Fuel Supply Company Limited. There is reason to believe that its founders thought of the company as a short-term venture. This is reflected in the location of the Union head office in Niagara Falls.

In its early years, the company grew through the acquisition of other companies, including Tilbury Gas Company and Hope Exploration Limited. World War I brought an overnight increase in the demand for natural gas, with homeowners given first priority. (That order was reversed in World War II, when the demand of industries came first.) Gas shortages developed, the first symptom of more serious ills to come.

Shortages were aggravated by Chatham's contention that it had first claim on the gas from the Tilbury field, a priority established by contract. In 1919, the Ontario Natural Gas Act was enacted to ensure an equitable division of available supplies, and to provide an impartial outside agency to adjudicate claims.

New supplies were needed. In 1920, it was predicted that local gas supplies would be exhausted in five to six years, instead of the twelve years predicted before World War I exerted an unexpected drain. There were also pricing problems. Initially, prices had been set low, and company attempts to increase them in municipal contracts were resisted. One of the results was a



1920 battle with the municipalities, when the company cut off gas to communities that refused to sign contracts at higher rates. Once that was settled, Union's acquisitions continued through the economically buoyant 1920s, and Sarnia City Gas, Windsor City Gas, and the Chatham Gas Company became part of Union.

There was an even larger expansion in 1930, when Union acquired the Haldimand field, United Fuel Investments Limited, and London City Gas Company. The London Company cost \$1,896,000 and the others added substantially to the company debt at a time when the nation was moving into a serious economic depression. At one time, Imperial Bank, the major creditor, sent in an overseer to encourage Union to pay off its debts and to limit purchases. This placed Union in a difficult position. It was not until 1935 that it was able to build a pipeline to London to reap the financial benefit from the purchase of the company five years earlier. Union's precarious financial position resulted in interruptions in the payment of dividends on company stock.

The Depression not only brought the economy to a near standstill, but it cut the demand for natural gas. This providential development allowed Union Gas to operate through the 1930s without major new sources of gas. The Haldimand field proved to be a disappointment.

Several appointments in those difficult years increased the company's chance of survival. F.R. Palin, eventually Union President, joined the firm in June 1936 as Assistant Comptroller and Assistant Treasurer. Colonel T.E. Weir was appointed Comptroller the following year. Both were men of great business ability and sound ideas.

In 1937, Dr. C.S. Evans was named Union's first staff geologist. Within eight months, he and R.L. Bevan completed the first comprehensive report on company production and storage. This report contained a proposal to store gas in expended wells in the Dawn field – a concept that literally saved the company. Implementation of this proposal allowed Union to negotiate for the import of U.S. gas.

An agreement was signed on November 25, 1944 with Panhandle Eastern Pipeline Company for the import of large quantities of gas at a very reasonable price. It was subject to a long and frustrating approval process, and it was not until 1950 that the Panhandle gas was received, and stored, in sizeable volumes. The contract hinged on Union's ability to accept gas through the off-season summer months, and that, in turn, depended on the availability of storage. The storage also put Union in a preferential position when a trans-Canada pipeline was proposed to bring Western natural gas to Eastern Canadian markets. Union was the first company to agree to the purchase from the Trans-Canada Pipeline, once it was built. The first Western gas was delivered to the Union in October 1959, a year after it had arrived in other eastern

markets.

The acquisition of Dominion Natural Gas Company in April 1958 brought Union new markets in Brantford and area. The staffs of the two companies were merged.

Concerns about storage on the part of landowners led to the establishment of a three-member Committee on Oil and Gas Resources, headed by Dr. G.B. Langford. The Committee's mandate was to study the regulatory mechanisms in "the largest gas storage area in the country". In 1962, the Committee report advocated more provincial control over gas storage, in part to protect the interests of area companies. The report said that storage capable of handling large quantities of natural gas was an "indispensable part of the business".

The delivery of the first Western gas to Union was followed by a period of almost unbelievable growth. In a single decade, the number of customers increased from 152,000 to 289,000. The assurance of an adequate supply also encouraged company President David Rogers to announce in 1962 that local drilling would be curtailed, except with gas pools that could eventually be used for storage.

To serve an expanding market, as more local utilities and customers were acquired, huge pipelines were pushed through the area, and buildings like Union's Keil Drive head office building, were erected.

In 1969-70, there was another major challenge for the company. After fifteen months of unproductive negotiations for a merger of Consumers' Gas and Union, the Toronto firm tried a new tactic. Consumers' announced in September 1969 that it had offered to buy 67 per cent of Union's 15.1 million shares of common stock. With the 700,000 shares it already owned, it would put the Toronto utility in a strong majority position. Union's initial reaction was favourable, but it soured as Consumers' reduced the terms of its offer, and directors studied what it implied.

Energy Board hearings were called in compliance with back-dated legislation which required hearings when one utility proposed acquiring more than twenty per cent of the shares of another. Initially amicable, the hearings became increasingly acrimonious as local opposition grew and positions polarized. Eventually, the Ontario Energy Board ruled against the merger on July 7, 1970, and company employees celebrated.

Expansion continued, but there were always problems. Prices of Western gas went up, and on January 1, 1973 the company increased its rates for the first time in twenty-five years. Other increases in the price of wholesale gas followed, and Energy Board hearings were held to justify the increased price to the consumers. The industry suffered, for some time, from the lack of a natural petroleum pricing policy, something hard to achieve where the



interests of Western producers and Eastern consumers were so different.

The company also faced the possibility of cutbacks in natural gas supply, when TransCanada Pipelines said it might not be able to supply full contract volumes. This led to a contracted purchase of synthetic natural gas from Petrosar, to meet the anticipated shortfall. Canadian gas supplies improved quickly, but the company found itself saddled with the Petrosar contract.

Union also diversified into real estate and other ventures with mixed success. It bought interests in Numac Oil and Gas Incorporated and in Precambrian Shield Resources Limited, to present a stronger presence in the Canadian West.

The most drastic change for several decades came on December 12, 1984 when Union Enterprises was established "to provide leadership and coordination to the strategic objectives of the Union group". A new resource subsidiary, Union Shield Resources Limited, would operate the company's resource assets. The grandparent of them all, Union Gas, would continue to operate the gas utility.

The package proved too attractive. On January 30, 1985, Unicorp Canada Corporation acquired 5,290,000 shares of Union Enterprises common stock from the Great Lakes group, and a day later, offered to buy the rest of the outstanding shares.

By March 15, Unicorp held approximately 19,700,000 shares of Union Enterprises stock, giving it approximately sixty per cent ownership control. The deal was subject to scrutiny by the Ontario Securities Commission. The Ontario Energy Board held hearings from April 9 to May 29, before announcing on August 2, 1985 that it could see no reason to interfere with the takeover.

While the takeover controversy went on, Union signed up its 500,000th customer, an indication of its continuing good health.

Since then, there has been extensive deregulation of the natural gas industry, enabling the Eastern buyer to purchase from the Western producer. In the negotiation of the Natural Gas Markets and Prices Agreement, Union Gas took an interested role, as it has in all major developments in the Canadian natural gas industry.

Looking ahead to its 80th year, Union has survived far beyond the expectations of its founders and has grown from its initial base in one small sector of Southwestern Ontario, to provide service to a wide area of Southwestern and Southern Ontario.

# Chatham Hydro: 75 Electrifying Years

By Sally E. Scherer

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In its earliest days, the generation of electricity was considered the domain of private enterprise. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, hundreds of private companies sprang up, purchased equipment, and began producing electrical energy. The power they produced was of low voltage and was subject to regular interruptions. It was also expensive. Hydro-electric power was a viable alternative (energy generated at Niagara Falls had actually been transmitted to Buffalo, New York as early as 1896) but the contracts to generate electrical energy in this manner had also been let to private companies.

Frustrated by the situation, a group of twenty-five businessmen and municipal representatives from across southern Ontario met in Berlin (now Kitchener) in June of 1902. They were convinced that the answer was public ownership. Support for their cause grew, and in April of 1906, 1500 people marched on Queen's Park, calling for government operation of the province's water power resources. One month later, the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario (now Ontario Hydro) was established, with Adam Beck, the Mayor of London and a member of the provincial legislature, as its Chairman.

Fourteen municipalities, including Berlin, Guelph, London, St. Thomas, Stratford, Toronto, and Waterloo soon signed contracts with the Commission. There were tremendous obstacles, both physical and political, still to be overcome. With limited resources, the Commission chose to concentrate first on constructing a system of transmission lines. On October 10th, 1910 Berlin became the first of the municipalities to receive hydro-electric power. This power actually had to be purchased from private power companies, since the Commission's first generating plant (at Wasdell Falls on the Severn River) would not be completed for another four years.

Turn-on ceremonies in Toronto followed in May of 1912. According to the *Globe and Mail*, the event was a memorable one. The reporter on the scene described it thus:

Striving vainly to make his voice heard above the thundering roar of thousands upon thousands of people (there were about 50,000 in attendance), punctuated by piercing shrieks as women here and there in the surging crowd collapsed in fainting fits, Sir James Whitney



(Conservative Premier of Ontario) last night officially inaugurated hydro-electric power in Toronto. As he pressed the button that threw the darkened streets of the city into light and set ablaze the wonderful electrical decorations about city hall, the crowd broke through the restraining lines of police, tossing the stalwart men about like straws and forced its way like a great battering ram into the hall.

Hydro's arrival in Chatham was not nearly that dramatic. Chatham voters had given cautious approval to the 'Power Plebiscite' in January of 1909 but for some reason, nothing happened. It was fully five years before Bylaw 884, allowing for the establishment of a Public Utilities Commission, was passed by City Council in February of 1914. The by-law empowered a three-member commission to coordinate the procurement, production, and supply of artificial and natural gas and electrical energy. (It should be noted though, that the Commission has only ever been involved in the electrical part of this mandate.) Then, as now, the Mayor was to serve as an ex-officio member. Except for the provision of annual financial reports, the P.U.C. was to function independently of City Council.

When Niagara power arrived, Chatham was a community of just under 13,000 people. Like most other Canadians, Chatham residents worked six days a week, with a half-holiday on Saturdays. For recreation, they enjoyed picnics, phonograph music, sporting events, and moving pictures. Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford dominated the still-silent screen. Walking remained the most common mode of transportation, although automobiles had recently appeared on the scene.

The first P.U.C. meeting took place in the City Clerk's office in Harrison Hall on September 16, 1914. The original members of the Commission included: Mayor John McCorvie, Robert L. Brackin, and Theodore Smith. The men drew lots to determine their terms of office. Brackin drew the two-year term, while Smith (who was to serve for one year) was elected Chairman. Smith's chairmanship was to be exceedingly short-lived, however, since he was transferred to Grand Rapids, Michigan less than a month later. Brackin assumed the Chair and Alex Chaplin was appointed to complete Smith's term.

Since that first commission meeting, dozens of Chatham's leading citizens have served on the P.U.C. They include present representatives Ralph Barry and Jim Allison, as well as Charles Austin, Jack Beardall, Fred Biette, Bill Donovan, Lloyd George, Tom Howard, Guy Morrison, Ralph Steele, Archie Stirling, Stanley Thomson, and George Wands.

In October of 1914, Chatham ratepayers voted overwhelmingly in favour of a bylaw authorizing the establishment of a hydro-electric plant. The sale of thirty year serial debentures, bearing interest at 6% was authorized. Chatham Hydro's first, and most senior staff members were appointed two days later. They were: John G. Jackson as Secretary-Manager, W.H. Leith as

Assistant-Manager, and James McNamara as Superintendent of Construction. Some time that fall, Chatham Hydro finally signed a contract with the Hydro-Electric Power Commission to supply 500 Hp of Niagara power annually, at a cost of \$7172.

As the senior official responsible to the P.U.C., Jackson faced an overwhelming task. In essence, he had to create the system, before he could proceed with the task of operating it. Over the next few months, staff had to be hired, post holes dug, poles framed and raised, wires strung, equipment ordered and installed, and office and substation facilities constructed. In the interim, power would be supplied directly from Ontario Hydro's Kent Transformer Station on Cemetery Road in Harwich Township.

In December of 1914, Chatham Hydro-Electric advertised in both the **Planet** and the **News**, confidently forecasting hydro's availability within six weeks. Jackson and his staff made good on this promise – the current did begin to flow on January 15th. Mayor Wanless's home in "the Terrace" at 387 King Street West was the first to be electrified. P.U.C. Chairman Robert Brackin's at 20 First Street, was next. On the evening of January 16th, 1915, Chatham Hydro illuminated a 1000-watt tungsten bulb suspended in front of the Central Drug Store at the corner of King and Fifth Streets. Hundreds of onlookers gathered for this first public demonstration. With every available man at work, sixty house connections were completed on these first two days. Hydro officials warned that "connections will be made as rapidly as possible, but some little delay may be caused as the requests for light become more numerous".

The hydro was officially turned on seven months later, when Sir Adam Beck presided over a large civic banquet at the Chatham Armouries on July 7th, 1915. More than four hundred citizens paid for the privilege of attending the gala dinner and concert put on by the Daughters of the Empire. The music during dinner was provided by Phelps Orchestra and the 24th Regiment Band, who played alternately. The **Chatham Daily Planet** notes that the meal concluded with cigars, "good cigars if you please, . . . something unique at a public banquet of the kind." The hall was bedecked with signs and banners proclaiming "Welcome to the Father of Hydro". The highlight of the evening was Sir Adam's speech, after which he pressed 'the magic button' which was the signal for the official turning on of Chatham's new hydro-electric system.

At the end of its first full year of operation (that is, the end of 1915), Chatham Hydro had 1,136 customers, revenues totalling \$16,400, and a physical plant valued at \$129,000.

It is important to note that in Chatham, both electricity and artificial gas had been available from private companies since the 1870s. Natural gas followed in 1907. However, news accounts document an ongoing series of disputes, controversies, and lawsuits. As a result, the city constructed a munic-



ipal street lighting plant in 1908. That still left city merchants and factories reliant on private concerns to meet their light and power needs. Predominant among these private companies was the Chatham Gas Company, which produced two-phase, four-wire, 60 cycle power using steam engines fed by natural gas. From a power plant on the site of the present Civic Centre, the Chatham Gas Company supplied many downtown merchants with steam pumped through wooden pipes which ran down King Street to the C.P.R. Station. Although the intention had been for Chatham Hydro to purchase the company's electrical assets in 1914, the deal was not finalized until October of 1919. As a result, the two companies, one private (supplying 60-cycle power) and one public (supplying 25 cycles) operated in competition for nearly five years.

For the men on the 'frontlines' the work involved heavy physical labour. Three of these first labourers were Bill Hunter, Bill Emans, and Bert Tugwell. Hunter had previously worked for Union Gas, and Emans and Tugwell for Bell Telephone. They started together at Hydro on November 1st, 1914, hired to dig the holes and raise the hydro poles shipped in by rail. They took their orders from Jim McNamara, the construction foreman. The standard wage was 22½ cents an hour.

The work could also be dangerous, particularly for men who were inexperienced or careless. In January of 1915, lineman George Campbell was electrocuted while making house connections on Wellington Street. He had worked for Hydro for only one week. In late April of 1915, two Chatham Hydro employees and one Ontario Hydro employee were killed in two separate incidents in which ladders came into contact with live wires. Prior to his death in December of 1922 at the age of 37, Edward Lampman had been involved in two previous accidents, involving injuries to his eye and to his finger. The safety record did improve, however, as better safety equipment and procedures were developed. In fact, in 1936, Chatham Hydro was awarded the Kent Industrial Accident Prevention Association banner for no lost-time accidents.

Employee benefits generally kept pace with those in other industries. In 1916, salaried employees were allowed two weeks holiday annually. As of 1924, hourly employees with two years service were extended one week's paid vacation. A group life insurance plan (with London Life) was introduced in 1928 and an employee pension plan followed in 1929.

The earliest Chatham Hydro offices were rented facilities, first in the Merritt Block on Fifth Street, and later in the former Stephens and Douglas Hardware Store on King Street near William. In February of 1916, a new office building and substation was opened at 213 King Street West, on the old Massey property. "Perhaps the finest suite of offices in the city", the building accommodated a spacious showroom, offices, storage areas, a Meter Department, a repair room, and substation facilities at the rear.

John Jackson, Chatham Hydro's first Manager, served from 1914 to 1929. A professional engineer by training, Jackson apparently had quite a reputation as an electrical expert and an inventor. He came to the Maple City in the fall of 1914, and bought a house at 59 Grant, where he lived with his wife Jean and his children. He was active for a couple of years as Secretary of the Chatham Board of Trade.

In his capacity as Manager, Jackson earned an annual salary of \$1800. For this sum, he supervised daily operations, planned system extensions and improvements, acted as purchasing agent for all specialized equipment, liaised with the industrial users, dealt with customer complaints, and handled correspondence and advertising. He also maintained records and statistics for use in his annual report to the P.U.C. as well as in a yearly analysis for the Hydro-Electric Power Commission.

Highlights of Jackson's tenure include the completion of the original Hydro building, the acquisition of the electrical assets of the Chatham Gas Company, and the installation of 4160 volt primary cable underground. (Chatham was, in fact, one of the first communities to install primary cable underground – something now standard for new installations). System capacity was upgraded from 138 Hp to 5443 Hp and the number of customers quadrupled to 4,600. The first Hydro picnics for staff and their families also took place during Jackson's time. The inaugural picnic was held at Erie Beach on August 18th, 1921.

Jackson submitted his resignation in January of 1929, having accepted a position with Square D Manufacturing of Detroit. Apparently, the electrical equipment manufacturer offered him a starting salary of \$15,000 (more than eight times his wage at Hydro) as well as access to laboratory facilities. Jackson did agree, however, to stay on as a consultant to supervise completion of the underground cable project. His ties with Chatham Hydro – and with the city of Chatham – ended officially in August of 1929.

Early in 1921, arrangements had been made with the Hydro-Electric Power Commission for Chatham Hydro to construct twenty-five miles of line to supply farm power to Harwich and Raleigh Townships. The first two rural customers were brothers M.J. Wilson (one-time Kent County Warden) and Frank Wilson, of Harwich. The Chatham Rural Power District continued to expand, to the point that in 1927, Ontario Hydro decided to operate it as a Rural District. A young Ontario Hydro engineer, by the name of Roy Sydney Reynolds was transferred to the Chatham area to superintend the new office.

When Jackson resigned, Roy Reynolds was the man selected from among the five applicants to take his place. A Queen's University graduate in both electrical and mechanical engineering, Reynolds was also an accomplished athlete. He had played tackle on the Queen's University football team that won three consecutive Grey Cups and had turned down the offer of a profes-



sional hockey career with the Boston Bruins.

Although not a Chatham native (Reynolds was born in Carleton Place and grew up in Smith's Falls), he very quickly became a part of the Chatham community. He served on the Board of Public General Hospital for more than 30 years, and coordinated the addition of the new wing in 1955. In 1947, he was asked by City Council to superintend construction of the Memorial Arena. Involved with the Chatham Maroons Hockey Club, first as a player, and later as a director, Reynolds also served on the executive of the Ontario Hockey Association for 21 years. In 1962, he received the O.H.A.'s 'Gold Stick' Award, the highest award bestowed on non-playing members. Reynolds' involvement was not limited to community groups, however. He served as President of the Association of Municipal Electrical Utilities in 1938, and was made an honorary life member of the group in 1957.

Mr. Reynolds often referred to his staff as "the Hydro family". And a family it was. The old 'Hydro picnic' concept was revived in the 1940s, in the form of the Annual Venison Dinner for Hydro staffers. The 'Hydro Hunters', including Roy Reynolds, George Field, Alf Stevens, and Wally Field made an annual pilgrimage to the north country to bag the main course. Apparently 1953 was a bad year - turkey was substituted for the venison. There was a Hydro Hockey team, a Hydro bowling league, a softball team (the Industrial League Champs in 1950), and a golf league. Dinners and parties were held to recognize the contributions of long-service employees. Thirty-five, forty, even forty-two and forty-three years of service were not uncommon. There were even some real family connections. Myles Emans, employed in the Meter Department following service in the Air Force during World War II, was the son of Bill Emans, one of Chatham Hydro's original employees. Leta Pritchard, Reynold's secretary and the first female employee to receive a 25 year pin, was the widow of Ivan Pritchard, a Hydro employee from 1914 until his untimely death in 1938. Historical Society member Rupert Bedford, a Ryerson graduate in electronic engineering, worked in the Parts and Small Appliance Repair Department for more than thirty-five years. He is the son of Burton Bedford who served on the P.U.C. in the 1910s and 1920s. In addition, a number of Chatham Maroons players - among them Alf Stevens (who retired in 1972, after 42 years service) - found lifetime careers with Chatham Hydro. Apparently Mr. Reynolds considered good defensive skills an important prerequisite for certain Hydro positions...

Reynolds' talents were particularly notable in the area we know today as "PR". From the Hydro scrapbooks for the years 1929 through 1969, it is evident that hardly a week went by without Mr. Reynolds' picture or comments appearing in the press. Of course, promotion had always played an important part in Chatham Hydro operations. Some of the slogans utilized in the early years have aged more gracefully than others. They include:

"Electricity - the secret of more leisure - prolonged youth - and

happiness", "The Electrical Way of Living", "A light year away", and "Better Light, Better Sight".

Electrical displays and shows were also considered essential to remain competitive in the (usually) friendly race with Union Gas. One Ontario Hydro publication noted ruefully that the Gas Company "frequently uses aggressive sales practices that Hydro, as a public utility, cannot emulate".

The most obvious area of competition was the sale of appliances, also known as 'white goods'. Chatham Hydro had begun selling electrical appliances almost immediately. Electric stoves were already on display in the Hydro showroom in July of 1915. Vacuum cleaners, electric grills and teapots, irons, toasters, coffee percolators, and heating pads soon followed. Sales Department employee Bert Tugwell even sold small appliances door-to-door, travelling about town with his trademark pushcart. By 1921, there were 250 electric stoves in use in Chatham. To promote sales (and thus, the consumption of electrical energy), Hydro offered a high level of personal service. For many years, light bulbs and range burners were replaced free in fixtures and appliances purchased from the Hydro.

The Parts and Small Appliance Repair Department was very much a part of Hydro's commitment to personal service. What began as fill-in work for the operators in the 1930s, developed into a local institution which was not discontinued until 1986. Demand for the service had declined as mass production methods made repairs to small appliances more costly and difficult than replacing them.

In the 1960s, another addition with the emphasis on personal service was the Home Economics Department. Trained staff (including at various times, Mary Anne Plewes, Shirley Martin, G. Hoyt, and Ruth Hammond) provided cooking demonstrations, as well as advice on menu planning, family budgeting, and the selection of electrical gifts. The model kitchen facilities were also available to schools and community groups.

Emergency services were always an important element. The P.U.C. actually paid to have telephones installed in the homes of some of the linemen as early as 1917, for use in the event of trouble calls. Over the decades, Hydro troubleshooters have responded to countless traffic accidents, hundreds of electrical and wind storms, cyclones, tornadoes, fires, and floods. The Flood of '37 is perhaps one of the most memorable. Located on the Thames River, Hydro's own facilities were submerged. Teams worked through the night to remove valuable supplies and equipment from the basement.

The war years (both the periods 1914-19 and 1939-45) were difficult ones. Demand for power was high, due to the needs of wartime production. Restraint was the order of the day. Streetlights, commercial signs, and even domestic customers were subject to regular dim-outs and cut-backs. Many



Hydro employees volunteered for overseas duty. Those who remained served as part of the Civil Defence force, guarding vital Hydro facilities around the clock.

In Chatham, a period of tremendous industrial growth followed World War II. Speaking to the local Kiwanis Club, Ontario Hydro Vice-Chairman W.L. Houck referred to Chatham as "one of the most progressive of our western Ontario municipalities", with twice the customers and twice the consumption of the average municipality. Chrysler Canada, International Harvester, Standard Brands, Daymond, and others either located in Chatham or expanded existing operations here in the post-war years. Hydro staff and facilities expanded to meet these growing needs. A new service centre and substation (re-named the R.S. Reynolds Service Centre in 1958 and now incorporated into the present headquarters) was constructed on Queen Street in 1937. Line crews, who had been operating out of the original substation on King Street, were transferred over. In 1952, the King Street office was expanded. Designed by Chatham architect Jack Moore, the addition effectively doubled the size of the structure while remaining architecturally compatible. (This building, now owned by National Trust, still stands on King Street). A system of seven substations was constructed to distribute power to all areas of the growing community.

Like numerous other utilities in southwestern Ontario, Chatham Hydro continued to offer 25 cycle power. The alternative, 60 cycles, was more reliable and ultimately, would become the industry standard. As part of a province-wide move to 60 cycles, Chatham Hydro's domestic customers were changed over between November of 1955 and February of 1956. Industrial customers had already been converted in 1951. Ironically, six of Hydro's industrial customers (including Planet Printing), who had started out as Chatham Gas Company customers, had never made the change from 60 to 25 cycles in the first place, because of special power requirements. Much of the equipment in the Hydro substations and in the distribution system (including transformers, meters, and control equipment) had to be rewound or replaced. All frequency-sensitive equipment and appliances in individual homes were also affected. Teams of Hydro employees and contractors swept through neighbourhoods, completing the job in four months. At Chatham Hydro, the person responsible for the conversion project was Clayton Leach, another Queen's University engineering graduate who had joined the staff in 1949. In 1958, Leach was named Assistant General Manager.

It was Clayt Leach, who replaced Roy Reynolds at the Hydro helm in 1969. Reynolds submitted his resignation in February, at a memorable P.U.C. meeting, held in the London hospital room where Chairman Archie Stirling was recovering from a broken hip.

More than six hundred friends and colleagues from across the province attended Reynolds' retirement dinner, held at the Kinsmen Auditorium.

Ontario Hydro Chairman George Gathercole summed up Reynolds' lengthy career by saying: "He was a doer, a mover, a man who gets things done. He is a big man, not only physically, but in the breadth of his interests, the warmth of his personality, and the totality of his accomplishments". Roy Reynolds passed away in 1983, after a lengthy illness.

Clayton Leach was to serve as Manager at the Hydro from 1969, until he retired in 1987. This was a period of dramatic change for the utility as automation began to have an impact. In 1970, the original No. 1 Substation on King Street was replaced by a new, completely automatic station on Queen Street at Harvey. Hydro billing operations were computerized in May of 1974. Over the same period, Hydro operations were streamlined and the Sales and Service functions discontinued (Sales in 1977 and Parts and Small Appliance Repair in 1986, as previously noted). With the completion in 1986 of the \$2.9 million Office and Operations Centre at 320 Queen Street, all Hydro functions (which had previously taken place at four separate sites) were consolidated, for the first time, in one building.

Jim Sutherland, who like Reynolds and Leach before him, had worked previously for Ontario Hydro, assumed Chatham Hydro's most senior position in February of 1987. Since that time, Hydro operations have been restructured, resulting in three departments: Administration, Human Relations, and Engineering and Operations. System capacity has been increased by 25 MW, with the addition of a sixth feeder line from the Ontario Hydro facility in Harwich Township, and services in the King and First Street area – the first area of the city to be hooked up in 1915 – were converted to underground.

Over the last seventy-five years, Chatham Hydro has kept pace with the growing demand for electricity in homes, businesses, and industries. In 1989, Chatham Hydro had nearly fifteen times as many customers as it did in 1915. The amount of power consumed by each of its domestic customers also increased by seven times. As a result, the cost of the power that Chatham Hydro purchases from Ontario Hydro has multiplied from \$7200 in 1915 to more than \$20 million in 1989.

Today, Chatham Hydro's focus is firmly, and most appropriately, on the future. It is important, therefore that we have taken the time on this, the 75th anniversary of the arrival of hydro-electric power in Chatham, to reflect on Chatham Hydro's development.

Note: In closing, the speaker thanked the audience, and acknowledged the assistance of Chatham Hydro retirees, Rupert Bedford, Bill Coltart, George Down, Clay Leach, and Gord Sharpe.

Presented to the Kent Historical Society on January 16, 1990.



# A Driving Tour of Morpeth, Howard Beach, and Eau Road

By Leonard Pegg

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*(This driving tour was undertaken as part of Kent County's Agricultural Week activities in October of 1988.)*

Driving from Morpeth, the birthplace of Archibald Lampman, one is reminded of an earlier time, when sailing vessels supplied settlers with provisions. The virgin forests of Rondeau Park, once the home of the Pottawattomi and Ojibway Indians, were discovered in 1670 by the "Sulpician Fathers" who claimed the area for the French government. Your tour through south Harwich concludes in the town of Blenheim which was first settled in the 1830s.

Travel west along No. 3 Highway into historic Morpeth and make a left turn at the main intersection. You are now on Erie Street (it is Erie Street all the way from what used to be the ports of Antrim and Hill's Landing – Morpeth Dock – to what used to be the Michigan Central Railway station in Ridgetown, both important features of transportation many years ago). When you curve to the right you will be on the third lakeshore road, the previous roads having been claimed by Lake Erie. The Hill Farm, with its lookout atop the stately old red brick house (now owned by the W.G. Thompson family), is on the left when you bear right to pass between the Wildwood Mobile Home Park and the lake.

The lookout was originally used by the Hills to spot approaching vessels (many with sails), in order to get advance word to those with grain or lumber to ship. After its shipping days, the dock was used by pound-net fisheries until that industry disappeared. Much of the concrete installed in south-east Kent prior to the opening of the Harwich Creek Road pits was made from aggregate dragged from the lakeshore east of the dock (this was Terrace Beach – east of Morpeth Dock) and to some extent, from other shore points, including the extensive gravel beds just east of the "point" at Rondeau Park.

At the mouth of the first creek that you pass (Big Creek), was the port of Antrim, which pre-dated Hill's Landing. Look inland to the right as you cross the creek. That is where the boats docked. Where the low bridge is now, was originally a high clearance wooden bridge which allowed small sailing ships to enter the creek estuary to be loaded. In 1834, a store and in 1836, a tavern, were built by the Ruddles. In 1841, Antrim shipped 84 hogsheads of tobacco (each weighing 800 pounds), in addition to wheat, pork, and "high

wines". Ships were built there and one-day cattle sales were held quarterly.

If you were to turn right on the gravel road entering the lakeshore road at the west side of Big Creek, you would be travelling on "Lovers' Lane" (does every community have one?). This was originally William Street in the 1800s. And if you travel up Lovers' Lane and pass the Howard Thirteenth Road, you will be on "Summer Coon Road" for the mile to Highway 3. The road was apparently named for its "coon-huntin'" residents and their famous dogs.

Go back to the lakeshore and to the next road, which is "Yoppingburg Road." The corner is said to have gotten its name because of the reputation for talking gained by the half-dozen families residing within 'yopping distance' of each other in the age before telephones. Located on this corner is the Consumers' Gas Company plant, with its officially registered "Yoppingburg Airport (heliport)", complete with airsock. The plant is actually located within the area of the Morpeth Gas Field, discovered in 1954 and still producing (perhaps you remember the gas docks along the shore). Gas now comes to the plant from a world-class gas field below the lake, some twelve miles offshore. An incinerator in the 300-foot tower burns off the impurities cleaned from the gas.

The next creek along the lakeshore was named for the pioneer Conway family. The area between the road and the lake is the Conway Grove public beach and picnic area.

The other creek you cross on the way to Rondeau Park is named for the Pattersons, who were granted their land by Colonel Talbot.

When you arrive at the intersection of the lakeshore road and the Harwich-Howard Townline (Highway 51), the imposing frame house on the east corner is the residence of the late William D. Bates, now occupied by his son Leslie and daughter Melba. Mr. Bates, at one time, owned nearly all of the property from Patterson Creek to the entrance of Rondeau Provincial Park. He operated the largest of the pound-net fisheries in the area. Fifty years ago, you would have noticed the stakes for the pound nets as you drove along the lakeshore road. At regular spacings (probably at least a mile apart), and about a half-mile offshore, extending out into the lake, were the quarter-mile of stakes carrying the 'lead' net and the cluster of stakes holding the pound net. The fish were directed along the lead and trapped in the pound until the crew in the open-deck fishing boat lifted the net, discharging the fish into the boat. In the winter, the nets were repaired and they were regularly boiled in tar and laid out to dry on the "twine field." The Bates' twine field east of the corner is now a residential area, and continues to be known by its historical name of "Sandytown." The short access road going east from the old fishery buildings is now "Bates Drive." The Bates' home was originally a hostelry, "Mooney's Inn". Mrs. Mooney was a Ruddle from nearby Antrim.



On leaving Rondeau Park and heading northwest on Highway 51, when you look to your left, you are seeing what was, at one time, one of the most prolific duck-hunting areas in North America. Shooters took two guns to the blinds, because one would get too hot to handle. One hunter shot a record 284 ducks in one day.

The large brick house on the right before you reach New Scotland corner was built by John Rose in 1883. He purchased the brick from the nearby Robert Stirling Brickyard for a total of \$55. The walls are all two bricks thick.

The former Howard-Harwich Union School on the left was built one hundred years ago. Prior to that time, there was a frame schoolhouse. The ratepayers could not agree on a location, so it was hauled – by horses, under cover of darkness – on more than one occasion to sites a mile apart.

You pass the school and on your left is a frame house. This was the birthplace of two of Kent County's most famous writers. Both Archie P. McKishnie, and his sister, Jean Blewett, were born there in the 1870s. For many years Blewett was on the staff at the **Globe**. McKishnie was known for his books and articles. He was one of the leading wildlife writers of his time.

At New Scotland, you turn left on the Eau Road and you are driving along Canada's "Snuff Tobacco Road." The black or dark-fired tobacco is a special kind. When ripe, the whole plant is hung on pickets in barns which are specially built to "cure" the tobacco with heat and smoke from wood fires on the barn floor (as hams are cured). The ultimate product is "snuff" type chewing tobacco.

Many of the farms on the south side of the Eau Road run to Rondeau Bay. The Clendenning Family grandfather, James, acquired the large brick residence seen on the right side from the Sopers, who operated shipping facilities on Rondeau Bay. Other shipping was done at Raglan, where there was a large sawmill. Walnut was the main timber product. Raglan is now noted for its restaurant, cottages, marina, and good fishing.

This era was before the channel was cut through from Rondeau Bay to the lake, at what became Erieau. Access to the bay had been via Big Creek across the Erieau Marshlands, long before they were dyked and drained – one of the first such projects undertaken in Ontario.

The next stop is Shrewsbury, one of the destinations on the Underground Railroad for slaves escaping from the southern United States. It is now popular as a residential, resort, and fishing centre. Shrewsbury was surveyed and streets were laid out, but it never developed into a town as planned. The streets still exist. The site of the old "government dock" now serves as a marina.

Turn right onto the Communication Road. Linking Chatham to Rondeau

Bay, this road was reputedly built by Governor Simcoe as a defence project. It went through the 'Ten Mile Bush', the holding of the Laird of Inshes who restricted settlement and obstructed Colonel Talbot's road to Amherstburg.

Renk Seed (Giffin Grain), Vander Pol's Rol-Land Mushrooms, and Malory Industries are important industries en route to Blenheim. After passing the Blenheim Golf Course and entering the town, you will see on your left the cairn marking the McKee Purchase, by which the native people ceded ownership of much of southwestern Ontario to Canada.

Many remnants of former times remain in the southern part of Harwich Township. This leisurely drive through the area brings back its early history and affords a pleasant afternoon.



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