

Cobourg Star
July 15, 1980

Era ends as Cobourg watches

Much of the "good stuff" was already gone before auctioneer Paul Lean began last Saturday's auction on the grounds of the old Fitzhugh estate at the east side of Cobourg. But the people were there by the hundreds -- hoping to pick up a bit of Cobourg's history from its glamor days as an American summer resort. The items were spread all around one of the old houses which had been used for the Fitzhugh staff in the summer heydays.

It was nostalgic, and full of memories of a by-gone era. The late Daintry Fitzhugh was never one to miss picking up a bargain himself. And a great many articles sold on Saturday were items which he had bought over the years at other sales in this community and were stored in a barn or other houses on the property, and thus escaped the fire of Christmas Day, 1976 which destroyed the beautiful East House.

There were some articles, however, that would forever be linked with the old estate. The International car up in the barn was now little more than four buggy-like wheels. But once it had been one of the first cars in Cobourg. For \$1,350, Dr. Bill Blastorah, who grew up in Harwood, was the buyer. We asked him if he intended to drive it home to Peterborough, and he replied that he would "have to have it certified first." That might be quite a chore.

There were musty old trunks from the days when only the wealthy could cruise to Europe. They were covered with labels from faraway places -- Paris, London, Tiarama. One trunk was full of old party dresses, now only garbage. There were great wooden barrels, stencilled "Mr. Henry Fitzhugh, Northumberland Hall, Cobourg, Ontario, Canada." They had brought treasures to Cobourg. A small label on one read, "English China, 1858". Another was "French Glass and Silver." The contents were long gone. Only the shells and the memories remained -- like empty carriages that once transported royalty.

There were scads of wicker lawnchairs, and with the lure of nostalgia, they sometimes brought \$200 each. What portly bottoms had they once held out under the portico of that great mansion on the lake? What summer yarns of old did they hear but can never tell?

There were old Victorian bedsteads, great monstrous things, some with sort of parapets, old brass bedsteads, and chairs, chairs, and more chairs. A handful of old shotgun barrels had gone through the East House fire of three years ago and their stocks were burned, and their barrels twisted. But they were sold. Even the scorched iron remnants of the old lantern from the side door brought a few dollars.

There seemed to be enough grounds-keeping equipment -- ancient lawnmowers and sod-trimmers and lawn rollers -- to maintain highway 401 from Cobourg to Oshawa.

Daintry Fitzhugh's grandfather, General Charles Fitzhugh, of the Union forces in the U.S. Civil War, settled in Cobourg a century ago as a summer visitor. The little town was attractive to Americans. Its air was clear (they said it had "ozone"). It had fine homes from its early days as the second largest town in Upper Canada (after Kingston, and ahead of York). There were excellent hotels, and from the 1870s it boasted the 150-room Arlington, the finest hotel between Toronto and Montreal. Steamer connections with Rochester were easy across the lake, and the great private railway cars brought the wealthy to the old Grand Trunk station. There was also business -- iron ore in the mines of Marmora came down the Cobourg and Peterborough Railway for shipment to the U.S. And the wealthy Americans of Pittsburgh and Louisville knew all about iron ore.

Daintry's father, Henry, bought Northumberland Hall, built on the east side of D'Arcy St. by lawyer George Boulton in the mid-1820s. When young, Daintry lived in what had been the Daintry family home on Spencer St. (Mrs. Henry Fitzhugh was from a local Cobourg family). Later, Daintry moved to Northumberland Hall. Five years ago, he sold Northumberland Hall and it was demolished (and the land will soon be built upon). He moved to East House, which had been built in 1900 as a wedding present for his Uncle Carroll. On Christmas Day, 1976, East House burned, taking with it silver and china and treasures of three generations. It is said that losses may have run as high as \$2 million in that fire. For a brief period, Daintry and his wife Hazel (who was present at Saturday's sale) owned another former Fitzhugh house, (now owned by Dick Jeffery). But Daintry's health was failing, and they spent most of their time at their Florida home or in Louisville.

The end of an era comes quickly. Just a decade ago, Daintry Fitzhugh and Northumberland Hall and East House were all part of Cobourg. Now they are gone. Only the original land on the lakeshore up to highway 2 remains in the estate. When it is sold, no connection will remain with this family which more than any other opened up the golden days of Cobourg as an American summer resort -- a period which forever left its mark of elegance upon the legends and folklore of Cobourg.

This is what the people were thinking on Saturday afternoon as they watched the auctioneer so effectively turn the remains of an accumulation of a century into hard and bankable dollars.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

(Or on Saturday, perhaps we should add).

COBOURG PUBLIC LIBRARY