

Alex Barnet: The man behind Renfrew's first Lumber Baron Festival

By Lucy Brown
Mercury reporter

"In 1912, Renfrew was very much a farmers' town. The townspeople depended on the farmers for their butter, eggs, milk, potatoes, wood for fuel and hay and oats for their horses. The farmers had to come to town for their groceries, clothing, medicine, hardware and even for their shipments of goods from Eaton's and Simpson's."

Excerpt from Harry Hinchley's Old Files

Farming has played a crucial role indeed in Renfrew's history.

There was also, however, another very strong influence, that of the lumbering business.

Lumbering, and the lumber barons who spearheaded such developments, were an equally key part of all Renfrew was back then and remains today.

No history of lumbering in the area would be complete without recollections of Alexander Barnet Senior, the man upon which Renfrew's first annual Lumber Baron's Summer Festival is focused.

Throughout the upcoming festival Bob Amaron will play the role of Barnet Senior, re-enacting moments in history.

Through the co-operation of Heritage Renfrew and the Renfrew Archives The Mercury is able to provide a closer look at the area's premier lumber baron.

Avid historian Marjorie Lindsay has also provided a valuable contribution in the form of notes taken during recent conversations with Lillian Handford, Mamie Kelly and Katie Millar.

These three ladies shared with Lindsay some of their memories of the man the town celebrates the first week of August.

Mamie Kelly, for example, recalls going to birthday parties for Barnet's daughters at Coleraine Hall. Today she still has the cup and saucer prize she won in a game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey.

Katie Millar doesn't recall Alexander Barnet Sr but does remember James Barnet who is buried at Springtown.

"Gracious gentleman"

Lillian Handford, meanwhile, has many memories of the "gracious gentleman" who owned a barnful of beautiful horses and walked downtown in the morning sometimes, using a cane.

In the days when Barnet's family was younger there were also many parties in the third-floor ballroom at Coleraine Hall, including many Christmas parties.

Three of Lillian's young uncles --



Alexander Barnet Senior.

Hugh, Alex and Walter -- were very much in demand for these parties as they were not only good looking but also good dancers.

Dr Ed Handford's house was the original Alexander Barnet Sr house, later owned by Geo Barnet.

Lillian also recalls the Barnets "always arrived at church with a pew full of children", as did John MacKay. The families attended St Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

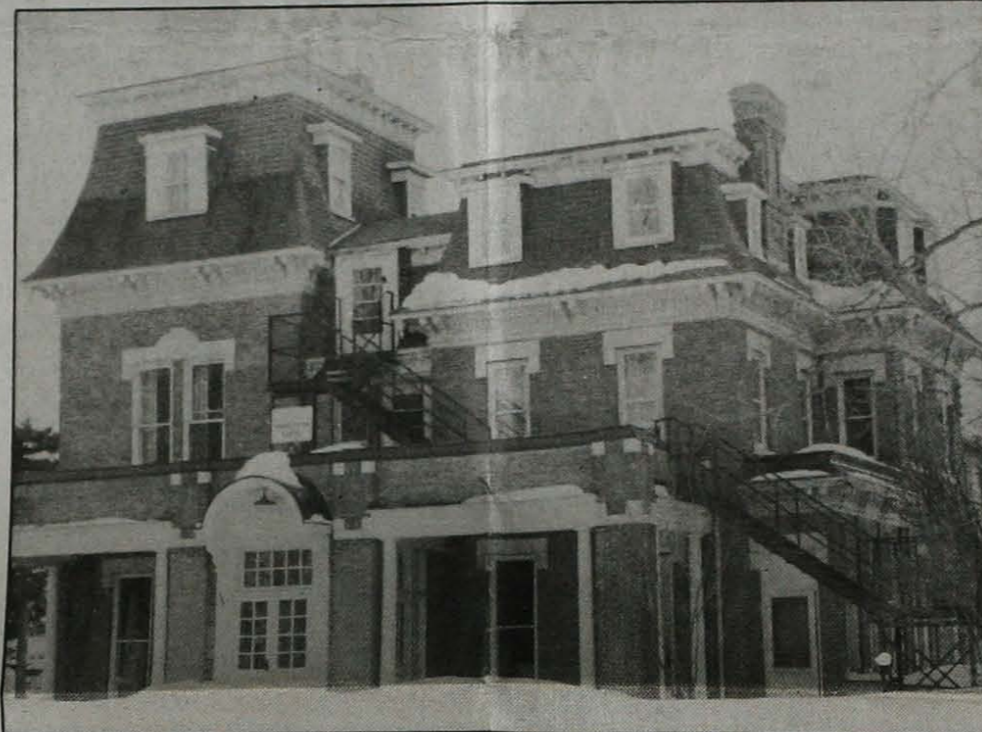
Stringer brothers remember

In a September 3, 1980 article by Harry Hinchley in The Renfrew Mercury, barbers WJ and Elmer Stringer shared some memories of Alexander Barnet Senior. One of the recollections, which Amaron will re-live during the Renfrew Lumber Baron Festival, is the shampooing of his beard.

Elmer Stringer particularly recalled that the Barnets and O'Briens had "lots of money and they financed the Millionaires hockey team. They were right after the Stanley Cup and hired the big names and paid them high salaries."

He also noted that Barnet Senior, aside from his timber limits, owned a refrigerator factory in Renfrew.

(Pictured on this page is a copy of an advertisement for these refrigerators.)



Coleraine Hall.

Grand old building

Yes, in the early 1900s Coleraine Hall was a focal point of social activity in Renfrew and later the focus of news, even in the city.

The November 9, 1949 edition of the Ottawa Journal featured an article on Coleraine Hall, noting its purchase had been approved by council for a price of \$35,000.

TF Barnet donated \$15,000 for renovations and the federal and provincial governments provided grants to complete work at the site.

Barnet's death

The Friday, January 19, 1917 issue of The Renfrew Mercury noted that Alexander Barnet Senior was born February 25, 1840 and died January 12, 1917. He was 77 years old.

His parents came to Ashdad, Canada in 1830 from northern Ireland.

At only 14 years of age Alexander

Barnet Senior began work as a lumberman and in 1860 started a business of his own on the Madawaska River with a pair of horses and \$300.

In 1865 he began operations on the Bonnechere River with Wm Bannerman and Wm MacKay.

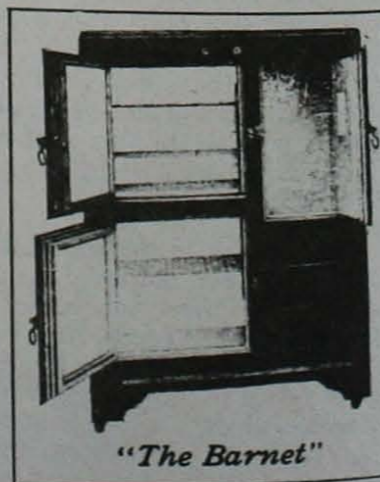
Sometime between 1876 and 1884 Barnet and MacKay bought out Bannerman.

In 1869 Barnet and Thomas Mackie, MP, of Pembroke formed a partnership which continued for 19 years (to 1888) for export, principally to England.

The lumber business delivered 400,000 to 500,000 cubic feet annually, working all tributaries of the Ottawa River above the City of Ottawa.

Alexander Barnet Senior had 10 children: six sons and four daughters.

The sons were J George, Thomas, William, Alexander Jr, Harold and James EH. The daughters were Mrs Jane McAllister, Mrs Susan Carswell, Mrs Louise Code and Grace.



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Renfrew Archives

In his own words...

Published in The Cosmos, circa 1900; Alexander Barnet's personal comments on 40 years in the lumbering business follow below. This article has never been published before, aside from in the original Cosmos. The original copy of this document is stored at the Ontario Archives.

I commenced to lumber for myself in the fall of 1860 on Halliday's Creek a tributary of the Madawaska River, operated for four years on above creek and one year on Constant Creek, five years in all on the Madawaska.

My operations were very limited at that time and not very remunerative.

The fall of 1865 I went up the Bonnechere to the head of Round Lake, myself and William Bannerman under the firm name of Barnet & Bannerman. We made a raft of timber on what was known as the John McDonald limit bought by the late Wm Mackay from the Quebec Bank for us, and over which there was a big lawsuit that lasted for years, but, we finally succeeded. The fall of 1866 we bought the little Bonnechere limits from the trustees of the late John Egan containing 214 miles, that fall we put in men to get out two rafts of timber which we got out and delivered in Quebec in 1867.

We then increased our operations, the late Wm Mackay taking an interest in the business in the fall of 1868. We bought out W Bannerman in 1874, and the business went under the firm name of Barnet & Mackay until we sold out all of our Bonnechere limits to McLaughlan Bros of Arnprior. The late Wm Mackay then went out of the lumber business -- I have continued it ever since. I bought the late Christopher O'Kelly's limits on Indian River, Thos Mackie MP of Pembroke and myself operated them for a number of years and several other limits on Sturgeon River, South River, Kippewa and Petawawa. Under the name of Barnet & Mackie, we did business together for 19 years and dissolved partnership in 1895. I have since operated on Petawawa where I still hold a block of pine. I also own a limit on the Upper Coulonge that has never been operated on. Have also some timber lands west of Sudbury that my sons are interested in with me, have also an interest in a Saw Mill and Factory at New Westminster, BC. There has been a great many changes in the lumber trade since I commenced, there is not a man now lumbering on

the Madawaska that was on it the year I left (1865) nor one on the Bonnechere except R A Campbell of the firm of Campbell and McNab, and there is not one of the Quebec lumber shippers now living that was there in 1862, the first year I went down. There are still some of the shipping houses in existence managed by the sons and confidential men that were in their services for years. The following is a list of the most extensive lumber shippers that I sold timber to from the first year I took it to the Quebec market and up to the last few years that they did business. The late John Gilmour of the firm of Allen Gilmour & Co, M J Wilson, Henry Fry & Co, Hon J G Ross and John Ross of Ross & Co, Roberts Smith & Co, John Sharples of J & C Sharples, John Burstall of J Burstall & Co and the late Hon R R Dobell of Dobell, Beckett & Co. These men were all in business when I went to Quebec first, and a more honorable lot of business men never stood in shoe leather or the sun never shone on, than the above list of Quebec merchants. Their word was as good as their bond. That has been my 40 years experience of them, and I have no doubt but that their successors will conduct the business in the same straight-forward manner from the training they got from these noble men who have passed away. I must mention two other fine men that did considerable business for me in looking after the sales of small lots of my timber when absent from Quebec. They were the late James Bowen Jr and Amos Bowen, both fine, honorable men.

A Barnet



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in Renfrew