

Kate Hoffman recalls early days in Monteith

Wednesday, August 2, 1989



Prestigious school

The village of Monteith was home to a business academy for secondary school boys and girls from 1916 to 1935. Northern Academy attracted students from as far away as Haileybury and Hearst who wanted to learn practical business skills in a school setting. The building was located on the site that is now the Monteith Correctional Centre.

by Alice Gray-Donald

Kate Hoffman is a living history book of Monteith.

Even though she was not born here, Hoffman, 84, has a vivid memory of what the village looked like as the site of an experimental farm, a farming community, a business college, a prisoner of war camp and a correctional centre.

She can still recall some of the local farms, the once bustling town centre, and the many social activities of yesteryear. Even though Monteith has gone through many changes over the last 78 years, it has remained a close-knit community.

When Hoffman moved here in 1911, the village was only a cluster of shacks on one side of the river. The other side was just a wilderness area. As Hoffman explained, her parents: Edward and Isabel Watts had moved to the area in 1911 with their six children; Ethel, Mable, Ted, Lil, Violet and Kate, to work on the experimental farm. The farm had been established in 1905 by Nelson Monteith, the Minister of Agriculture to determine what kind of crops could be grown in Northern Ontario.

When the Watts first arrived, they were confronted with a drastic change in lifestyle from what they had been accustomed to in England. At first, Hoffman found it difficult to get used to living in a wilderness area with just a cluster of tar paper shacks, a one room school house and no stores. Even though the area had been founded in 1905, very few people except railway workers, who were building the railway tracks from MacDougall Chutes (Matheson) to Kelso, lived in the area. Gradually, as the experimental farm expanded and hired more people, others began moving to the village.

"There was nothing here on this side of the river. They called it Driftwood City. All they had were construction shacks that were just tar paper shacks. We lived at McCosh's boarding house when we first got here. There were quite a few people living there since they were building the railroad through to Kelso. My uncle was from here. He came over to England to persuade my father to come over here. My father didn't have a job when he came. All we brought was a trunk and then my father got a job on the farm," Hoffman said.

To this day, she can still remember trying to get used to the area after leaving her life in England.

"It was terrible. It was just tar paper shacks and that is where the people lived. It would have been different if we would have gone to a larger city like Montreal or somewhere down south but we didn't. We came up here and it was all green bush. In England, the place was settled. There were brick homes. Here, there were black construction shacks and it was cold in the winter," Hoffman recalled.

When she first arrived, Hoffman attended school in a one room wooden schoolhouse in the village. Between 20 and 30 local children attended the school from grade one to grade eight. The schoolhouse was a small room with three windows on each side and a barrel stove to keep the building warm during the long winter months. Students would carry water from the well to the wash stand so that they could wash their hands in the wash basin. The students would work at long tables that were pushed together rather than the traditional desks. Once her family moved to a farm