

He's the 'history detective'

by Jennifer Barr

Ontario's most interesting history detective is writing a book called—"The History Detective".

Hugh MacMillan, a pioneer in field research for the Ontario Archives, is committing some of his great finds, humorous cases, and fascinating wild goose chases to paper in the form of a new book written in conjunction with Ron Poulton.

The Nassagaweya resident, who has more interests than most people's is squeezing time out of his very busy life to organize the book and, at the same time, to develop a radio column on historical finds.

Man of many faces

Hugh is a fascinating man, a mixture of Farley Mowat and Grizzly Adams (the beard helps!) with a twinkling sense of humor and an over-developed sense of history. He even lives in a log house he built himself, surrounded by fur trade canoes and pioneer nostalgia.

Visiting him is like taking a step back in time.

Hugh's life sounds like a three ring circus. In fact he used to be part of one—and a drummer for a hypnotist—and a mate on a towboat, among other things.

However, throughout his years he's always been interested in history and old papers.

In 1963, he was living in the lower Ottawa Valley and president of a local historical society in Glengarry County. Doing research in the Dominion and provincial archives, he was appalled that neither organization had field workers going out

and bringing in documents of historical value to be preserved.

From 1912 to 1933, Sir Arthur Doughty had field workers filling the national archives on the theory that he didn't "want to wait for people to stumble off the street with their treasures clutched in their hand. "You went out and got them," thought Doughty, and "if you couldn't get them any other way, you stole them."

After a 30 year drought of field research, Hugh convinced the Ontario Archives they should hire a field research worker—him.

Actually, the Archives weren't completely sold and he had to become a clerk at the Archives in the newspaper section doing field work part-time. Within six months, the archives were indeed convinced they needed Hugh out on the road full time. He's been pulling in historical documents, papers and letters at a fantastic rate ever since.

The Ontario Department of Public Records—the Archives—is situated near the University of Toronto at 77 Grenville Street. The 48 person staff deals with paper records of Ontario history, including government records, land deeds, family papers, diaries, photographs, newspapers, tape recordings, church and school records, political papers, business and society records, all documenting our past.

Family bibles, cancelled cheques and land deeds are not accepted, thank you. Land deed records are already complete within the department.

Letters are most interesting for Hugh. He says he really likes to acquire old letters that tell a bit of Canada's history in them. He considers his greatest

find a collection of 51 letters from John Graves Simcoe, to his wife. Simcoe was first Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. The chase for those letters took Hugh from the Georgian Historical Society near Sutton, where he was speaking one night, to Peterborough, to Northumberland County where he paid a New Zealand farmer \$5,000 for the Simcoe letters plus material of John Ross Robertson.

In some cases, the archives are willing to pay for a real find, but the acquisition budget is small, and in most cases, Hugh persuades the owner, the documents are much safer in the archives. A donating family receives a bound copy of their papers and a tax receipt so they don't lose out.

However, valuable historical papers are much better off in the controlled humidity, dust-free, acidity controlled, fire-proof containers of the 11-storey stone archives building than in the desk drawer at home.

Hugh travels mostly by car, sometimes by air, about 30 to 35,000 miles per year following leads, nosing out information. He has a large file box filled with names, 3,000 of them, contacts all across Ontario with an interest in preserving history.

It's this network of contacts that helps Hugh gather 70 to 80 items a year and an average of three to four major collections in a year. To acquire those 70 pieces, Hugh follows upwards of 400 leads. One thing leads to another and he often finds himself off on a tangent following the trail of something much more exciting than the original lead.

Not only does Hugh pursue history but he really does live it. He and his wife, Muriel, and four nearly grown youngsters live in a charming hillside piece-



Hugh MacMillan

en-piece log house built from four old barns dating back to 1820.

Hugh and some friends have recharted the North West Company after Hugh discovered one of his ancestors was a partner in the old trading company.

He builds fur trade canoes and reconstructs historical fur trade trips, canoeing hundreds of miles on the same routes pioneers did.

Acton High School is the first high school ever to own two fur trade canoes built by students under Hugh's guidance.

Hugh MacMillan is steeped in history and has been called a pioneer in his method of preserving Ontario history. I hope his name goes down in history and that he saves all his own papers for someone else to collect.

Add-on heating units dangerous

Be extremely cautious with add-on heating units—wood burning appliances attached to existing furnaces—Halton Region Fire Prevention Committee warns.

They are hazardous because the original furnace and ducts are not equipped to handle the higher temperatures which wood fires can create, points out Capt. Art McGlynn of Burlington, 1980 Chairman of the Committee.

There are no add-on units yet approved for safe use in Canada, he noted.

The safety certification of any furnace becomes void if an add-on unit is installed, and the insurance companies may not cover any damage resulting from a fire.

There is a major hazard in the case of a power failure, too. The furnace blower stops during a power failure, but the wood continues to burn. There is no method of reducing the heat, which could eventually set fire to the home.

Another problem is temperature control. Add-ons don't shut off automatically once a maximum temperature is reached, like a thermostatically-controlled furnace. The temperature must be watched constantly.

Heat from the add-on may also damage mechanical and electrical parts in the furnace.

"They are not only illegal, they are dangerous," said Capt. McGlynn.

In the news

Making a name in the news of the RCMP Gazette is Halton Regional Police Constable William McGrath from the Identification Branch.

The Oakville constable presented an article on "An Inexpensive Photo Board and Mug-Shot Set-Up" after designing the system himself.

The article was published in December in the national RCMP news magazine.

Champion Perspective

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Deposits throughout Esquesing

Gas riches may await the gambler

by Gord Murray

The odds are probably steeper than winning Super Lotto, but there's a slim chance that someday Albertans could be pointing to North Halton and calling us oil barons or blue eyed sheiks.

It's probably slipped a lot of people's minds, however, there's natural gas and oil deposits just north-west of Acton, south of Acton and around Hornby.

Some of the deposits of fossil fuels are still out there under a dozen or so wells that haven't been completely drained. There could be even more gas and oil deposits in Esquesing which were never discovered.

Unfortunately, for a now deceased Acton entrepreneur, Anthony Seynuck, and his investors or "partners", some of whom were local people, the dream of oil and gas riches never really materialized.

Over three decades of exploration and development resulted in a little oil and much more natural gas being found. A lot of the discovered gas was sold but it never really justified all the efforts and cash sunk into the dream.

On balance, the results were a lot of broken dreams for a goodly number of people.

However, with ever advancing technology and the price of fossil fuels poised to soar in this country, the day may again dawn when liquid gold fever will sweep North Halton like it did in the '50s. It might not be that far off in the future when existing wells will be uncapped and drained and more wells are sunk, although indications now are the wells will likely continue to sit there dotting the fields of Esquesing, untouched.

The history of gas and oil in North Halton isn't an easy one to trace. Most of the principles involved have died. Those still living aren't too interested in discussing the topic.

Checks through back issues of the Acton Free Press, Union Gas files and interviews with provincial officials and a University of Guelph geologist did reveal some of the story.

The tale begins in 1928 when Seynuck, a Roumanian immigrant who came to Acton in 1919, began exploring for oil in Esquesing.

By 1929, he'd announced he was selling his confectionery and light lunch business to devote his time to exploring for gas and oil. He found gas for the first time in January, 1929, following six months of drilling. He found natural gas for the first time at a depth of 2,050 feet, two miles west of Acton.

Seynuck kept exploring throughout the '30s and '40s, with limited success, first as Suburban Gas and Oil and later Seynuck Valley Oil Company.

By the mid-50s, when his luck started to change he was back talking about exploring for oil and gas as a hobby, but that didn't last long and soon he'd formed a new company.

In 1954 Seynuck made two big strikes. The first came in July when he found natural gas near Crewson's Corners and in October even more gas was discovered six miles south of Acton, near Speyside. Oil was later found in the same area.

It was an exciting time for people of the area. Crowds were out at both sites at night watching the blue flame from the wells.

Seynuck had brought the equipment up from McDonald's farm, east of Highway 25 near Speyside, to Crewson's Corners and spent \$12,000 drilling on the site north-west of Acton. That find came in at 2,100 feet down and speculation was rife that there was enough gas to "supply all of Ontario." At that time only large centres had gas mains and natural gas wasn't yet in use in North Halton. Later tests proved the find wasn't as big as expected, but some gas was recovered and sold.

Then came the big find in October. Seynuck struck gas in rock at 1,817 feet, and there were indications there was also oil in the area. Meter tests showed 64,000 cubic feet of natural gas in that well and Seynuck said he thought the rest of

the farm's deposits contained "the largest production potential in Ontario." A couple of Actonians, E. Sherk and D. Johnson were in charge of the site and reported at the time it had the "best pressure" they had seen in 15 years of drilling in the area.

February of the next year well number three in the Speyside area came in, with a flow of 100,000 cubic feet.

That was enough encouragement for Seynuck to form Anthony Gas and Oil Explorations (at other times it was called just Anthony Gas Explorations). Some of the officers of the firm, including secretary-treasurer James Ruddick, were from Acton and shares went on sale in April. There were a good number of local investors.

That May, when talk started about bringing natural gas service to Acton, Georgetown and Milton, Anthony Gas and Oil was among the firm's interested in obtaining the franchise for North Halton. Seynuck had four wells and was telling council and the Ontario Fuel Board that he'd need 4n to 60 to serve the area properly in the years ahead.

The fourth well was tested and deemed the biggest, containing 332,000 cubic feet of gas. That well was sunk on the Moore Sisters' farm, five miles south of Acton, and that gas was found at 2,000 feet.

By July of 1955, Seynuck had four wells in operation, a fifth pending and had started work on a sixth, located a mile-and-a-half east of Guelph on A. Koens' property.

Beginning in August of that year Seynuck found himself in a long struggle against Halton Natural Gas and United Suburban Gas to obtain the franchise for the three towns. In March, 1956, the decision was finally reached and United Gas won and Seynuck was something of a winner. United Suburban, forerunner of Union Gas, had to buy his gas or it wouldn't get the franchise.

At the start of the excitement over Seynuck's discoveries he had leased well rights over an area of 10,000 acres, 48 square miles, in an area bounded by Eden Mills on the west, the Fourth Line on the east, Speyside Road on the south and Erin Township boundary on the north.

From press accounts of the many hearings during the battle to bring natural gas service to

North Halton comes indications of the optimism of Seynuck and his associates for the future. He figured his firm could be ready to distribute its own gas from its own wells within a year of obtaining the franchise.

Councillors were worried about Anthony Gas ability to produce enough gas to serve the area but at the same time wanted local gas used. The two competing firms had arrangements in place to supply gas from larger companies, which could get gas from much larger wells in Ontario and from Alberta.

Officers of Anthony Gas showed councillors at one meeting a "comparison table" demonstrated the present volume from the four producing wells were capable of supplying more gas than the total consumed "by different Ontario municipalities now using natural gas."

"There's lots of gas in this area," Ruddick told the town fathers of the day. He told them there was enough "on tap now" to serve the likely needs of all of Acton, Georgetown and Milton for the first year of service.

The favored firms were willing to enter into agreements to buy Seynuck's gas but he refused to answer their letters and at one hearing vowed to never sell gas to Halton Natural Gas. At every opportunity he publicly objected to applications by other firms, stating his local gas should be used to supply homeowners first. Seynuck thought since his firm had gas it should also handle distribution. Ruddick repeatedly pointed out that until natural gas was found in the Acton area nobody seemed interested in supplying Acton, Georgetown and Milton.

In 1956 Hugh Wharton, an officer of Seynuck's firm, proclaimed confidently they could produce 800,000 cubic feet of natural gas daily. He noted natural gas was being used since the second gas strike to heat workers' shacks, for cooking and for heating water used in the drilling operations.

At a council meeting in January, 1956, Seynuck noted he'd spent 27 years looking until he found "the finest gas." Out of nine holes drilled he'd found gas in seven.

By March, 1956, Anthony Gas and Oil had leases on 60 square miles of Esquesing land and six wells were in production. Two more exploratory wells were being dug. There were other wells, not in production too.



TONY SEYNUCK is pictured inside a drilling shed in Esquesing in the mid-1950s with workers Warren Rippol and Lorne

McKillop. Seynuck made a number of natural gas finds in Esquesing and sold the fuel to Union Gas for many years.

Anthony Gas and Oil would concentrate on exploring and producing, Seynuck decided, since it wouldn't be distributing gas.

In May, 1956, what was described as "high grade" oil was found near well number eight, south of Acton. An oil expert, one D.R. Murphy said the oil find "could prove to be one of the richest finds in the country." That was obviously wrong. Only tracings were found. In February, 1957, Seynuck found more gas near Acton, describing his find as his "biggest" yet.

Seynuck kept exploring, moving a little further south and made major gas finds in the Hornby area in 1956 and 1960. One well, which came in in 1960, was on the Lloyd Marchmont farm south of Highway 401 and east of Hornby. Seynuck hit the gas at 1,700 feet and estimated the flow would be 250,000 cubic feet a day. Another Hornby area well was on land owned by former MPP Stan Hall.

One reason for all the optimism about oil and gas riches in North Halton was the fact the Trenton Limestone, or Ontario Arch, rock formation begins just north of Acton and extends southwest under Lake Erie, into Ohio and Indiana. By the mid-50s, 610 million barrels of oil had been pumped out of this formation in Ohio and prolific wells were in operation in Ontario along the shores of Lake Erie.

Anthony Gas and Oil began selling natural gas to United Suburban and later Union Gas in early 1956. Some of it undoubtedly heated homes in North Halton since in the summer of '56 gas went into service here.

According to Bob Lewis, Union Gas spokesman, they kept buying gas from the local firm until November, 1973, when Anthony Gas and Oil was sold to Anthex Industries of London. Seynuck died in 1967, prior to the sale of his company.

In January, 1974, the contract was cancelled. The pressure in the wells was gone and Anthex couldn't meet its supply quota of a minimum of 75,000 cubic feet a day. Anthex wasn't producing any more than 42,000 cubic feet a day. Lewis notes that isn't much gas since the average household uses 125,000 cubic feet of gas a year.

Anthex went into receivership several years ago. When its contract was cancelled by Union Gas they may not have been meeting their supply quotas not just because the well pressure was gone but because they didn't have the capital to invest in new equipment to bring up more gas.

There might be a lot of gas left in North Halton, maybe even some oil, too, Ron Bryant, head of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources' petroleum resources branch admits. But it will sit there until the industry finds it an economically viable project to drain existing wells and search for more.

Even though there's chance there could be more gas and Canada is suppose to have an energy crisis, the province has been plugging the long abandoned wells that were simply left to deteriorate by the previous owners.

After Anthex went into receivership the province took over ownership of the wells and invited landowners to buy them for a nominal fee. One farmer took the offer and uses the gas for heating his own farm buildings. The rest declined and now the province is in the process of having the wells plugged. Bryant notes some of the wells are still in good condition and haven't been emptied, so if anyone's interested. . . .

If a firm wanted to produce the gas deposits commercially Bryant thinks they'd have to first spend a considerable sum "stimulating" the existing wells and of course do a lot more exploratory drilling.

The present energy situation could make the Halton deposits important in the years ahead so the province is certainly not against more exploration, he said.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee, he says, that there is any commercially recoverable gas left in the area. While traces of oil were found it was mostly natural gas, so hopes of finding

higher priced oil are even simmer than discovering more gas.

Two or three oil and gas exploration and drilling firms have made enquiries about the leases, which are probably null and void now, Bryant says, but because of Anthex's receivership status have a cloud over them. These companies carried out some studies and then backed away, Bryant notes. "Ultimately" the wells will likely be plugged, a task costing anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000.

He noted many of the dozen or so wells out in Esquesing aren't drained and the province doesn't want to see them capped when there is still gas down there.

Bryant explained, to get the remaining gas out might cost \$100,000 to \$200,000 for a compressor and other equipment but a firm might recover just \$10,000 worth of gas.

North Halton's gas deposits are an expensive gamble.

"I'm not saying there isn't a lot more gas which could be recovered but you have to assume they (Anthex) looked for more gas, didn't find any and went broke doing it," Bryant observed. Since then, Bryant said, industry has looked at the wells and examined the chances of finding more gas and backed away, so that indicates they didn't think they could get enough to offset the huge costs.

The first successful commercial oil well was sunk in 1958 in Ontario near Petrolia, and since then oil and gas have been brought into production in a number of areas. As cheap oil came in from Alberta fields, many wells in Ontario were closed down.

Over the past few years wells in the Sarnia area and along the shores of Lake Erie have been uncapped and are producing again, with handsome financial results.

But there's a difference between the wells down by Lake Erie and the ones in North Halton, Bryant points out.

The difference is in rock formations and where the oil and gas are found.

In other areas on Ontario, where gas and oil are being pumped profitably and new discoveries are being made, there are several sedimentary levels where fossil fuels are found at just one level, 1,800 or 1,900 feet down. "Gas is found at a deeper level in other areas. Often at different levels. But there (North Halton) the different formations just aren't there. You just get one chance to find the gas, at just one level," Bryant explains.

University of Guelph geologist Ward Chesworth, also doesn't think there's enough gas left in the Acton area to make it commercially viable. He suspects most of the gas that's in the ground has been found already and there isn't much left in the wells.

Both the Acton and Hornby area fields are reservoirs of a "particularly geological structure called an anticline, a fold where the two sides slope away from each other," Chesworth explains.

In the anticlines around here "aporous limestone containing the mineral dolomite (calcium magnesium carbonate) is trapped between two types of impervious rock. Oil and gas migrate upwards through the porous limestone and collect in the apex of the fold, where the non-porous cap rock prevents them from going any higher. Only by drilling a well can they be extracted," Chesworth said.

So, while the higher prices for gas and oil and new technology is once again making Ontario, in a small way, a producing province, prospects aren't good for the wells in the Acton area. So far industry has determined there aren't sufficient reserves to justify the expense of putting them back in production.

Investors lost a lot of money in earlier years and nobody is coming forward to chance more losses on what looks to have been just a dream.