

Saga of John Dennison

Algonquin Park Settler

Story and photo by: Ross Beagan

Much is known of the exploits of Davey Crockett and other legendary American frontiersmen, but little is heard of their Canadian counterparts. No doubt they were legion, and it is equally certain that, except for our national tendency towards reticence, their experiences would equal or exceed in excitement those of their southern cousins.

Unlike today, the daily lives of the early pioneers of Ontario were epic life-and-death struggles against a wilderness which was harsh and unforgiving. The laws of nature were simple, strict, and justice was swift. Therefore the people had to be astute, disciplined, and tough.

Captain John Dennison, who battled a black bear in Algonquin Park at the age of 83 in a struggle they both lost, was just such a man. He was buried almost a century ago between two massive white birch trees which have maintained a century's vigil over a simple grave.

His story stirs the imagination! He was born in 1799, almost two centuries ago, in Penrith, England. He was likely either a graduate of a military college, or obtained the field rank of captain during the Lower Canada (Quebec) Rebellion in 1837, where he served Canada with distinction in a regiment called the Beach River volunteers.

He settled in Ottawa from 1854 to 1869 between the ages of 55 and 70, and when most men would consider retirement, started a new career. He trundled his wife, two sons and all his possessions via the Ottawa and Madawaska Rivers to the present village of Combermere near Bancroft, thence by canoe and foot to the interior of present day Algonquin Park which was to come into being about two decades later in 1893.

He must have been in superb physical condition to even attempt such a journey at the age of 70. He may have known, however, that a major colonization road called "The Opeongo Line" was planned to connect the Ottawa Valley with Byng Inlet on Georgian Bay, and that the location he chose was roughly the half-way point. He may have planned to build a "half-way house" or inn to accommodate the envisaged traffic.

The new colonization road never reached that far inland after it was discovered that the soil beneath the magnificent forest cover was, for the most part, unsuitable for farming. Captain John Dennison, however, persisted with his farm and succeeded in clearing several hundred acres, perhaps as high as six-hundred. It must have been productive, at least initially, because he did a brisk trade with timber companies supplying food for woodsmen and horses alike.

To supplement his income, he turned his hand to trapping. Characteristic of the times, his end came suddenly and violently in June of 1881 at the age of 82. He was checking a bear trap near the North Arm of Opeongo Lake about eight miles northwest of the farm. Some days before he had baited a bear trap with rotten meat and chained it securely to a fallen log weighing several tons. Accompanied by his eight-year-old grandson, the 83-year-old poked his head over the log to check the trap when he was caught in the grip of a wounded, trapped bear. Both succumbed in the combat.

The eight-year-old grandson paddled alone and furiously the eight miles home for help only to find his father had left on an overnight journey. Upon his return, the father located the grandfather and transported his body home by canoe.

They buried him in a beautiful spot behind the barn guarded by two equally sturdy and superb white birches. Today the grave is still marked by a cedar rail fence measuring six feet by eight feet. The only identification on the fence is an oval copper plaque inscribed, "AT REST."

Almost two centuries of Algonquin Park history are bound up in that last fragile memento to a soldier, settler, and frontiersman. The gravesite itself is almost impossible to locate in an area almost impenetrable to man, and hidden in a jungle of underbrush strangling the former clearings.

The two magnificent white birches, both close to record size, which mark the grave may not last the next few harsh Algonquin Park winters. Already a massive 47 inch diameter lower limb of one tree, extending more than fifty feet in length, lies on the forest floor, a victim of last winter's heavy snows. When last seen on September 26th, 1978, it still bore green leaves even in its broken state.

Only a handful of employees of the Ministry of Natural Resources could, with some difficulty, find the site. One of them is Nick Martin, a ministry fisheries research scientist at Maple, Ontario, who first worked in Algonquin Park as a biology student from University of Toronto in 1943, thirty-five years ago.

Nick Martin's chief ambition prior to his retirement is to have the site restored and preserved. Our southern cousins would certainly do this much as a fitting memorial to a fine specimen of a man!



Simple copper plaque replete with sundry irreverent etchings on fence enclosing the grave of Captain John Dennison on last arm of Opeongo Lake. (Courtesy, Ministry of Natural Resources.)