

Remember



THE ART GALLERY OF
COBOURG

JULY 24 - AUGUST 30

Cobourg in the nineteenth century was shaped by the citizens it attracted. Its evolution as a region of what was then Upper Canada, depended upon people of initiative, willing to take an active role, and to offer leadership. This exhibition considers those former citizens and the Cobourg they created.

Those who took leading roles in the promotion of Cobourg were typically part of an elite, who through their wealth and social status, commanded a great deal of power. They came from varying backgrounds. United Empire Loyalists made up a significant percentage, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. Retired fur traders also found Cobourg a desirable location. They were quickly followed by wealthy immigrants from the British Isles, who came to Canada to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity provided by the opening of a new land. The first of this group to arrive were the official class, appointed to government positions in the newly created province of Upper Canada. Beginning as a mere trickle, the colony was soon inundated with such immigrants, particularly after the Napoleonic Wars when officers were given lands in lieu of half their pensions. These "half-pay" officers were followed by successive waves of well-to-do British settlers. Often called "Empire Builders" they came in pursuit of large fortunes which would allow them to maintain the aristocratic lifestyle they had enjoyed in Britain. Once settled, they allied themselves through marriage and business with the wealthy Loyalists and fur traders.

The British soon formed the major segment of this group in Cobourg and throughout the province. Their attitudes and manners shaped the lifestyle of the "upper classes" forming at this time. Coming from distinguished families and raised in the British social structure, with backgrounds of wealth and public service, they recognized a society hierarchical in nature, which placed them near the top. This engendered within them a self-confidence and a tendency to view the rest of society in a paternalistic way. The "English Gentlemen" with his ambience of grace, ease and leisure epitomized the admired lifestyle.

Important for men particularly, was the military. The army and militia were a visible reminder of the greatness of the British Empire and a visible link which banded the colonies together. It also served to allay fears of invasion from the United States. Cobourg had a strong military tradition and it added much in the way of pageantry to the town.

The most visible and therefore most essential requirement for an English gentleman was a fine home. Houses were generally large, set in park-like grounds surrounded by high fences and furnished in an appropriate style. These English style "estates" offered a genteel backdrop for their day to day life of afternoon tea, croquet, lawn tennis and whist.

Early sporting amusements Cobourg gentlemen and their ladies enjoyed were, a hunt club, where full fox hunting regalia was the prescribed attire, and a turf club. A cricket club and a yacht club also existed. Garden parties with Clarendon Park and the

the shrubbery and along verandahs, were fashionable. More formal assemblies, balls and soirees, were held in hotels and later the Grand Ballroom of Victoria Hall.

Wealth was important in achieving the desired lifestyle. Commerce and industry, the professions, landed wealth and government appointments, "the plums of paronage", were profitable ventures. At a time of little government involvement, individuals were more apt to take the initiative for needed community improvements. In Cobourg, wealthy men grouped together to form companies releasing stock for sale, in order to build such necessities as roads, the harbour and various public buildings. Entered into as profit making ventures, they also benefited the community. These development schemes were often ambitious and if not successful, could have disastrous effects on the town's economy. The most significant building project initiated in Cobourg was the construction of the Cobourg to Peterborough Railway. Begun at the height of Cobourg's prosperity during the 1850's, the Railway's purpose was to tap the natural resources of the north, thus ensuring Cobourg's place in the economy of the province. The Railway failed due to mismanagement and poor construction. The enormous cost of building Victoria Hall, Cobourg's grand new civic edifice, in 1860, together with the collapse of the Railway caused a severe economic crisis, forcing the town to the brink of bankruptcy. While the town suffered terribly from this event and many lost substantial sums, most eventually recovered and were able to maintain their style of living. As the century closed the privileged class generally tended to invest in enterprises outside the town but still continued to reside in Cobourg.

The rise of the town as a fashionable summer resort during the latter part of the nineteenth century gave a large boost to both the town's economy and to individual fortunes. Until the onslaught of World War I, the lives of Cobourg's wealthy altered little. They continued to view themselves as English-Canadian gentlefolk.

World War I brought dramatic social and economic change across the country. The genteel traditions that characterized a way of life were swept away, as garden parties became cocktail parties, dusenburgs replaced phaetons, and servants left their situations for the higher monetary rewards and the independence of the factory system. Today the nineteenth century seems far removed from our modern age. It survives in faded photographs, in letters, artifacts and most visibly in the architecture left behind. In this exhibition such relics of the past illuminate the Cobourg these families knew. For us in the twentieth century, theirs can only be "A COBOURG REMEMBERED".

Robert D. Mikel

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