

The straight goods on Weir

I have been researching the history of William Gummow of Harwood for some time and would like to set the record straight.

Who was Weird Willie?

William Gummow, lately dubbed "Weird Willie" by some teenagers with over-active imaginations, was just an ordinary young man. He was born c. 1881 near Fenella. His father, William Gummow Sr. (1849-1926), a farm laborer, was born in England and married a local girl, Margaret Johnson (1850-1924), c. 1874. In the 1880s they moved to Harwood where William and his two older sisters, Elizabeth and Emma, attended public school. There is no question of William having been retarded, one false story that has been circulated, because all the Gummow children are listed in the 1891 Canada Census for Hamilton Township as being able to read and write although their father was illiterate. None of the family was recorded as being of unsound mind.

There was no obituary published for William Gummow Jr. and nothing mentioned by local newspaper correspondents concerning his death on March 10, 1901, or his burial in Bomanton Cemetery. Hamilton township records, however, show that he was a farmer and died of pneumonia after an illness lasting two weeks.

Interviews with several old-time Harwood and Bomanton residents have failed to turn up anyone who had ever heard tales of any untoward happenings concerning the Gummow family, although in small villages memories are long concerning local scandals. It was remembered that they lived in a modest house still in existence on the outskirts of Harwood. Although there was a Methodist church in Harwood from 1870 until 1911, Bomanton had the nearest Methodist cemetery.

Letter to the editor

Scots had built a small white frame house of worship, Bethesda North Presbyterian Church and established a cemetery near the Hamilton-Haldimand border. The building was replaced with brick in 1882 and still holds services.

Around 1857 some of the English and Canadian-born settlers of Methodist persuasion formed Classes that were attached to the Roseneath Wesleyan Methodist Church circuit and called the "Plains appointment." Meetings were held under a class leader with regular visits by an ordained preacher, but no Bomanton Methodist Church is mentioned in Roseneath church minutes until 1864. The church property was not purchased from Richard Knight, one of the trustees, until 1874 and was located near the post office and small store.

Nearby was the first blacksmith shop operated by Henry Greaves on what was to have been the site of the school, S.S. 17, severed off for the purpose in 1853. The school was built, however, in the ninth concession on land belonging to William Isaac and was never moved from that location. It had probably existed since the first days of settlement and would have also been used for the first church services.

The Bomanton Cemetery was located half a mile or so from the Methodist Church, on a half acre surrounded by 100 acres belonging to Christopher Smith. The earliest grave there, dated 1847, is that of four-year-old Robert Henry

Smith, son of Samuel and Debora, probably a relative. This burial indicates that the cemetery existed before either the Methodist or Presbyterian churches were established and must originally have been a family burial ground.

The graveyard is mentioned in the Haldimand Township book of bylaws by Edward Caddy, in his report, dated July 1853, of a road survey. In May, 1869, Christopher and Caroline Smith granted the half acre for \$1 to trustees Hiram Brisbin, George Vaughan and Richard Knight to be used as a public burying ground and it was at that time surrounded by a picket fence. In 1880 the trustees bought another acre from the Smiths. There are now more than 100 gravestones in Bomanton cemetery.

The sandy soil on the Bomanton Plains did not long support farming, however, especially when the farmers went heavily into growing barley crops for the breweries. Long lines of farm wagons loaded with barley were to be seen waiting at Cobourg harbor to be loaded on to boats headed for Rochester. But as the old timers say, the land was soon "barleyed out" and many people had to leave.

By 1910 the Methodist Church was closed and three years later demolished, the post office followed suit and only the public school survived into the 1950s supported by a few surviving farm families.

During the following two decades tobacco farming was attempted in the area but with

History of Bomanton

Bomanton (spelled without a "w"), was once a thriving hamlet in the eighth concession of Haldimand Township. It was officially named in 1857 when a post office was opened with the first postmaster being William Campbell.

Floreen Carter, author of *Ghost & Post Offices of Ontario* (1986), says that he lived on a farm belonging to a Mr. Bowman. According to Haldimand township records, William Campbell, a merchant of 26, was living at that time on one-half acre in lot 32, concession 8. Perhaps the record should have read lot 33, concession 8, for George Bowman, one of the first settlers in the area, had rented that 200-acre clergy reserve lot since 1845, although he and Alexander Bowman (also spelled Bowerman) hadn't received the patent for the lot until 1854. George Bowman and his wife, Harriett, sold the lot two years later for 500 pounds but George was only able to sign his name with an X, which likely accounts for the spelling of Bomanton, no doubt named for his family. It seems more probable that William Campbell rented Bowman's vacant house. There is one undated grave in Bomanton Cemetery inscribed simply "To The Memory of Pheobe, Harriet J. and Alexander Bowman."

From 1860 to 1884 the postmaster was Richard Knight, who lived in the centre of the hamlet on lot 30. Then Lewis E. Day took over the premises and post office, which was for many years referred to as the "Knight and Day house."

Bomanton area was settled in the 1840s by people from Aberdeenshire and sometimes called "The Scotch Settlement." One of the first of those settlers was William Isaac Jr. who bought land in 1845 from Sheriff J.W. Dunbar Moodie and his wife, Susanna (author of *Roughing It In The Bush*, 1852), although the Moodies never lived in Haldimand.

The thrifty Scotsmen established prosperous cattle and horse breeding farms on the Bomanton Plains. According to the 1861 Canada Census there were a few who lived in stone houses that had been built by their countryman, stonemason George Kennedy, but the other houses in the settlement were constructed of logs.

By 1856, being strict and devout Presbyterians, the

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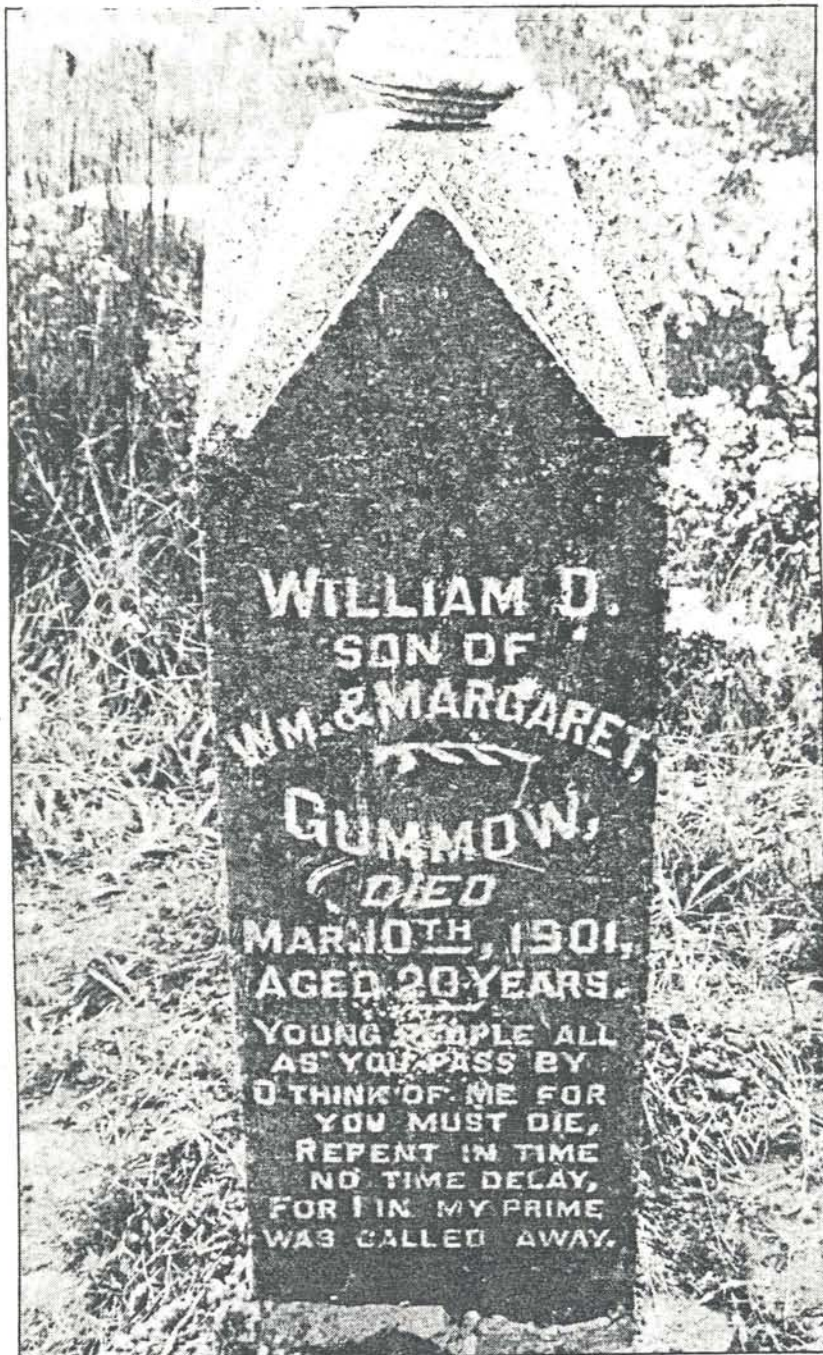
the success. Today re-
restoration has replaced
much of the badly eroded for-
mer farm land.

Bomanton Cemetery is still
existence on a deserted road
the reforested area and the
most recent burial was in
1986. More than 30 years ago
local teenagers began to party
here. At first car headlights
flashing off a tall tombstone
caught their eyes and it was
said that "Wee Willie" was
holding his lantern. This
tombstone was subsequently
pushed over and broken off its
base.

Then someone spied the in-
scription on William Gum-
mow's headstone apparently
never noticing a similar in-
scription on a much earlier
grave nearby. "Wee Willie"
men became "Weird Willie."
The fact that same inscription
has been found on gravestones
of young people in other ce-
meteries shows that there was
no particular significance to
this particular inscription
placed by William's bereaved
parents.

The teen parties at Bomant-
on degenerated into orgies of
vandalism with gravestones
broken when they were
pushed over with heavy
machinery, causing much grief
to those who had loved ones
and ancestors buried there.
The damage has continued
until now there is hardly one
undamaged gravestone left
and the vandals are even be-
ginning to disturb the graves
themselves.

Over the years the tall tales
have proliferated as each
group of young people sought
to frighten and cap the previ-
ous one with an even more
ruesome story about the hap-



The last resting place of William Gummow

less William Gummow. Exten-
sive research to date, however,
has failed to give any credence
whatsoever to any of these fa-
brications. It seems sad that
the reputation of an innocent
young man should have been

thoughtlessly sullied merely
for "fun" and that not even his
bones have been left to rest in
peace.

Catherine Milne
historical researcher for
Hamilton Township LACAC