

The Cobourg Daily Star

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# Second section

## Memories of my neighbor Mattie

By Norman Deer

Mattie Dunn, my nearest neighbor at the farm in west Haldimand township, was an elderly man who lived alone in a little house beside our road.

Naturally we were very interested in his way of life and social attitudes which were obviously much different from ours.

His home had originally housed his father, mother and a family of several brothers. His grandfather had been a squatter on land that later was included in my orchards. A pile of stones at the side of an old work road was all that remained of the original Dunn habitation.

The terraced hillsides around Mattie's crumbling shelter had been gardens for many years to provide vegetables for the Dunn household. Fruit trees were liberally planted and carefully tended providing greatly for a self-sustaining family. A small stable was used by a horse, needed to cultivate the garden patches and by a host of domestic fowl.

Money was always a scarce commodity but by exchanging labor for necessities an existence was eked out.

Mattie was a gentle soul with a great sense of quiet humor. He told me how he and one of his brothers drove their rig in to the Cobourg brewery

### Remembering when

and were given the wagon box filled with mash to be used as cattle fodder. They drove the load home and dumped it near the stable. The chickens, ducks and other fowl descended on it greedily. There was a wild scramble until each got its fill. In a short time peace prevailed. They were all sprawled around helplessly drunk. Chickens and ducks were laid low in incongruous disorder. The horse who had enjoyed a share was far from normal, wobbling around on apparently disjointed legs.

This was a case of reversed disorder because the Dunns had kept a busy still in Mr. Craig's swamp which helped to create havoc with the gangs of railroad workers who would drink anything when the opportunity was presented. Mr. Craig's barn was raised by laborers who turned up for the day when promised a pail of poteen from Mattie's still.

When we arrived on the scene the still had long ceased its operation. Mattie was receiving the old age pension and the gardening of vegetables had long been discontinued. Kindly neighbors willingly gave him whatever he needed from their bountiful

cannery crops. Apples were to be had for the picking from the many surviving trees in the area. His wants were simple and well provided for in his old age pension. When his monthly cheque arrived Mattie would don his one good suit and walk into Cobourg to savor for a day metropolitan pleasures. He would return by cab late in the day armed with a bottle of cheap wine and a sack of groceries, his worldly needs well supplied.

When Mattie discovered it was cheaper for the county to keep him at his home than in an institution for the aged he played his trump card. He refused to cut any more firewood, a job he hated. He won and from that day until his death years later his firewood was delivered to his door, carefully cut to size and neatly stacked.

Mattie had lived alone for many years. His observations and comments were a source of much wonder and amusement to our family who had never before met anyone like him:

"Doctors were for the rich folks in Cobourg. We never needed one because we believed in rhubarb. In the spring, when the first tender shoots came up, Mother cooked up a mess of them and we was all drenched. Couldn't keep our pants on for a week

but it sure kept us healthy. On a hot day I always put a leaf in my hat. It keeps the head cool.

"Our neighbors, the Sinclairs, never had a clock. They didn't need one. They just lived natural. When the sun came around to where it touched a hole in the kitchen floor Mrs. Sinclair knew it was time to put the potatoes on.

"When it gets cold I put a few sticks on the fire. Some days when the fire in the stove ain't enough I just put on another overcoat and go to bed. It ain't no use wasting firewood."

Before Mattie died he was given the last rites at Cobourg Hospital. I believed this frightened him by its finality. He had not attended church for many years and could be roughly termed as a careless Catholic. His body was prepared for burial by an old friend and neighbor, Mr. Blacklock, the local undertaker. Friends arranged for his burial at Grafton and a funeral service at the Catholic church. Due to Mattie's failure to observe many Catholic traditions, the priest decided that Mattie's remains should not be placed near the altar. Most of the pallbearers, being good neighbors and all closer to their time, hence more forgiving, turned a deaf ear to the priest's protests. Once again Mattie was the winner of one of life's battles.