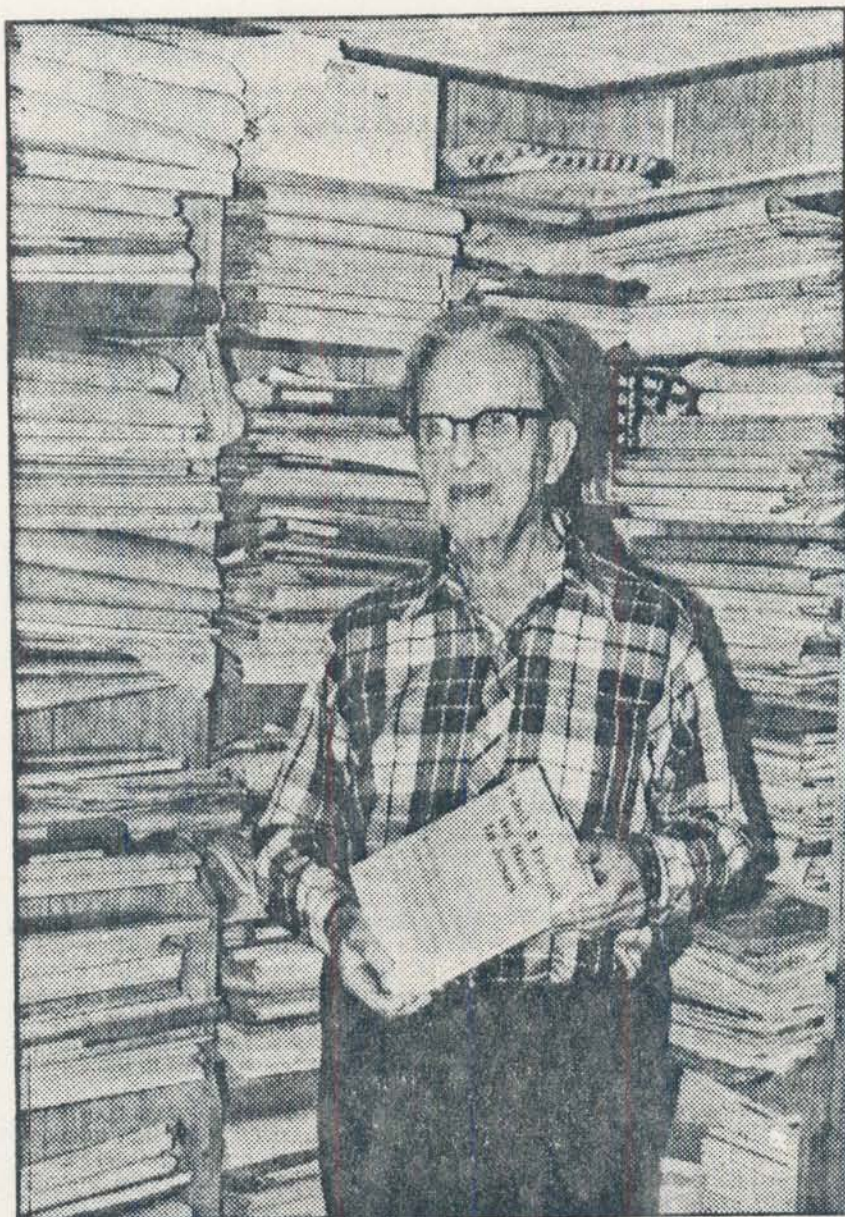


PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER

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The history of the famous hymn, What A Friend We Have in Jesus, is as involved and fascinating as any best-seller thriller, and it is traced by Cobourg author Foster Russell in a book about Joseph Scriven — the man who penned the famous verses.

THE DISTRICT

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Author wants stamp honoring area 'saint'

By MICHAEL BROWN
Examiner Staff Writer

COBOURG (Staff) — This is a story about a stamp, a scribe and a saint: the stamp hasn't been issued yet, the scribe lives today, and the saint is long since dead.

The stamp is still just a proposal being made by among others, the scribe, Foster Russell, to commemorate the saint, Joseph Scriven. Although just a lay preacher, tutor and humanitarian, Scriven was thought of by many as a saint, and is best known for his hymn, What A Friend We Have in Jesus.

Born in Ireland in 1819, Scriven came to Canada for the first time in 1846 following the death of his first fiancée in Ireland. Ill health forced him to return home shortly after he arrived here although he later returned. In the interim, he lived for a time in the Middle East and it was while in Damascus he wrote what could be called a first draft of the famous hymn.

What has all this to do with Cobourg, and a Canadian stamp you wonder.

Well, Scriven eventually wound up as a outor to a family on the shore of Rice Lake near here, where he revised the hymn and changed the title from Pray Without Ceasing. During his stay there, he became engaged, but again his fiancée died before the wedding could take place.

The second tragedy, the story says, did not make Scriven bitter, but rather led him to perform humanitarian deeds from day to day. Russell, who has written a book about Scriven, says he was known to walk down the streets of nearby Port Hope, asking passersby, "Are you saved?"

He was known to share his money and belongings with those in need, and died a pauper. But his most notable act, from today's perspective, was the writing the hymn, known worldwide and sung in many languages.

Scriven, however, didn't write the music to accompany his lyrics. Russell tells a remarkable story of how the music came to be composed.

It happened this way: Scriven gave a

copy of the hymn to a friend, who was the editor of the Port Hope Guide at the time. Although not asked to do so, the friend published the verses, and a copy of that newspaper was used to wrap a parcel bound for New York.

When it arrived there, a woman noticed the wrapper, kept it, and then submitted it to a New York newspaper, which printed it. The coincidences don't stop there, Russell says, because a travelling salesman noticed the verse in that paper and eventually showed it to a clerk at an organ factory — who promptly wrote the music. The man in the factory was Charles Converse.

Russell was born in Millbrook and between 1938 and 1969 edited and published the Coldwater News, the Cobourg Sentinel-Star (then a weekly), and was a correspondent for the Trentonian and the Examiner. He was sufficiently fascinated by the Scriven story to have published two years ago a documentary of Scriven's life bearing the

same name as the famous hymn.

Although writing another book now, his seventh which is an anthology of his editorials through 45 years of newspapering, he is also campaigning to have a stamp issued on the centennial of Scriven's death in 1886.

The idea originated with the Rev. Wilfred Moncrieff, minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Pembroke, after reading Russell's book.

In addition to contacting Russell, Rev. Moncrieff's group contacted Canada Post, which replied that the matter would be looked into by the Stamp Advisory Committee, which makes recommendations on stamp subjects.

Since then, the East Durham Historical Society (of Port Hope), of which Russell is a member, has agreed to support the proposal.

1986 is still three years away, but the stamp, the scribe and the saint may yet get together.