



Essay winners

Lawrence Jones, centre, a resident of Cobourg for the past four years, was the winner of the Cobourg and District Historical Society's first essay contest. Jones wrote about the life of William

Weller. Tied for second were Foster Russell and Percy Climo. Russell wrote about the life of Joseph Scriven while Climo's essay was about James Callcut Sr. The winning essay is reprinted below.

William Weller: The Stage-Coach King

By LAWRENCE F. JONES

north of the Front. For them, do it in time, and Weller took the public transport to a rural land

Form wins

Who is he?

That's what many of testants in the Cobourg District Historical Society's first essay contest are wondering today after the contest was won by Lawrence Jones.

Mr. Jones, now retired, was the news editor of the Star from 1941 through 1945.

He also worked as the editor and a reporter with the Ottawa Morning Journal.

Later, the man who lived in Cobourg for the past four years, worked as the director of information services at the University of Toronto.

He is now an editor and consultant with Pitt Point Company.

Jones chose Weller as the topic because "he was an interesting character. I wanted someone flamboyant, someone with more color, and I felt William Weller."

Jones, who is a frequent visitor to the Cobourg Historical Society, saw the contest rules the

Last night he joined the historical society for the first time and donated his \$25 to the library.

"I thought it might be fun to enter this thing."

He admits the last time he entered an essay contest was when he was 11-years old.

Tied for second in the

By LAWRENCE F. JONES

Of all those who, in the first half of the 19th century, built the foundation for the town that became the Cobourg of today, none was a colorful, as enterprising, as venturesome, as its first mayor: William Weller, entrepreneur, risk taker on a grand scale (for the times) and public-spirited citizen.

Weller, the son of a farmer, was born in Vermont in 1798. At the age of 22 he married Mercy Wilcox of Canton, in upstate New York, then studied law with the financial assistance of his bride's well-to-do parents. That completed, Weller and his wife followed the path being taken at the time by many Americans who saw in upper Canada opportunities for fame or fortune, or both. In the early 1820s Weller, with York which became Toronto in 1834, as his base of operations, tried his hand at the buying and selling of land. His speculations were successful and gave him the funds for the first of his acquisitions — a stage coach line. The purchase of other coach companies followed and, as well, a telegraph line that extended from Toronto to Montreal and Buffalo.

Weller's coach lines served the growing communities along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario—the Lakeshore often referred to as the Front—Montreal, Prescott, Kingston, Cobourg, Port Hope, Toronto, Hamilton, and places in between. He extended the service to the developing townships and villages, such as Peterborough,

north of the Front. For them, public transportation over land was essential; as social historian G.P. de T. Glazebrook said, contact with the Front "was essential: an isolated town can neither live nor thrive."

Thanks to Weller's enterprise, there was employment for many, skilled and unskilled, in the operation and maintenance of his business. As many as 400 were on the payroll when the Weller lines were at the peak of their prosperity. When the proprietor moved his headquarters from Toronto to Cobourg in the 1840s, Cobourg enjoyed new benefits. Coaches were built in a Weller shop at George and Orange Streets and were of such high quality that one woman traveller from England described them as "not unlike the Lord Mayor's state carriage", although perhaps a bit "showy." There was a repair shop on Swayne Street and nearby, east of the Globe Hotel (the site a century later of the Park cinema theatre) stood the ticket office.

William Weller was not only an executive—he could do what he expected his employees to do. He demonstrated this when Governor General C. Poulett Thompson (later Lord Sydenham), wanted to be taken from Toronto to Montreal in February 1849. That was not unusual—what was unusual was that His Excellency wanted to be in Montreal in 38 hours in order to reprieve a convicted felon from the gallows, and the journey normally took 4½ days. Weller said it would be done—if he drove himself. A friend wagered L1,000 that he could not

do it in time, and Weller took the bet. Thirty-five hours and 40 minutes from the time the Vice-Regal sleigh left Toronto it arrived in Montreal, the driver exhausted but happy. Happy, too, was His Excellency, who paid Weller L100 for his far and, as a bonus, an engraved gold watch. On his return to Upper Canada, Weller of course picked up the L1,000 wager.

By the beginning of the 1850s, there were signs of economic trouble for the stage coach king. Contracts his lines had for the carriage of mail were cancelled in 1853 and the loss of this business was added to the growing threat from the steady advance of the Grand Trunk Railway across Upper Canada. As one author put it, "no sooner was the whistle of the locomotive heard in the land than stage coaches became things of the past." If he could not beat the railways, Weller decided he might as well join them. Through the years he had acquired much property in Cobourg and this he mortgaged heavily to obtain funds for investment in a company, largely of Cobourg business and professional men, which planned a railway to connect Cobourg with Peterborough. The railway was built, with a bridge of uncertain stability to carry the tracks across Rice Lake. It was a glorious, exhilarating time. So carried away was Weller with the optimism and enthusiasm of the occasion that he declared, at the celebration of the inaugural trip on the line: "I am rejoiced to see old things passing away and conditions becoming weller."

But conditions did not become "weller". The railway failed and the stockholders lost their investments. His stage coach business dwindling to zero, much of his Cobourg land gone, Weller lost the vitality that always inspired him. Three years after the railway fiasco, he died after three weeks' illness, at the age of 65. He was, one historian reported, "a poor man."

But, rich or poor, William Weller was long remembered by the people of Cobourg. They elected him nine times to the Board of Police, Cobourg's first governing body, and, when the village became a town in 1850, their first mayor. He was a councillor for four years and mayor three times, including the year of his death, 1863.

Business was suspended for his funeral and the citizens of Cobourg genuinely mourned the loss of an outstanding figure.

The Cobourg Sentinel summed up well the public feeling: "...one of our oldest and most influential citizens, a thorough businessman (who) served this town...with honor to himself and credit to the town."

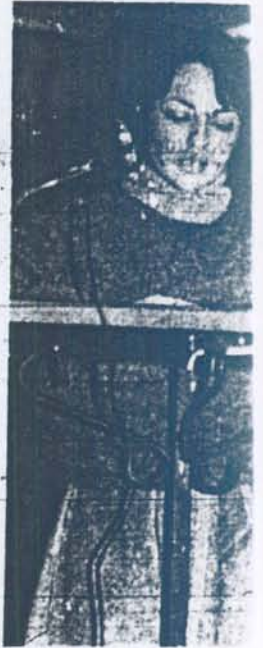
He admits the last entered an essay contest he was 11-years old.

Tied for second in the were Percy Climo and Russell.

Russell, a former publisher of the Cobourg Daily Star, wrote his essay about Scriven, the author of "What a Friend We Jesus."

Russell said that performed at the funeral of T. and is frequently everywhere in the free-pressed world.

Scriven's mission, said, was to perform a vice of love and charity.



Wins third

Miriam Mutton, the prize winner in the C and District Horse Society's recent essay test spoke about a legged personality, confidence, a high-jumping se, set the equine record for high jumping a leap of more than 7 the Cobourg horse since 1912. Mrs. J. L. Manitoba received honorable mention for essay.

Sources of Information

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- Toronto of Old (1873), abridged edition 1966 - Henry Scadding
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NOTE - Not all of the above provided information that was included in the essay as written, because of the limitation on length to 1,000 words maximum.

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