

OTTAWA VALLEY DAYS

Polish Exiles, Led by Priest, Founded Colony at Wilno

Written for The Journal by
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In settlers' wagons from Farrell's Point at the mouth of the Bonnechere they made a weary cavalcade as they jolted over the rutted bush road to the then village of Renfrew.

Thus the Polish exiles, some of them of aristocratic lineage, came to our Valley in a series of migrations during the early seventies and eighties. They had chosen this way to freedom, sailing out of Bremen on sluggish windjammers to escape from Bismarck's dream of world power built on bayonets.

Their country had been despoiled and divided in a series of partitions. But within the Danzig Corridor in Prussian Poland there spread a message of hope, and Canada became the magic word that quickened their thoughts to far horizons beyond the North Sea surges.

Again history is repeating itself with the remnants of a gallant Polish army who have sought sanctuary in this country.

(Some years ago we referred to the story of the early Polish settlements and now with additional information we are completing that chapter. The story of their pioneering achievement should inspire their new compatriots who have suffered so bitterly.)

Inspiration of Priest.

During a decade of migration hundreds of these Polish people came to South Renfrew, trekking inland to an untamed wilderness back on the Opeongo Line. From this colonization there developed a splendid citizenry that has enriched the stream of our national life and whose sons have fought gallantly for Canada in two desperate wars of survival.

A young Polish priest was the inspiring leader of this mass migration. Some of his courageous fellow countrymen are reported to have arrived on the Upper Ottawa prior to 1870, but it is generally recognized that the movement was given impetus and direction by the organizing genius of the late Rt. Rev. Bronas Jankowski, who founded the parish at Wilno in 1875 and named it St. Stanislaus Kostka after one of the legendary heroes who fought for Polish independence together with the great Kosciuszko.

This young priest was the son of a Polish count, and in common with many of his compatriots had come to Canada because of the rigid regimentation of life in his torn country. Seeing the boundless opportunities available in Canada he returned to Poland, disguised as a peasant, and became the evangel of the ~~liberty inherent in our pioneering~~ saga of the Ottawa.

Corner of Poland.

Soon the fruits of his work were apparent in the plans laid, often secretly, for family and group migrations. Father Jankowski returned to Wilno, named after the Polish city of Vilna, to help his wilderness flock as they arrived. He brought with him from Poland the Church vestments and vessels and these were for years venerated in the parish church at Wilno until many of them were destroyed in the fire some years ago.

Commanding a majestic panorama, the magnificent new church at Wilno (the parish is now called Our Lady of Czenstochow after a shrine in Poland) is a witness to the work of Rev. Father E. Wilowski, who is ably carrying on in the tradition of the great and revered Jankowski. Rev. Father Wilowski is noted for his championship of Polish rights. His parish is still a little "corner of Poland".

Many of the immigrant Poles after voyaging up the Ottawa, availed themselves of land in the Opeongo wilderness, but many others remained in the then village of Renfrew with its prospects of plenty of work in the period of the CPR railway boom. Hence it was that for many the long exodus ended at Renfrew.

The log cabins of the Polish pioneers were once familiar sights on what are now Queen, Bank and Bonnechere streets in Renfrew, Thompson Hill and out the "Pucker Street" where several settled on small holdings.

Tribute in Parliament.

The place was a straggling village then, and the end of steel was at Sand Point. The Poles arrived with nothing but their courage and a will to establish themselves in independence. How they succeeded was told in Parliament by the Hon. J. J. McCann, Minister of National Revenue, and member of Parliament for South Renfrew, who said of the descendants of these pioneers:

"Let me say that no county has a finer class of citizens than the Polish people of Renfrew county. They are honest, industrious, hard-working, good living and God-fearing people. They are men of the land and of the forest. They have been there for many

years; they have raised large families, have become prosperous and are splendid law-abiding citizens. The parish of Wilno in Renfrew county is called after Vilna in Poland and is the oldest Polish parish in Canada."

The Polish "exiles" preserved their national customs and traditions. (On festivals they still decorate their homes with evergreens and at burials in the country parishes the singing congregation in procession follows the corpse to the grave.) Many of the old timers of Renfrew remember their arrival, the women with their quaint shawls and the infants in swaddling clothes. The English-speaking villagers received them kindly, and many a young Polish mother came to Grandmother Wright (mother of the late A. A. Wright, former MP) for advice and guidance in a new land.

Dean of Colony.

Dean of the Polish colony in Renfrew used to be the late Frank Cybulski, but the mantle now has fallen on Michael Vice, who arrived in 1882. He came from the Danzig area and escaped the country just in time to avoid military service in the German army.

As stated, many of the Polish youths, detesting German militarism escaped it by taking ship to Canada. Among those who were pressed into the Prussian army was the late Philip Klamon who served in the Franco-Prussian war as a bugler to a German general.

Among the other pioneers of

the Polish colony in Renfrew are such well known family names as Sulpher, Kasoboski, Coulas, Zavitcki, Scholea, Lemenchick, Mackwood, Kubesheskie, Kurkowski, Kuash, Leterski, Libera, Kobus, Ritza, Yackabeck, Valski, Reckoski, Utronki. On Thompson Hill are the homesteads of Keiser, Sidock and Dregas (all

Galician Poles.)

In Barry's Bay there is an outstanding churchman in the person of Rev. P. B. Biernacki. Major league baseball lost a promising pitcher when this great athlete decided to go into the priesthood. Another prominent Polish Canadian citizen of the area is Reeve H. J. Chapeski.

notary of Barry's Bay; who also in the Barry's Bay-Wilno-Round Lake section are many first citizens of Polish descent. Two of their priests are Rev. Father Coulas and Rev. Father Malik and among them are to be found such family names as Mas Prince, Schulst, Shalla, Peplinski, Yantha, Stoppa, Zilne

Yackabulski, and many others both in Renfrew and the western end of the county.

In all, there are approximately 6,000 people of Polish descent in South Renfrew and each of them cherishes proud traditions of a generation that had the courage and foresight to find a new land of promise.