

by Barbara Irvine

Thousands of urbanites visit the upper Bruce Peninsula each year to enjoy its beautiful scenery, clean water and sweet-smelling air. One of the best of its rural attractions is often overlooked, however, and that is the local people themselves. Many of them are grandchildren of the pioneers who settled here shortly after the land was first opened up for sale in 1856. It is reasonable to suppose that their descendants today must reflect something of their ancestors' ideas about getting along in this world. By listening to the stories they tell of the early days of roughing it in the Bruce, one can easily discover their survival secrets, and the kind of society the pioneers developed in this area. This essay will attempt to reveal, through interviews with two elderly, lifelong residents, how their families were able to succeed in making a good life for themselves on this isolated peninsula.

The Bruce is surrounded by water on three sides. Once the bottom of an inland coral sea, its eastern edge, the Niagara Escarpment, was pushed up by a 3 km. thick glacier which left drumlins, eskers, erratics, and billions of small stones in its wake when it retreated. Small pockets of fertile soil are scattered here and there on the stony limestone surface. These pockets could be farmed after the settler removed the trees, the stones and the boulders. "If you have nothing to do, go pick stones," is a Bruce expression. The low-lying farms on the flats in the centre are always wet and need drainage ditches to clear them for pasturage. From December to the end of February, terrifying winter storms rage across the land, making it impossible to move outside the house. "Streamers" of wind-driven snow, twenty miles wide, will often suddenly appear, moving in from Lake Huron. They make the air as thick and white as a glass of milk. Yet the local people like the winter and believe it is "healthy". The poor land and the hard winters were accepted by the settlers as a challenge, and besides, that was how things were.

Driving past fields with huge piles of rocks in the centre, looking at the abandoned farmhouses, and walking through meadows covered with wildflowers, and the scrubby growth that

has replaced a farmer's ploughed acreage, in 1987 one becomes sensitive to how hard the work must have been, and how close many of the pioneers must have existed to a bare survival level. In 1900, over 4,700 people lived in the upper Bruce Peninsula, twice the number of permanent residents living here today. Minnie Hepburn, whose grandparents came to Purple Valley, is an outstanding woman who has made the Bruce a better place because of her life in it. I have transcribed part of her story as follows:

This is the story of some of the happenings in the life of Minnie Hepburn who was born the 5th of January, 1903, in a little log house on the farm where the parents had lived all their married life. My father was Henry Pruder who was born in Germany and came to Canada May 3rd, 1868 with his parents. They settled in Bentick Township near Chesley. My mother was Margaret Elizabeth Charbonneau. She was born near Lonsborough, near Wingham, on September 16, 1868. My parents were married around 1888 and went to a farm on Con. 14, Albemarle Township, on the border of the Indian Lands, to take up farming. The only building on the farm was a small, rough house, a settler's cabin on the only clearing near the road.

My parents added a garden and a place for the animals. I will describe that house.

The house was made of logs, hewed by hand and put together with a plaster substance. The cabin had one large room on the main floor that was used as a living room and kitchen and a smaller room that served as my parents' bedroom. The upstairs was one large room that was curtained off with bleached flour bags that separated it into rooms for our family of ten children, seven girls and three boys. A ladder was used to get up to the upper floor. The inside walls were always whitewashed, and the floors were bare wide boards that had to be scrubbed. The house was heated by wood stove, and coal oil lamps were used for the light. We did our laundry in wooden tubs with a metal washboard. Water was heated on the stove in a boiler, and badly soiled clothes were always boiled to removed stains. Water was pumped by hand with a wooden pump outside.

Our furniture was made mostly by hand; wooden beds with slats and hand-sewn flour bags. They made the mattresses which we filled with straw. They never were very soft, but we used them for many years. We did a lot of sewing; clothes, straw ticks to sleep on, remodelling hand-me-downs. We went barefoot most of the time. In the summer, we even went to school barefoot, walking the 2½ miles to Purple Valley. We did not have flower gardens, had no thought of them because we had too many other things to do.

A large hole was dug under the house, and milk and butter, potatoes and vegetables, as well as canned fruit and pickles were stored there in the winter. In the fall, a large hole was dug outside. Clean straw was put in the bottom of the hole and potatoes and apples and vegetables were stored there with more straw on the top. Earth was piled up on it to keep out the frost. In the spring, this hole was opened up and we shared the crisp vegetables with out neighbours. We had a real treat. We never went hungry, even with ten children. Wild plums and berries could be picked and canned. We had venison, chicken, fish and eggs.

We liked to pick wild berries, strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, to put away for the winter. We also sold them for spending money. Our favourite spot was down under the cliffs. The Bruce Trail now runs along the top there. Short ladders made of wood were wedged into the rocks, and other steps were chipped out to help us make our way to the bottom where there were always good berries. We carried our pickings back up the ladders in pails. There also was a wide slide made of heavy boards built to carry the logs from the top right down to the lake. From there they were taken to the sawmills. There is no evidence of this device left. It is just a memory. (Giant decaying stumps of the white pine trees logged out, remain, however, to suggest past glories of the forest cover as well as man's rapaciousness.)

We had no books in our house. Nobody did much reading, just the school books and the Bible. There was no such thing as a library in those days. We never travelled anywhere.

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