

FEDERATED WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF ONTARIO
BACKGROUND HISTORY OF THE LEE FAMILY AND HOME

The Erland Lee Homestead "Edgemont" stands on the escarpment overlooking Stoney Creek and the blue Lake Ontario beyond.

Miss Marjorie Lee, daughter of Erland Lee, tells us that the first of her relatives to arrive here came in 1792. According to records, majestic evergreens and hemlocks and towering maple trees rooted in lush undergrowth, crowned the mountain. The lower area was covered with dense growth of tall rank Indian grass, that was as sharp as a razor, hard to get rid of and a hindrance to cultivation. It was relieved only by tall water elms, all close, low and impenetrable, a safe and protected shelter for wolves that terrorized the settlers and killed their livestock. Revenge came from these predators, however, when the settler stretched their hides over his windows for panes or pushed them full of holes to use for sifting his wheat after he had ground it by hand in a hollowed-out buttonwood log.

The area between the mountain and the bay was cut by deep ravines and dotted with patches of swamp. Here lived the quail, the rattlesnakes, and the frogs. The beach has been romantically described as "crescent shaped, lying like a huge sickle sharply dividing lake and bay, and the bay resting like a pearl in the shadow of the hills, in its beauty like the Bay of Naples". This is what James Lee and his wife would glimpse at as they struggled along an Indian trail, overhung on both sides by tall trees. Often the foreboding silence would be pierced by the cry of the wolverine and lynx, not always four-legged ones!

Doubtless their thoughts drifted back to the charred remains of the home they had left behind them in Pennsylvania, and to their friends there. Their minds would be filled with fears and the uncertainty of the future. But James Lee was a determined man of British soldier lineage and a firm and outspoken United Empire Loyalist, who, to quote an historian, "for pure love of his native Britain, wanted nothing of the American republicanism and no greater independence than that furnished by the protection of the British Crown." We can imagine him striding forward determined to carve out a new home and life for himself and his family.

He was given a Crown Grant of 200 acres by King George III, at the top of the escarpment on the Ridge road. He would have built a log cabin with clay floors and a fireplace, chinked it with moss and "fog" (the boys called it frog spittle) and proceeded to prepare a patch of land to plant oats, wheat and a garden. Mrs Lee added the homey touch by planting the lily, myrtle, Sweet Mary and Snowball bush, they brought with them. (the myrtle and Snowball bush are still there). The beautiful virgin pine at hand provided material for furniture and the wooden pegs to hold it. Until their fields produced, they would have to live on herbs and wild flesh, ground nuts and fish. Tea was scarce, so they, like other settlers, probably boiled leaves of the allewart.

The water was poor in this location, so that was no doubt the reason that James' son, John, when he married, chose to build his cabin on Lot 17, Concession 4, in Saltfleet Township, the land where the "Home" stands to-day and where there was a lovely spring at the root of a large maple tree, which supplied water for household use, for watering cattle and for keeping milk cool. Here in 1801, after receiving his Crown deed, John and his wife Mary built a log cabin, and later the nucleus of the present house.

Life was still difficult in the early 1800's. Wheat still had to be ground by hand and taken 45 miles over the Mohawk trail to Niagara to be ground into flour, though between 1800-1850, nine mills were erected in the Stoney Creek area.

Education was provided by dedicated men from eastern U.S. who would get a room for three months and hold school. Books were scarce, pens were of quill, and ink, the juice of strawberry.

The spiritual needs were provided by a "Circuit Rider" who preached his sermons "straight from the shoulder" to the homespun-clad settlers, who may have walked 20 to 30 miles to hear this.

John Lee, like most of the other loyal settlers, fought in the War of 1812. He helped carry General Brock off the battle field and was a pallbearer at his funeral/

The area grew rapidly from about 1820 on. By 1815, there were 35 log houses and about 22 frame houses, and a school. Trade was encouraged by the building of the Burlington Bay and Desjardin Canals and by 1840, this was the centre of the mercantile business. By 1857 there was a grain storehouse at the lake and the area soon became the head of navigation on Lake Ont.

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