

# The Hungry Year

By Marcus Van Steen

*"The sun and moon, alternate, rose and set  
Red, dry and fiery in a rainless sky;  
And month succeeded month of parching drought  
That ushered in the gaunt and hungry year—"*

THUS wrote William Kirby in a long narrative poem describing a catastrophe which haunted the early settlers of Ontario with memories of famine and death for half a century. The Hungry Year started with the dry, hot summer of 1787 which left the scattered settlers with little food to carry them through the winter and even less in the way of seed for the next year. It continued through 1788 when such crops as had been put in were burned in the ground and the parched forests broke into flames, driving away game and destroying berries, nuts, herbs and roots to which the hungry colonists might have had recourse. And it lasted until the end of the summer of 1789 when rain brought relief at about the same time as food shipments reached Upper Canada from the government in Quebec City.

The start of the Hungry Year in 1787 found between three thousand and four thousand settlers west of Kingston, most of them in isolated communities strung along the north shore of Lake Ontario and in the Niagara Peninsula. Nearly all of them were Loyalists who had fled from the United States during and after the Revolution. The British government supplied each settler with tools, essential clothing and seed to put in crops of spring wheat, peas, corn and potatoes. It also agreed to provide such basic foodstuffs as salt pork and flour for three years, by which time it was assumed the settlers would, generally, be self-supporting. But the three-year period ended in 1787 and the food rations stopped coming up the St. Lawrence just when the drought was destroying all hopes the settlers had of feeding themselves.

### Soldiers Shared Rations

Unfortunately in those days there was no way by which anyone could pick up a telephone and call the governor in Quebec City to say "Look here, we're all starving up here." The officers commanding the forts at Kingston and Niagara sent reports to Lord Dorchester, but by the time the letters reached the governor the winter had set in and there was no way to send fresh supplies to Upper Canada, even if there had been any. There seldom was any surplus of foodstuffs in Quebec.

The following spring Dorchester bought flour, meat, potatoes and other provisions in the United States and arranged for it to reach Upper Canada by way of Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence. But so slow was transportation in those days that none of this life-saving food reached Upper Canada until the late summer of 1789.

Meanwhile the soldiers at Kingston and Fort Niagara reduced their daily rations to one biscuit a day in order to distribute whatever they had to the settlers who clamored at the gates for the soldiers' rations of hard biscuit and fat, salt pork. The soldiers normally supplemented this diet by hunting

and fishing, but in the Hungry Year the game had been driven far away by drought and forest fires, and the fish, too, had disappeared from the rivers and lakes which had become shallow, with a thick green scum on their surface. Even the great flocks of migrating carrier pigeons that normally darkened the skies over Niagara in May and September failed to appear during the Hungry Year. Possibly the pall of smoke that hung over the burning forests forced the birds to find another route for their migration. Only a handful were killed that year, compared to the thousands that had been slaughtered in previous years and salted down to serve as a tasty supplement to the monotonous winter diet.

### Death and Sorrow

Many a family that had managed to herd a cow through the untracked wilderness from a tidy farm in the rebel colonies to a new home in Upper Canada, found that the animal was unable to get enough food in the parched woods, was failing to give milk, and had at last, reluctantly, to be slaughtered for the small amount of meat still to be found on its bones. Even the bones were hoarded. There is a story of settlers in the Picton area passing a bone from cabin to cabin to boil it over and over again, to extract the last remaining hint of flavor and nourishment.

Others killed their faithful dogs and pet cats. One cat in the Bay of Quinte region saved its own life by regularly bringing in from the woods rats and mice and even the occasional rabbit.

There is no way of knowing how many died as a result of the Hungry Year. There were no official records among the settlers at that time. Each family buried its own dead and kept the toll in their sorrowing hearts. There is no doubt that many died from starvation. Henry Ruttan, one of the first Loyalist settlers near Adolphustown in Prince Edward County, tells in his autobiography of finding "five people dead in one cabin, including one poor woman with a live infant at her breast."

There are stories of people dying as a result of eating, in their desperation, poisonous roots and berries. And there is no doubt that many children were carried off the following winter by colds that would not have proved fatal had the victims not been weakened by malnutrition.

The rains of 1789 returned conditions to normal, and with the arrival of supplies of seeds along with the government provisions, the famine started to pass into memory. Within a few years all signs of the Hungry Year had been so completely erased that when Mrs. Simcoe, the wife of the first Lieutenant Governor, was told in 1792 about the famine a mere four years before she expressed wonder that a country with so much fruit and herbs and fish and game could let people starve. Only those who had passed through it could tell what happened when . . .

*"The water vanished; and a brazen sky  
Glowed hot and sullen through the pall of smoke  
That rose from burning forests, far and near . . ."*