

Where Manifest Destiny faced Upper Canada's Billy Green

By JAMES ELLIOTT
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Stoney Creek Cemetery is an oasis, seen from the dizzying top of the battlefield monument. It's a verdant copse that stands in the rolling foothills snuggled under the lee of the escarpment, a counterpoint to the surrounding arteries and subdivisions, used car lots, fast-food outlets, a foreground to slab-sided highrises and steaming stacks, a link to the earliest days of European settlement.

The altitude diminishes the din of air brakes and infernal combustion. And as the sun climbs out of Grimsby, it casts the monument in shadow, a stone finger that points directly at the oldest continuously used cemetery in the region.

OUR HISTORY IN STONE

Part five of seven

Starting at the top of the monument is a fitting way to survey the early history of a community that was well established long before Hamilton.

And in the end, all time lines lead back to a late spring morning in 1813 when *Manifest Destiny* squared off against *Peace, Order and Good Government* on the Gage farm for the Niagara Peninsula bragging rights.

The result was likely a draw, which in our case was as good as a win because the Yanks turned tail and abandoned plans to storm Burlington Heights. On such actions, history pivots and maybe, just maybe, the reverse at Stoney Creek halted a campaign that would have made republicans of us all.

It happened here.

In the aftermath of the Battle of Stoney Creek — early documents suggest — the dead of both sides were gathered and dumped in common pits.

The one certain location is Smith's Knoll — now a municipal parkette off King Street. It is probable that there were others, such as the Methodist churchyard where American pickets were first surprised and overwhelmed by British troops.

The chapel — the first in the area — had already been there more than 20 years and it's not a huge stretch to imagine space being found in the adjoining graveyard for a few lads from Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Ironically, the oldest church and cemetery in the area were, strictly speaking, only tenants on privately-owned land. Befitting the Family Compact's control of Upper Canada, no church except the Anglican was permitted to own land until 1828 when legislation deemed the Calvinists and Tunkers and Quakers and Presbyterians and all the others responsible enough to hold property. In the case of the Stoney Creek Cemetery, the nominal owner was James Gage on whose family farm the battle was fought on.

Today, of course, nothing remains of the cemetery's 18th century origins since early tombstones tended to be wood. But there are still ample reminders of the battle to be found.

Undoubtedly, the most historically significant monument in Stoney Creek Cemetery is to a man who isn't there. Billy Green, the intrepid local scout who may have led the British Army back to Stoney Creek in the middle of that fateful night, figures prominently on a large cut stone marker near the entrance.

The inscription notes his brave deed along with birth and death dates but, alas, Stoney Creek's celebrated first son is not here. Green, who died in 1877, is almost certainly buried with his parents on the Mountain brow in an unmarked plot formerly part of the family farm.

Isaac Corman, who married Billy's sister and is supposed to have obtained the crucial password from the Americans, is buried in the cemetery.

Green and Corman are reminders of the Loyalist origins of Stoney Creek, founded by refugees of the American Revolution who trekked here from the former Crown colonies of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York. The names of these landless exiles — Land, Lottridge, Bedell, Gage, Nash and Lee — are sprinkled throughout the cemetery like seeds in the forest.

And speaking of seeds, there are more Lees in Stoney Creek cemetery than any other single name. Almost all are descendants of James Lee, a British soldier who took a Crown land grant in Saltfleet after the Revolution.

His great grandson, dairy farmer Erland Lee, made history of his own a century later when, together with his wife, Janet, they became founding pillars of a world-wide organization dedicated to women's education and empowerment.

Taking their cue, and vision, from educational reformer Adelaide Hoodless, the Lees helped establish the Women's Institute (WI), an early feminist movement that predated the suffragette movement.

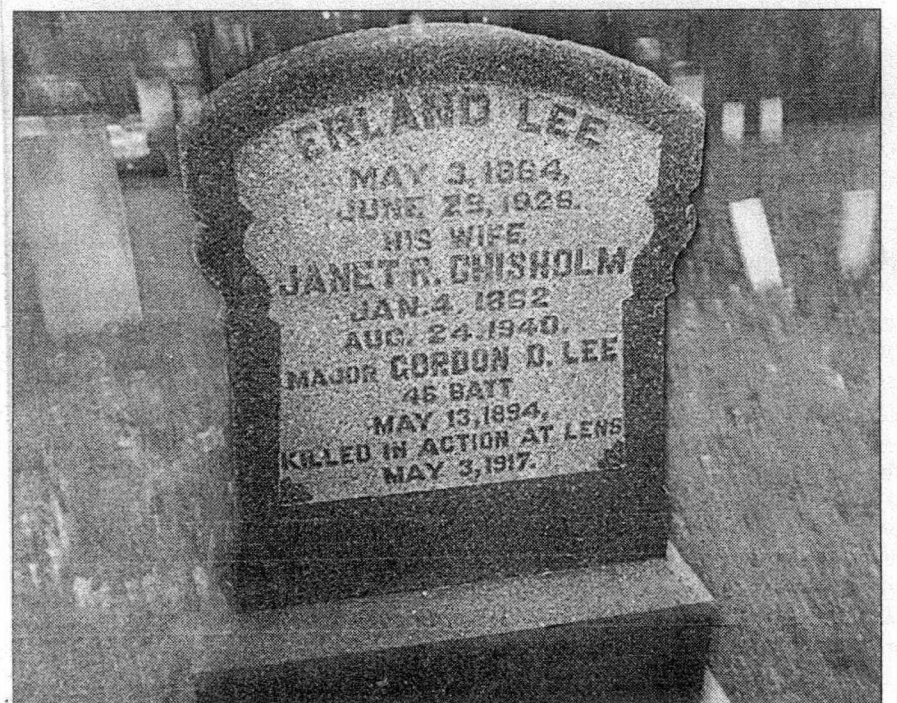
In the kitchen of the Lee farmhouse — now the Erland Lee Museum — they laid the groundwork for a rural women's organization that promoted what was, for the time, a radical notion, improved education for women.

On a February night in 1897, 100 women and one man — Lee — crowded into the Squire's Hall in Stoney Creek and founded the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township. Janet Lee was named a director and Erland helped draft the original constitution and bylaws.

Once it was established, Erland Lee stepped away, but Janet remained active for the next 40 years. WI chapters spread all over Canada and within 20 years had gone international. By the mid-1950s, there were more than 10 million members worldwide.

The most prominent place among the old marble slabs — where the black squirrels shred walnuts and the doves feed — has been staked out for the jam man, E.D. Smith.

Ernest D'Israeli Smith, also Loyalist descended, was a pioneer fruit grower and processor in the Niagara Peninsula. Originally, he had intended to become an engineer. But failing eyesight forced him back to the family wheat farm where he discovered the local climate was much better suited to growing tender fruit. Beginning with raspberries and black currants, he diversi-



Headstone of Erland Lee who helped his wife Janet found the Women's Institute.

fied into grapes, cherries and no fewer than 13 varieties of apples. His fresh fruit from Winona was shipped all over Canada, as were trees from his nursery stock which formed the beginning of the famed Annapolis Valley orchards in Nova Scotia.

In 1904, when overproduction resulted in a glut of Ontario fruit, he opened the first jam factory in Canada and quickly branched out into grape juice, chili sauce, catsup, tomato paste and pie fillings.

The same year, he was elected to Parliament for the first of two terms. Later, there was a Senate appointment.

In Winona, he built the baronial, 14-room Helderleigh where he continued to play family patriarch up to his death in 1948. Two years earlier, he made history of sorts when he resigned his Senate seat, becoming the first Canadian senator to not die in office.

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