

EARLY SETTLEMENT OF MCLEAN AND RIDOUT TOWNSHIPS

One hundred years ago Muskoka was a dense forest of pine, hemlock, cedar, etc. Indians roamed this area. Trading posts had been established on the Muskoka Lakes and on Bigwin Island on the Lake of Bays. The name "Muskoka" is supposed to be called after their chief "Musquaukie". Quite a number of Indians were living on Bigwin Island when the first settlers arrived on Lake of Bays in McLean and Ridout Townships. On Bigwin Island was found an Indian burying ground and other Indian relics.

At one time the Government of Ontario was proposing to turn the Muskoka and Parry Sound Districts into an Indian Reservation but we are told that Mr. A.P. Cockburn, a merchant of Lindsay and later member of Parliament for Muskoka, gave the Government such a glowing account of the beauty of this area of lakes and rivers that they decided to open it up for settlement.

In 1868 the Homestead Act was passed offering free grant land of one hundred acres to settlers. A colonization road was to be built into this area but it was a long time being built. At that time the only way into this territory was by water from Belle Ewart on Lake Simcoe, through Orillia to Washago.

The Free Grant of land was greatly advertised, placards and posters, pictures too were spread throughout the cities of Great Britain and Ireland and created quite a stir. Those who had never owned land, rich and poor alike resolved to emigrate to Muskoka.

The Colonization road was commenced and was being built from Washago to Severn and settlers began to arrive in Morrison Township in 1865. The road was then continued on th McCabe's Bay (later Gravenhurst) and from there settlers paddled up the Muskoka Lakes locating on Muskoka Lakes, Rosseau and Lake Joseph. Settlers arrived at South Falls on the Muskoka River and at North Falls, later Bracebridge even before the road was built to Muskoka Muskoka Falls. Mr. A.P. Cockburn had a steamer on the lakes and settlers arrived from Gravenhurst to Bracebridge by water in 1868 and 1869.

Such were the conditions when Mark Langford and his party arrived in Bracebridge to make locations in McLean Township in September, 1870. McLean and Ridout Townships had been surveyed but were opened for location at the Crown Land office in Bracebridge. Some locations had been made but there was no road. Relatives of the Langfords and Haws were living in Bracebridge, then just a small village, while homes were being built on their locations in Macauley Township.