

EARLY HISTORY OF BRACEBRIDGE AND SURROUNDING AREA

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, Muskoka might well be considered a "No Man's Land", abounding in game and fur bearing animals, the hunting ground of the roving Indian, a land of innumerable lakes and dense forests, a land of wild and natural beauty awaiting the coming of the white man.

One Historian "Hamilton" in his history of early life in Muskoka, claims that Muskoka takes its name from the, then great chief of the Rama Indians, Mesqua Ukee, who fought side by side with the British, and was awarded the silver medal with the image of King George, after the war of 1812.

Mesqua Ukee's territory was at first the South Branch of the Muskoka River. There is evidence that the Indian Village of considerable size, existed in the vicinity of the corner of the four townships of Draper, Macaulay, Oakley, and McLean. This village belonged to the Mohawk Tribe, but long before the nineteenth century, this tribe was driven away and the village destroyed. Mesqua Ukee's territory extended to the Lake of Bays, or Trading Lake, as it was then known.

Bigwin Island in the Lake of Bays was for many years occupied by Indians as a council area and Trading Post. Here the various chiefs of friendly tribes met in conclave. This village must have existed for a long time, as an old cemetery was discovered with at least thirty graves.

Ultimately Mesqua Ukee's authority was recognized over the whole of Muskoka, and the district was named after the great warrior who held sway until Muskoka was opened for location.

In 1859 a location office was opened at Severn Bridge with R.J. Oliver in charge, and the same year the Government built a road from Washago to South Falls. In 1861, the townships of Morrison, Muskoka, Draper, and Macaulay were offered for location, but the rush for Muskoka lands did not begin until the enactment of the Free Land's Grants and Homesteads of 1868. In 1861 there were but three squatters, John Beal, David Leath, and James Cooper at North Falls. To James Cooper was born the first white child at North Falls, (now Bracebridge). In the same year the Location Officer, Mr. R.J. Oliver, crossed the North Branch of the Muskoka River, for the first time on a felled pine tree, which at that time was the only bridge.

A village site was located and surveyed at South Falls, now known as Muskoka Falls, which at that time was considered the logical spot for a town, but navigation proved the determining factor in the locations of Muskoka's villages and towns and when the first steamboat whistle was heard at North Falls in 1866, South Falls dream of greatness faded away. Natives of England claim, that literally Bracebridge means "Fording the River".

In 1866 navigation was opened by the Wenonah making her first trip to North Falls.

Mr. A.P. Cockburn, merchant and reeve of Eldon and Victoria Counties, was interested in this venture, and became the founder of the most magnificent fleet of vessels plying the minor inland waters of Canada and thereby becoming the founder of the now famous Muskoka Tourist Trade.

In the early stages of navigation, a trip from Toronto to Huntsville would be made as follows: by train to Belle Ewart, by boat over Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching, to Washago by stage, to McCabe's Bay, (now Gravenhurst), by steamer to North Falls, by stage to Port Sydney, and by steamer over Mary Lake, Fairy Lake, and Muskoka River to Huntsville. It is estimated that this trip required at least three days.

Incidentally, this seems incredible, as while writing this in 1969, we are watching the Television report on Apollo 10, making history soaring through the air at hundreds of miles per hour.

In 1877 the Beardmore Bros. of Toronto erected a Tannery at Bracebridge, which they were encouraged to do by the village which gave them a bonus of two thousand dollars exemption from Taxation, from Bracebridge and Monck Townships, for a period of ten years. Although the Company was pledged to employ at least twelve men, the number ultimately reached one hundred or more.

Many important affairs also happened in 1877. Division Courts were established in Port Carling, Huntsville, and

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