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PHOTO BY TED AMSDEN

Every year George Potter along with his wife, Alice, left, and Mary Hermiston on piano entertain students, local dignitaries and members of the media with snappy tunes. More information on the Warkworth Maple Syrup Festival appeared inside the *Port Hope Evening Guide*, Friday, Feb. 10.

Historical Sketch

Russ' Creek Pioneer Tallgrass Prairie Cemetery

Once neglected but still a valuable source of history are the old cemeteries of Northumberland County. Fading memories have very often indicated a recollection of a graveyard where, today, no stones remain standing. Russ' Creek Cemetery, in the Seventh Concession of Haldimand Township was destined to follow this same path.

Jonathon Russ, an early surveyor in Haldimand Township, gave his name to the small creek nearby, and to a little community that grew up around it in the 1830's. Once there were sawmills, a blacksmith, pump factory, general store, one-room schoolhouse, churches of several denominations, and even a post office. Surrounded by cultivated fields and pasture, its future seemed assured. Today, the creek still appears on topographic maps, but is not named, and, a few years ago, even the 'C' marking for it cemetery disappeared from the map.

South of the cemetery was the John Tuck farm, later known as the Farr farm. On a few occasions, the family was asked permission to allow a funeral procession to cross their property, if a section of the cemetery's historic access from the adjacent Russ' Creek Rd. was washed out or in a poor state of repair. Sometimes a request came on very short notice. One time, the residents were made aware just as the funeral procession was seen to be slowly approaching down the road. Unfortunately, a line of freshly washed laundry stretched from the house to a tall white pine that stood nearby, and blocked the way to the cemetery. A great scurrying of mother, wet clothes and children was thereby engendered so that the procession could continue unimpeded. The children were quickly dressed in their best attire and the family joined the others attending the service.

The most recent tombstone, that of Elizabeth Pratt, is dated 1950. The earliest one records Sarah Bradley's death in 1849. Nancy Crawford was one of the early landowners bordering the cemetery. When her estate was settled in 1902, it was recorded that the cemetery was two acres in size. Local residents recall many more markers than are now in evidence at Russ' Creek, and most of the gravesites are now unmarked. Although weather and vandals have taken their toll, the following pioneer family names have been recorded: Beswetherick, Birney, Bound, Brakley, Bright, Bull, Carpenter, Cocks, Drinkwalter, Finley, Fox, Graham, Hartford, Hill, Joice, Kirkland, Long, Miller, Porter, Pratt, Prout, Richey, Ritchie, Russ, Samis, Spinks,

By Barry King



Sweet, Thurston, Tinney and White.

In 1984, a work party of volunteers cleared away several decades of brush, trees and poison ivy, which covered the site. Many sunken graves were also filled and some of the broken markers repaired. A Russ' School reunion, held the next year at Russ' Creek recalled the old community spirit. An Abandoned Cemetery Board has since been established and the Russ' Creek Cemetery received heritage designation in 1985.

A remarkable discovery in the Millennium year has revealed another historic treasure preserved at Russ' Creek. Because the land was never cultivated, the cemetery is home to a wide variety of rare prairie wildflowers. These were once common in this area, known as the Rice Lake Plains or Castleton Plains, but have all but vanished under the plough. A local field botanist, John Macoun, who went on to explore the Canadian Prairie with Sir Sandford Fleming, and became the nation's first Dominion Botanist in 1881, began his botanical career here in the 1860's. The place names of Oak Hills and the Castleton Plains, are attached to many of his field samples. It is hoped that this small remnant of the original tallgrass prairie ecosystem can be preserved for future generations.

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