

The stone fence builder

He once ministered to souls;
now Wendell Sedgwick tends to row housing for God's creatures

Story and photos by Lance Crossley

Thirty years ago, on a trip to England, Wendell Sedgwick's bus was held up by construction on a narrow English road. When he looked out his window he saw construction workers building a stone fence. In an effort to widen the highway, the workers were tearing down the existing fence and rebuilding it farther away from the roadarmac. Sedgwick was struck by the prudence of the spectacle.

"I had been dumping stones for years, just to get rid of them when I take them off the field. Dump them anywhere. I thought, 'Why don't I start building fences?' The pioneers did it, I can do it, too."

Small strands of hay cling to Sedgwick's blue sweater, the result of mowing at dawn this morning to feed his cattle. His white hair slightly ruffled, he is eager to talk about his stone fence. When I notice a dirty elastic bandage round his left wrist, he says it helps to stabilize it because "arthritis tends to hurt." The supports on his knees help out as well.

That doesn't stop Sedgwick from doing the work of two men on his farm off County Road 1. Aside from his cattle, he also chops wood, plants crops and of course, builds stone fences. The stone fences are sprawled throughout his property stretching for hundreds of yards. Sedgwick estimates, with a full day's work, he can move two linear feet forward a day.

"It's not exciting work and it's not fast work. It's boring, dull, and deadly. And I rather enjoy it."

Sedgwick remembers helping his father repair old, rusty barbed wire fences in his youth. He says it was "just horrid stuff to do", but during the Second World War brand new wiring was hard to come by. That same old wire fence is now enveloped in a six-foot triangle of loosely set stones. And while wire fencing has a lifespan of only 20 to 40 years, the stone fences Sedgwick builds will last for centuries.

An ordained minister in the United Church, Sedgwick spent most of his life away from the farm serving congregations near Madoc, Campbellford, and Port Hope. It is only since retiring in 1997 that he has returned to the farm he grew up in. He appears uncomfortable talking about his ministry, saying, "I



Seventy-three-year-old Wendell Sedgwick first gained an appreciation for stone fences on a 1974 trip to England. Now he builds them.

didn't like the idea of being a minister. Don't ask me why. I don't know if I ever did come to like being a minister. So now I have come back to my roots."

His father suffered from poor circulation when he was young, losing a toe to gangrene (his mother lost a leg to the same ailment). That meant spending more time on the farm for young Sedgwick, delaying his high school graduation until the age of 20. Sedgwick worked another seven years on the farm before being confronted with a dilemma. In the post-war culture there was a prevailing sentiment that farmers were not needed. At the same time the United Church was advertising a shortage of ministers. Since a university degree was required to become a minister, Sedgwick decided to take a correspondence course in English literature at Queen's University. Secretly he hoped he would fail, thereby cementing his vocation on the farm.

"Unfortunately, I got the highest marks of anybody who took the course. And so I said, 'Well Wendell, you can't flop out on that'. So I took the plunge."

Sedgwick hops on his tractor and says he'll meet me by the stone fence he's working on down toward the railroad. As I'm walking down the dirt road I get a chance to take in the view of the land. Sedgwick's farm is nestled in a valley between a creek and a hill. In the distance, at the edge of a road, a long stone fence rises over the hill as far as I can see, perhaps a half-kilometre or so. The fence traces the contour of the hill with an elastic elegance, not daring to disturb the integrity of the countryside. Its beauty is indistinguishable from the trees and animals that surround it.

When I catch up to Sedgwick he is already busy at work on the fence. He starts by laying the largest stones five to seven feet apart. He then administers the stones as a bricklayer would, breaking the joints, trying to cover the two stones below with one stone above. He chooses a stone with great care, sizing up the best spot to place it or, conversely, he finds a spot and will look for its appropriate stone.

The art of building a stone fence seems akin to playing cupid, finding stones that are best suited to co-exist together. They

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