

# Brownsville History

## Village of Brownsville Has Long and Interesting History

(By Ila Hawkins Leach)

Dereham became a township of Oxford County in 1798 and settlement commenced in 1799. During the succeeding 40 years about 10 settlers took up land on what is commonly known as the 10th concession, which is actually that portion of the tenth concession lying between Delmer and the Dorchester town line. Of these 10 settlers, one was David Dean, who lived on the farm now known as the Woolley farm. Hence, until this time, the location was known as the Dean Settlement. At that time, 1840, the district is described by one by the name of Crippen, whose words have been recorded, as "some of the finest timber land I have ever seen, land covered with beech, maple and pine, the last being three to four feet through the trunk." Land was sold for one dollar an acre.

To reach the settlement there were only two trails, one passable by horse and ox team, lay through woods and bog with only one clearing to break the density of forest between Talbot St. (No. 3 Highway) and the Dean Settlement. Surely a hazardous journey, with the marshes and swales where the horses stood belly deep in mud and water, while the wagon carrying the mothers and children and the precious household goods swayed uncertainly behind them. The other byway was a mere path through the forest from the west, suitable only for travellers on foot, and then only with a guide.

Brixton Brown, whose name was given to the village at a later date, had come by the latter trail when he first reconnoitred the district in the hope of finding a home for his family. The following spring, April 1841, he returned with his family and household goods, grain, and a small herd of cattle driven behind, this time over the south route from Talbot St. An account of this period, preserved by the Brown family, describes the little dwelling that was rented from one Joseph Conrad, till their own could be built. It was 20 feet square with one room above the other. This for a family of 12. Nor was that all! Friends of the Browns, named Loucks, bought adjoining land, and in generosity, never so great as in the wilderness, his family too was welcomed into the little house until their own should be complete. Twenty-two souls in a 20 by 20 foot dwelling. So they lived until the early winter. Summer's end brought other neighbors to the settlement, James Dennis, who took up land which is still farmed by Dennises to the present day.

With three large families fairly close together it was deemed necessary to have a school, the first of three schools which have served from that day to this. This first school was an unused dwelling, where the grist mill now stands. Its first teacher was Mrs. Abram Matthews, engaged at eight dollars a month. Two years later a regular schoolhouse was built about a half-mile north of the village. By 1860 pupils numbered 75 in summer and 125 in the winter months. In 1907 a modern brick school was erected south of the village on property designated as a community park, and in 1926 this building was further enlarged so that education up to junior matriculation might be completed under one roof.

By 1846 other families had come to swell the growing settlement. Land owners on the Tenth Concession were John Loucks, Matthias Millard, Edward York, Joel Nims, Lewis Woolley, Daniel Hawkins, Linaeus Ford, Joseph Cook, Joseph McDowell and Henry Downing. Those on the Ninth Concession were Benjamin Hopkins, James Dennis, Daird Phelps Andrew Baxter, John Petch and John Allison. On the Eleventh Concession were Edward and Joseph Livingstone, and on the Twelfth were James Freeman and Chauncey Smith.

This last name recalls the beginning of the early churches; being one of the very first, he had, largely through his own efforts, labored to hold regular services sometimes with the help of a circuit rider who preached about once a month. From this early beginning came the Baugham United Church, and to these services the folk of the Dean Steeplement went, usually on foot, whenever occasion permitted.

Brixton Brown was a minister, and immediately began holding services in his home. He was helped by itinerant preachers who came once in several months. In 1859 the first church was erected somewhere near where the Borden Company Limited plant now stands. Land for the church site was given by the Brown family and later, in 1872 a similar gift was made to the Baptist congregation when their church was erected. The Methodists in after-years built a large brick church and parsonage south of the crossroads on property granted them from the Hopkins family.

With the land-owners came the tradesmen and industrialists. From Sutherland's "County of Oxford Gazetteer and Directory" we find this census of the tradespeople of Brownsville in 1860: Harris Andrews, carpenter; Ovid P. Brown, saddlery and shoe shop; Sam Nelson Brown, harness maker; John Fursman, carriage and wagon maker; John Hall, carpenter; Henry Helmka, carpenter; Simon Pearson, shoemaker; Alex Scott, blacksmith; William Sponeburg, carpenter; Irving Thompson, blacksmith; A. D. Glover, Royal Exchange Hotel. George McShery, a plow manufacturer and blacksmith, owned and operated the Premium Plow Factory, winning a gold medal at the provincial exhibition for his plows.

Of those listed above, Henry Helmka played one of the largest parts in the village's growth. One of his earliest ventures was a saw-mill. This had its beginning on a site back of the present Downing residence about the year 1867. Later, when he began to manufacture

cheese boxes, he moved his mill to its present location south of the village where water was available from the ponds. This was a thriving industry through the years, being sold by its owner to George Edgington. After more years of prosperity, when more than 200,000 cheese boxes were sold each year, the mill was sold to John Scott, who operated it until his death and whose family still control the property and the manufacture of cheese boxes.

The tile industry of Brownsville also owes its origin to Henry Helmka and to the extensive deposits of clay, suitable for tile manufacture, which lie south of the village. Since about the year 1870 tile making has continued with few interruptions, with the business changing hands from Mr. Helmka to John Koor, then to Albert Deller & Son, who carry on the industry today.

Sons of the Brixton family were the first butchers to sell meat to the community, their shop being near where the community hall stands. They sold their business to Mr. Copeland, who in turn passed it to the present ownership, that of the Downing family.

The original hotel-keeper, A. D. Glover, retired and was succeeded by Joseph Corbett, in partnership with Mr. Badge. The latter also ran an undertaking establishment just across the street. Later, Mr. Corbett acquired the retail general store, formerly owned by Mr. McDiarmid and the establishment has continued in that family until the present time.

While supporting various industries, the community was essentially agricultural and especially adapted to dairy farming. Very early a cheese factory was established promoting the production of the fine cheddar cheese for which Oxford County became famous. This factory burned and was replaced by another (which incidentally contained in its structure the main portion of the outgrown Methodist Church, and stands today). In 1903, this was sold to the Borden Milk Products Company and thereafter milk powder and butter were produced instead of cheese. Today no manufacturing is carried on, the milk being received here and sent to Tillsonburg for processing.

The early families had formed among themselves a society called the Home Circle, which served as a fraternal order, social organization, and later as a financial company called the Home Circle Bank. This functioned for a few years until a branch of the Royal Bank was set up in the village, and as often happens, the weaker organization fell before the greater.

An entertainment hall stood on land opposite the present grist mill

in the early days. This was moved to a spot behind the Bell Telephone office, and there burned to the ground. Sometime later the old Delmer Church was moved and placed where it now stands. Recreations of various forms were part of the community life as the years marched by. A library was formed, first in a small room beneath the store, then in the little hall previously occupied by the Home Circle Bank, then outgrowing these accommodations, to its present location.

About 1919 a Village Improvement Society was formed which financed the building of cement sidewalks and a tennis court, promoted the use of hydro electricity, which had come to the district in 1916, and generally sponsored weekly evenings of entertainment. It annually held a mammoth garden party which attracted thousands from near and far. Later, in the 1930 period, this organization was revived and carried out a similar program of social entertainment and constructive benefit, which extended to the time of the war when it dissolved to form a Patriotic Society.

Brownsville also boasted a brass band composed of 16 players, in earlier years. It was led by John Edgington. This too proved very popular, both at home and in other communities. Names of some of these men have remained—Washington Elliott, Joseph Grandy and Hubbard Wood, the drummer, Isaac Giner, a colored boy, who also was a member and drove the band wagon.

The burying grounds for the community was set aside at Delmer, the next village east of Brownsville. Here the first burial was made in 1846, being that of William Dean, who met his death by drowning in a creek and whose body was carried behind a team of mules to the graveyard. Later, about 1909, a second cemetery was set aside, also at Delmer.

Among the many who walked these ways were the men of medicine, the best known and most lovingly remembered probably being Dr. Henry Minshall, who practised many years in the district. Many others there have been too, whose goings and comings have been unrecorded and unremembered by those now living. Of the hundred years and more that we can look back upon, only a small fragment here and there is available for us to snatch from time and keep safe from forgetfulness. These have mostly been gleaned from memories of the gray-haired men and women who now look back over 80 years and more, and if there be small inaccuracies they are not deliberate but tricks of the memory somewhat deflected by time. The old ones of the community have shared their memories willingly and in good faith that we might not altogether lose our heritage of the past. (From the Lawson Memorial Library, University of Western Ontario.)

*Brixton should be Brinton.*