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Halton's Pages of the Past

County 'Post-Boys' Had Hazardous Job When Upper Canada Postal Service in Its Formation

By GWEN CLARKE

On April 1, 1854, the letter rate for first class mail in Canada was boosted from four to five cents. It was an innovation not at all popular with the general public. And yet, compared with earlier times, we get fairly good service and considerable value for our money.

In pioneer days there was naturally no government postal service at all. Communication of any kind was a major problem and it was generally the receiver and not the sender who paid the charges for the delivery of a letter. This was a great hardship to the early settlers. Many letters were unclaimed because there was no money to pay for them. Such letters eventually were sent to the Dead Letter office. The heartache this caused the pioneers can hardly be imagined. Strangers in a strange land, longing for news of loved ones they had left behind, knowing that news was in the letters that awaited them, and yet not being able to pay for delivery of the letters.

Nine Offices in 1816
Letters were generally prepaid to the coast and then continued their journey across Canada in various ways — by bateau on the St. Lawrence; by government schooner across Lake Ontario; overland by stage coach, and then by courier or private messenger, on foot or on horseback, to the recipient.

By 1816 there were still only nine post offices in all Upper Canada. Conditions gradually improved although, looking back, it seems miraculous that any mail got through at all! The roads were beyond description and the driver of the stage coach put the mail-bag under his seat or on top of the coach. Upon reaching a post office the driver blew a mighty blast on his horn and threw the mail-bag off the stage. The postmaster emptied the bag, took out what was addressed to his district, put the rest back, along with outgoing mail from his office, returned the bag to the driver, who then continued on his way — unless at a post where horses had to be changed as at Trafalgar — then there was a twenty-minute delay.

Early in the last century a letter posted in England in November, might, under favorable circumstances, reach York (Toronto) by the following spring. When letters were carried by stage coach, Weller's Royal Mail Line had coaches gaily painted and adorned with the King's Coat of Arms, giving a colorful touch to the muddy and dangerously rutted roads.

Five Days a Week
Eventually mail in Halton County was received and despatched along the Front five days a week. From then it was carried by pedestrian courier or post-boys on horseback. Duncan McGill, Esquire, Township, for years carried mail twice a week on horseback down the Seventh Line to Trafalgar post office, stopping at "Long Tom's Inn" and picking up and delivering mail along the way. Upon his return neighbours in the Scotch Block would call for their mail at his home.

The post-boys' job was a hazardous undertaking, through dense forest trails and swamp land, and there were many cases of robbery and attempted robbery so that it finally became necessary for the courier to be properly armed for the trip.

Early Offices in Halton
As the number of post offices increased conditions gradually improved. Palermo post office was opened in 1837. The first postmaster seems not to have been recorded but in 1839 Joseph Gage received the appointment. In Esqueping the first post office opened was on Lot 9, Concession 7, with Henry Fyfe as postmaster. In 1840 the office was moved to Stewarttown. That same year MacNabville was allowed the privilege of a post office; the name of the village was then changed to Norway. Acton post office was opened in 1844, Scotch Block in 1852 on the farm of Thomas Hume. In 1898 the office was moved to Manswood, Mrs. Wooding acting as postmistress until the office was closed. Mail bags were dropped off at Manswood flag station close to the post office.

In 1850 Omagh felt it was worthy of a post office. John White, M.P., told the people to choose a suitable name and he would see that they got an office. At that time T. F. Howell, father-in-law of Dr. Anson Buck, Palermo, owned a store and hotel. He was well-liked by the village folk so they suggested the name "Howellville" in his honour. This did not please John White because Mr. Howell, as he put it, was a "Yankee." John White was an Irishman so he changed the name Howellville to "Omagh" after the capital of County Tyrone. Other local post offices were opened in the county but we have not yet been able to ascertain the dates.

Rural Mail in 1908
The first rural mail service in Ontario was started in 1908 and gradually was adopted right across the province. The first, and one of the most faithful couriers to service local post offices from the Base Line in Halton to nearby points in Trafalgar was Jim Currie of Milton. Jim had a wooden leg and could neither read nor write yet he was rarely known to make a mistake. He made his rounds by horse and buggy or cutter according to roads and weather conditions. In 1951 postal service was transferred from Imperial to Canadian provincial government control that same year postage stamps were in

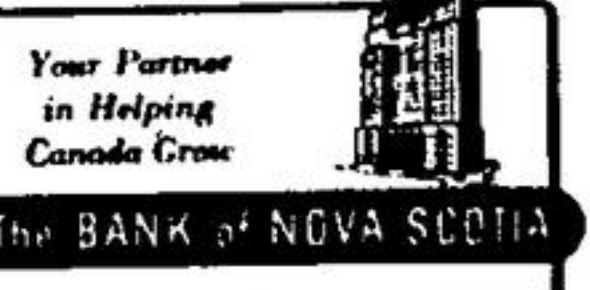
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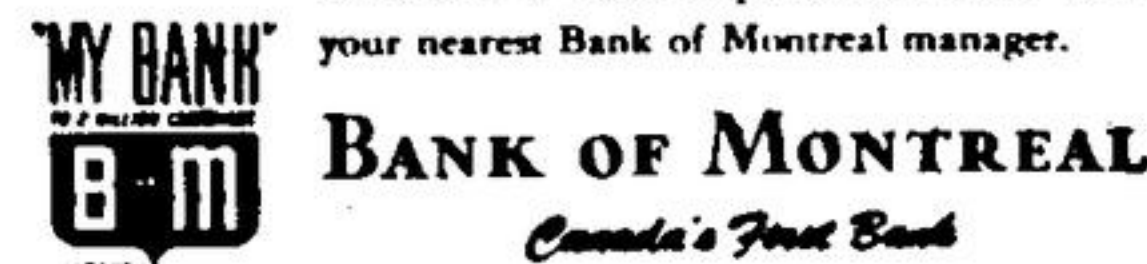
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About This Feature

Since the beginning of the feature "Halton's Pages of the Past" just a few weeks ago, an unusually high reader-interest has been indicated. When the feature started, you will perhaps recall there was some possibility mentioned that the columns could later be printed in book form.

To publish these articles in book form, and to make the production as economical as possible, the same type as used in the paper will have to be used in printing the book. Before a program of this kind, which will involve a considerable period of time, is undertaken, some indication of its acceptance is required.

We are asking that those who might be interested in securing copies of this column in book form, fill in the coupon below. If interest warrants it, the publication will be started and you will have the first opportunity to purchase a book from the limited printing. This coupon is not a definite commitment, it is simply to indicate interest. Cost of the book will not exceed five dollars. Please DO NOT forward any money with the coupon. The book would not be available for at least a year.

To the Acton Free Press, Acton, Ont.

I am interested in seeing the column "Halton's Pages of the Past" in book form and would consider purchasing a copy if publication is undertaken. I understand this is not a definite commitment to purchase but a copy, if published, would be held in my name for a limited time after I have been notified.

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use for the first time and envelope never commonly used. Previously letters were written on one side of the paper, folded like an envelope, addressed, and the four corners on the reverse side sealed with sealing wax.

Penny Postage

In 1898 Penny Postage was adopted in Canada following Sir Rowland Hill's postal reform a system that proved so satisfactory that it spread to many other parts of the world. It was probably one of the greatest benefits to mankind up to that time, especially to the poor, who had rarely been able to afford the luxury of writing letters. In 1918 air mail service was commenced in Canada. So, in approximately a hundred years the postal service in Canada saw many changes, from Indian courier, post-boys, stage coach, railway and then to Trans-Canada and Overseas Airmail Service. A far cry indeed from the time of the pioneers.

(Next week's story—"Limehouse")
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Neglect is Costly

A run down, dilapidated property with untidy surroundings can ruin the appearance of a whole neighborhood and affect property values in the whole area. It is not only for appearance sake that one should keep one's property looking its best, it is also good business. Pierce George, (B.C.) Citizen.

Alternative

Inspector: "So he got away. Did you guard all the exits?"
Policeman: "Yes, sir. We think he must have left by one of the entrances."

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