



STORE & RESIDENCE OF J. MATTHEWS ESQ. ACTON WEST.



Licking stamps for fifty years

"The public has kept me busy licking postage stamps for over 50 years, and I think I'll stay at the job."

That decision was made some years ago; it was made in response to a request that he should stand for some important elective office, but the man who has seen more years of service than any other postmaster on the continent was eager for no other honor than his years of faithful public service.



JAMES MATTHEWS
Recalled the Past

He was appointed to succeed his late Uncle Robert Swan in 1855, the year that Lord Palmerston became Prime Minister of Great Britain, and Sebastopol was taken. The postmaster who comes nearest this remarkable term was found to be Silas Hatch of Hatchville, Barnstable county, Massachusetts, who was appointed in 1858, three years after Mr. Matthews.

During all that long span, with its many events of world-wide importance, he has gone on his way, faithfully serving his community and the many governments that have had their glory and passed out.

With 67 years of unbroken devotion to duty, he has become an unique figure in this branch of public activity.

"When I came to Acton with my father in 1845," said Mr. Matthews to the writer, "we settled on a farm on Main St. It is now, you see, built up with business places. Our family had been pioneer settlers in the Flora and Guelph districts. They chopped some of the first trees in Flora. My father in 1826 built the old log house in Guelph that was long used by the CTR as a depot, and that prior to that was a tavern known as the Priory. Even in Acton, I have seen every house go up except two."

You can find him any day if you enquire at the wicket of the Acton post office, a man beyond 87, figure quite erect, eyesight good and hearing almost unimpaired. With his coat off, he was among the mail bags that hung on the long iron forms waiting to be locked and sent away to their various distributing centres.

There he is carrying on, careless of the fact that in longevity he is crowding the century mark and in length of service has a record unequalled in North America. The dusty tomes of Washington and Ottawa have been searched. They

pression of their crest in the wax. There were few newspapers published in Upper Canada then, so that our volume of mail from the printing press was exceedingly small. Those who did get a weekly paper of any kind regarded it as a treasure to be read from end to end.

"They would tell the most important news to their neighbors who had no papers. Our mails then, such as they were, had to be taken on horseback, in cutters or sleighs, on wagons or any other means of conveyance. We didn't have 50-mile-an-hour automobiles."

Mr. Matthews has lived through epochal days. He began his career as postmaster during the Crimean War.

"Yes," he said when reminded of the fact, "there have been a good many events to look back upon. The main line of the GTR from Quebec to Sarnia was completed in 1856, the year after I started in this office. About that time, there was a discovery of gold in the sands of the Fraser and Thompson rivers and there was a wild rush to the West, which then seemed like a distant, unknown world."

"In 1861, as you know, war broke out between the North and South in the United States. Quite a few fellows went over from around here. One of them, Mr. Thomas Statham of this village, still draws his pension. I remember quite well when President Lincoln was assassinated. The event caused a great deal of excitement in the unknown world."

"The Canadian Pacific, the Intercolonial, the Canadian Northern, now the National, and nearly all of the other railways of Canada, have been built, of course, since I became a postmaster. As for public events, I quite well remember the Fenian raids, the Red River Rebellion and other disturbances and wars. These latter happenings are comparatively recent to me."

earlier, did not disturb us so very much. People were pretty busy in Halton county in '66 digging out stumps and building log houses for themselves. The Niagara district felt the most of that brief shock."

Elderly citizens of Acton, when they are leaning back in their chairs, like to tell about the fast horses Mr. Matthews used to keep. The village in its younger days was quite a centre for horse trading and training.

The name of Ransen Adams, reputed to have been a character in his day, is not forgotten with the trading end. That of the postmaster's associated with the trotting events. When the subject is mentioned, the eyes of Mr. Matthews brighten. He would be driving yet, he says, were it not for an accident of a few years back when he went to visit a son in Denver.

Prior to this, the postmaster drove trotters that carried away the first prize at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901 and second prize at a big show in Detroit. He exhibited his winners at Guelph, Milton, Georgetown and many county fairs.

"I had a span," he said, "which I called the Grey Eagles. There wasn't more than five pounds difference in the weight of these grey drivers. Oh, how they could slip! I could drive a hundred miles today and back tomorrow with them, and they would come home strong on the bit."

"I guess I got to be reasonably well known around for my trotters and often when I was driving through the country, someone would call out to me 'Hello, Matthews, how are the greys?' Perhaps the man wouldn't know me, but of course, there's a friendliness among horsemen, even if they're not acquainted."

Mr. Matthews remarked further that he had the first buggy in Acton, and it was considered quite a tip-top



THE ROYAL MAIL

"The Red River affair caused quite a stir in those days, for we weren't accustomed to getting such a large supply of world news every day that we couldn't digest it. A rebellion in our own country was something to talk about, I can tell you."

"I recall that Major Allan, a fine soldier, took a small contingent from this neighborhood I think the volunteers all came back safely. The Major has since passed away. The Fenian raids, though much

thing in those times. Most of the vehicles used for trotters were home-made carts.

"And they were rather homely affairs," he laughed.

He will also tell with great pride of an experience with hook and line some years ago when the streams that flow around Guelph, Georgetown, Acton, Limehouse and other Halton county points were better stocked than now.

Twenty dozen in one day! But enthusiastic anglers shouldn't think of taking the next train to Acton after reading of this good luck. Mr. Matthews says the streams are pretty well depleted now. And he should know, for even though he is past 87, he likes as well as ever, a day with pole and line along a rambling stream.

"We used to have fine sport around here," he said, with a flash of youth still in his eyes. "Lots of deer in former days."

Pausing, he turned to his son and asked, "Do you remember, Chester, that big buck I shot on the hill back of Acton? He was an old fellow with eight prongs on his head. When we got him, we found that he carried in his body two bullets which other hunters had lodged there some time before but which had not proved serious."

"Away back in the '50s and '60s, a man could have real sport when he went out," said he. "We could bring in a deer or a mess of good fish almost any time to replenish the stores of the kitchen."

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Continent's oldest postmaster was interviewed by MacLean's and told how Acton had grown

"February 22, 1918.

"Sir:—Mr. James Matthews, Postmaster of Acton, Ont. was appointed to that office in June 1855, and he served as a clerk in that office for two years before. He has therefore had sixty-three years' service in the Acton post office, sixty-one of them as Postmaster. . . Mr. Matthews' service as Postmaster is probably the longest service of any Postmaster in Canada."

(Copy of a letter from Post Office Department, Ottawa.)

Thus begins a yellowing article in MacLean's magazine of December 1, 1922, which continued with a reminiscence interview with North America's oldest postmaster, written by J. M. Elson, entitled "Licking Stamps for Fifty Years." A check had revealed that Mr. Matthews topped the postmaster in the U.S.A. with the longest service, Silas Hatch of Hatchville, Mass., who was appointed in 1858 and was still serving in 1922.

As a subtitle for the story MacLean's declared, in large type, "He was behind the post office wicket when the Crimean War was fought. Was there when North fought South. He is there today, the oldest postmaster on the continent."

The 45-year-old page was lent to the Free Press by Mrs. Anna Smith.

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