

Canadian bakeries in 1860s knew about Norval

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By ANI PEDERIAN
Herald Staff

Bakeries all over Canada knew where the village of Norval was back in the 1860s. It was where the flour that made their breads and pastries was milled.

A booming spot in the 1800s, Norval had five hotels, including the present day Hollywood Tavern, a woolen mill, a knitting mill, a broom factory, a coopershop for making barrels, a buggy shop and countless blacksmiths.

Prior to the days of railroads, Norval was often a stopover for travellers heading west.

For farmers who grew grain, Norval was the spot to bring their wheat and barley for milling.

In the area where Highway 7 and Winston Churchill Boulevard now intersect, Robert Noble, the great-great-grandfather of Halton MPP Julian Reed, erected a mill.

"It was considered a fair-sized mill when Robert Noble built it. By today's standards, it would be considered little," Gord Browne of Norval said.

Mr. Browne's grandfather owned the mill at one time and it passed to grandson Gord when his father died.

Robert Noble's mill was fed by the power of the Credit River and the oxen that were harnessed to a water wheel. For the animals, there was a shed next to the mill.

Built by contractors Lairds and Grains, the mill used to make wheat, pastry and hard wheat bread flours. Locally grown wheat was suitable for pastry flour and teams of horses would come to Norval, hauling grain.

Business thrived and the original small mill was enlarged. In those days, farmers bargained for the mill's services, using the old barter system.

In 1918, Colonel Alec Noble, the son of Robert Noble built the Credit River dam which still stands today.



This is a picture of the Webster Home in Norval, former residence of the area doctor. Before the days of the railroad, Norval was often a stopover for travellers heading west. For farmers who grew grain, Norval was the spot to bring their wheat and barley for milling. (Herald file photo)

From the Noble family, the mill passed to another family in 1913, until Gord Browne's grandfather W.B. Browne took it over in 1921.

May Cleave, retired and living in Brampton now, used to farm near Norval and remembers her husband going to the mill with his grain.

"I've seen lines of horses and wagons delivering wheat," Mrs. Cleave said. "We all had a field of wheat and we'd come there to chop

it."

Lifelong Norval resident Dorothy McLean remembers hitching rides to the mill with the farmers who would then come to her dad Robert Watson's sweet smelling bake shop for fresh bread.

"It was a very flourishing business," she said of the mill.

However, a fire Jan. 30, 1930 slowed down the milling operation.

"Although the cause of the fire

was never determined, my father always said it was spontaneous combustion," Mr. Browne said.

Full of grain, the mill burnt for months and months.

"It was a fierce, fierce fire, it was," Mrs. McLean said. "The heat from the fire melted the snow on the roofs in the centre of the village even."

"I remember thinking how terrible it was that they couldn't do something to stop it," she said.

Born in Norval, Mary Couper

Maxwell can remember the fire that took the mill.

"It lit the whole countryside here. If you've ever burnt a pot of porridge, that's what the whole area smelled like for weeks and weeks," she said. "The smoke was still coming out from the heart of the mill even on Easter Sunday."

People driving through Norval in the middle of the night would ring the alarm "Fire, fire, fire!" and it was just the wheat that was smouldering away and had been for weeks, Mrs. McLean said.

Mr. Browne remembers his dad broke a window and went into the burning building with townspeople Johnny Shephard to get the books. The mill was full of wheat at the time of the fire and the senior Mr. Browne wanted to be able to show farmers they'd already been paid. The senior Mr. Browne lost a lot of blood and was unconscious for a time after.

"My dad was upset because there wasn't enough insurance to pay for the mill and all the wheat in it," Mr. Browne said. By the time everyone was paid off, there wasn't enough money left over to pay for the erection of another mill comparable in size, he said.

There was only enough money left to put up a 50-barrel-a-day mill for specialty diastatic flours and Carmel Malt. The Canadian Malting Company of Toronto used to buy from them.

Although the large mill was lost, the grist mill was saved and operated until 1954 when Hurricane Hazel took a chunk out of it and washed the waves of the Credit River into it.

Mr. Browne has fond memories of the mill, and even when he joined the army at 18, although he was exempt as were all farmers and millers, Mr. Browne took with him a picture of the mill as it once stood.

He still has the picture in a photo album, a little worn at the edges, and on his wall, he has a painting of the mill by a local artist.

McNab first settler

to purchase Norval land

The first settler in Norval was Scottish-born James McNab who took up land in 1820, attracted by the unlimited water power from the Credit. He built a grist and flour mill in 1828. The community soon became known as McNabville. As the community grew a Post Office was established in 1840 and the name was changed to Norval. It is thought that James McNab's son took the name from the following verse from a play by John Home. (Place Names in Canada, p. 208):

"My name is Norval; on the Gram-pian Hills

My father feeds his flocks; a frugal swain

Whose constant cares were to in-crease his store

And keep his only son, myself, at home."

The son Alexander McNab did keep a flock of sheep on the hills about the village.

James McNab suffered an unfortunate accident when a mill stone fell and crushed his leg necessitating an amputation. He sold out in 1838 to General Sir Peter Adamson, and the mill changed ownership several times until in 1868 it was purchased by a Scotaman, Robert Noble, who had the mill entirely refitted with new machinery. It had eight run of stone driven by an 80 horse power water-wheel and it had a capacity of 200-300 barrels of flour a day.

Mr. Noble also did a large gristing business, owned a cooper shop, saw mill and the Norval Woolen and Cotton Batting Mills which was leased to other operators. Mr. Noble's son, Col. Alex. Noble carried on the

business for many years until his retirement. His death occurred in 1965 in his 90th year.


Norval at one time was quite a business community and had a carriage factory, several blacksmith shops, three or four stores, two shoemakers shops and two hotels. An early storekeeper and the original Post Master who was prominent in municipal affairs was Col. Wm. Clay, a gentle Irish bachelor. He was a member of the Gore District Council before the formation of the county in 1851. He later was Reeve of Esqueving for eighteen years and Warden of the county for the years 1862-63 and 1881.

Norval possessed (and still does) three churches Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist (now United), a two room school in 1876 and a volunteer company with a brass band.

It might be interesting to note that the wife of the Rev. Ewen McDonald the Presbyterian minister from 1926 to 1935 was the writer L.M. Montgomery who was author of "Anne of Green Gables" and many other books which still have their appeal to girls in their teens.

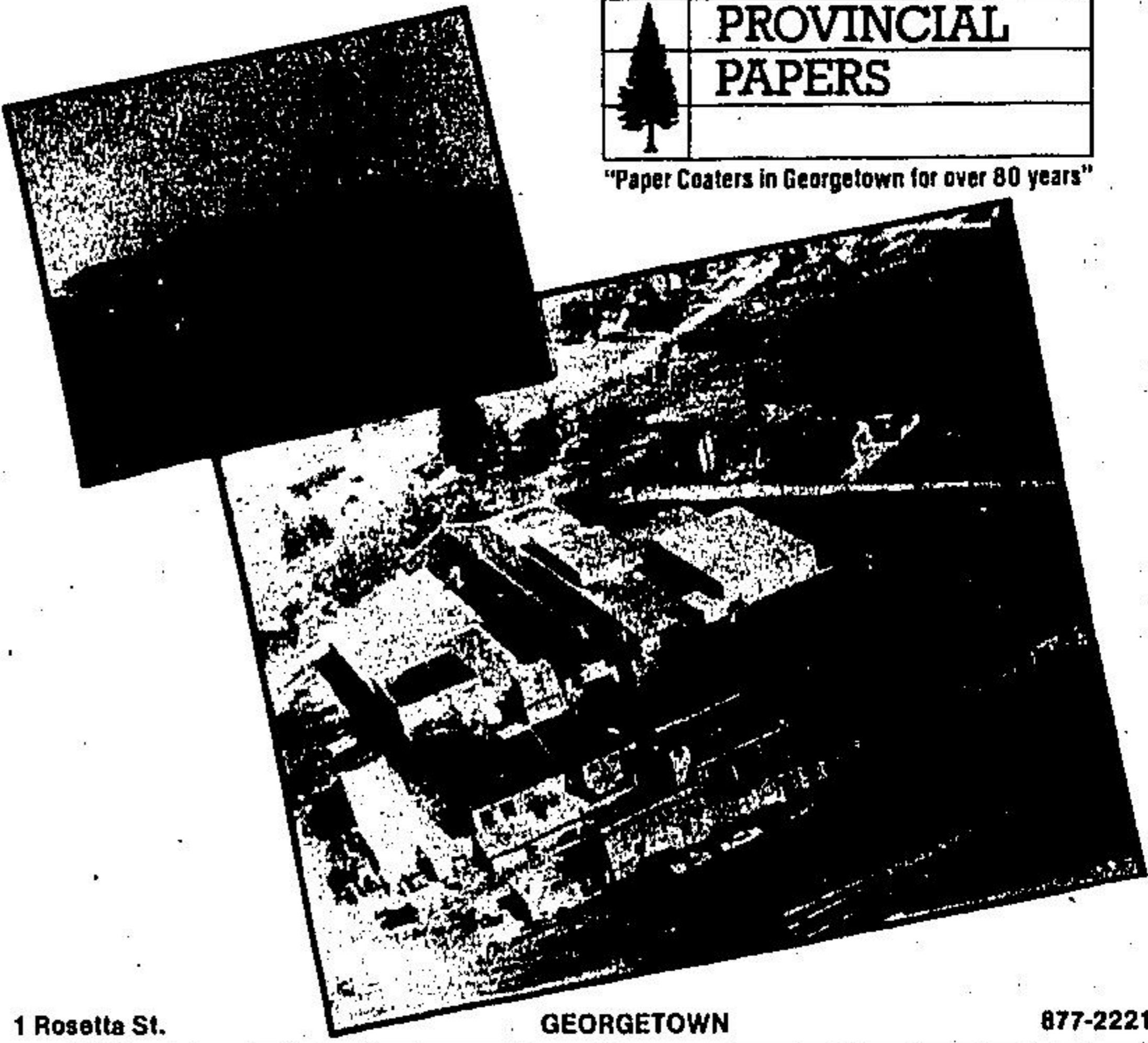
In the disastrous flood of 1954 known as "Hurricane Hazel" the dam and mill race were badly damaged and never rebuilt. Like so many other small communities, the day of the small business has passed and Norval has lost much of its former prosperity.

—From A History and Atlas of the County of Halton by the Halton District Women's Institute



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