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Roughing it wasn't an option it was the norm

By Ted Brown
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A Ted Bit

The Sidekick and I were in Southampton a few weeks ago and while there, we visited Bruce County Museum.

The museum focuses on early local settlers and concentrated on one settler who had detailed notes.

The display featured a replica of a shanty or log cabin, built to show what early settlers had to contend with. The structure measured about six by ten feet, with a sloping flat roof and a very small door. There were no windows.

The wall at the low end was about four feet high, and the high end was perhaps seven feet high.

It looked nothing at all like the Little House on the Prairie cabin of the television series.

The walls were constructed of small cedar logs, six to eight inches in diameter, and the chinks (cracks) were sealed up with mud, sometimes mixed with straw or horsehair.

At the low end of the room there was a bench which doubled as a bed and at the opposite end, there was a small fire with a pot suspended over the flames.

The chinks above the fire pit were left open for a couple feet, allowing the smoke to escape out the top. A few items were hanging on nails driven into the walls, and there was a small clothesline to dry clothing over the fire.

The door was a blanket pulled across the opening.

It was pretty crude to say the least.

Bruce County was settled in the 1850s, so this was a somewhat modern cabin, compared to Halton, which was settled in the early 1820s. Some of the hand tools used in 1850s Bruce County probably weren't even available in 1820s Halton.

As I peered into that tiny building, I was reminded of our own farm. My great-great grandfather took possession of the property in April of 1826. His first priority would be to build a shelter, similar to what I was looking at in the Bruce County Museum.

Forty years ago, we built a bungalow for my parents, located on high land near the original farmhouse.

There was an indentation on the highest part of the farm it had always been there. When the backhoe dug into that indentation, a few clunks of wood were unearthed.

We had found the location of the original cabin, about the same size footprint as the replica in Southampton.

I thought how my forefathers had to live in something that small and crude, to make a life for them and their families.

I understand every settler was expected to clear a certain acreage of their farm every year, as well as work on the trail in front of their property to ultimately create a road.

Everything was done with hand tools and blood, sweat and tears.

As I survey the farm today, I think how much thought was put into the layout of the buildings. The cabin was located on the highest piece of land on the farm, ensuring that rain water always ran away from the structure.

The farmhouse, where I live today, is also on that same high piece of land. It was built around 1835, so my great, great grandfather and his family lived in the cabin for nearly a decade. I'm sure the cabin expanded with the years, but it still must have been pretty crude.

I often sit on the verandah at home, trying to imagine how the place looked in the early days.

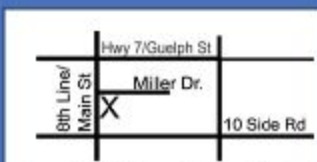
I wonder what the original cabin looked like, I wonder where their animals were housed and I'm totally blown away when I think about living in a cabin with an open fire, and a hole in the upper wall to let the smoke out through our Canadian winters.

But thanks to a forward-thinking museum curator in Southampton, I can at least have an image of what it was like here 190 years ago, a time when roughing it wasn't an option it was the norm.

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