

Tragedy hits home



A review of
**Well of Lies:
The Walkerton Water Tragedy**

Quaile Reviews

by Deborah Quaile

Although author Colin N. Perkel juggles all the facts in a careful, orderly manner, he makes no bones about the ineptitude on many sides of the Walkerton water tragedy.

Well of Lies is imminently readable, yet heartbreaking. It's honest and cleanly written, but the facts still cause Canadians - especially locals - a great deal of pain.

The title itself is brilliant with its dark, wry insinuation of blame - but upon whom? Until reading for himself, a reader cannot choose or cast judgment.

The story begins with the accounts of two individuals that balance between tragedy and hope. It covers the history of the town and the area, to offer a sense of perspective to readers unfamiliar with the rural southern Ontario landscape. The strength of the pioneers, their resilience...Perkel has used this research carefully to set the scene before spinning out the story of tainted water. Soon the chapters end abruptly with the reader left hanging - forcing them to continue into the next segment in the saga.

The third chapter launches the audience into Stan Koebel, who ran the local PUC. Neither he, nor his brother Frank, finished high school although Stan did pass his lineman exams in 1980. He was recognized as a man with a strong work ethic, but his lack of formal education was critical to the catastrophe that followed.

The author paints a tale of somewhat hard-working and hard drinking men in the PUC - an "old boys" style of network where they were unaccustomed to any sort of water science and progress.

As an omnipotent narrator, Perkel sometimes pulls the focus to a "between friends" sort of explanation of certain facts or tidbits as the reader travels through the saga. Granted, there is often a slightly condescending "town tone" in the author, as if he doesn't fully understand rural folk and their different concepts of the world.

After years of water quantity and quality dilemmas, the "unsafe" source of well 5 became Walkerton's permanent source - under what sounds like slipshod circumstances. Elected commissioners eventually pushed Koebel into the managerial position of the PUC, despite what the author calls his "spectacular lack of formal qualifications or managerial experience."

Because licensing didn't begin until the late 1980s, both Stan and Frank were ushered in on a grandfathering clause - and no one ever checked their qualifications or lack of a high school diploma.

Perkel maintains a good balance between the pros and cons of the people involved and the methods they used. Ultimately, he leads his readers to *The Walkerton Inquiry*, the fact-finding exercise that was used to provide future solutions, not point blame.

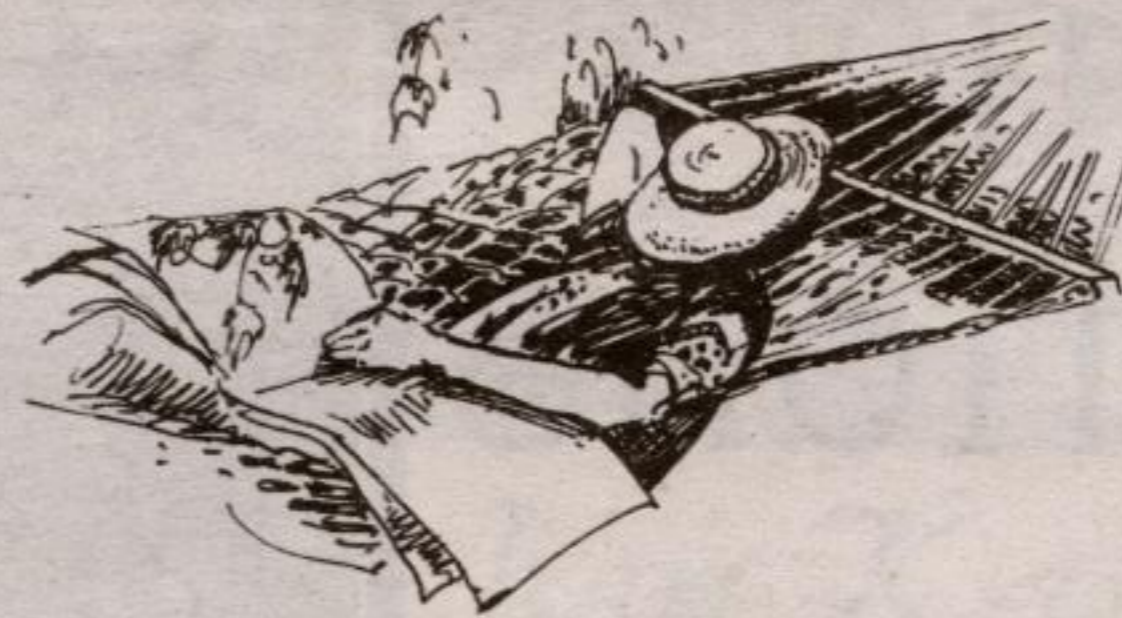
Overall, *Well of Lies* reads like gripping fiction. But the shock of it is - it's all real.

The real tragedy is that so many wells of lies could still be out there - rural or not.

Well of Lies:

The Walkerton Water Tragedy
Perkel, Colin N.
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart
Ltd., 2002
304 pgs.
ISBN 0-7710-7019-5

Idle



Pursuits

Popular history of Acton shows the town is more than just leather

by Deborah Quaile

Acton residents have been asking for a good book on their town - not only for themselves, but also for the burgeoning tourist industry. Their request has been answered.

Being no stranger to publication, Glen Williams teacher and author John Mark Rowe took on the task.

"I've always been interested in history; I have an interesting family history as well as a degree in history," comments Mr. Rowe. "This is an overview history of Acton, right up to the year 2000. The book was needed; there wasn't one done before."

An active member and prolific writer for the Esquesing Historical Society (EHS), Mr. Rowe has produced several smaller publications before, such as his out-of-print booklets on Glen Williams and Georgetown.

This is the first major book the EHS hasn't published itself. The 96-page softcover book has been printed at Boston Mills Press and will be used as a fundraiser for the Esquesing Historical Society, particularly to help cover costs for the archives. A Trillium grant has helped defray initial costs.

With over 80 black and white illustrations, *Acton: The History of Leathertown* will be particularly interesting visually as well.

"I started with the original set-

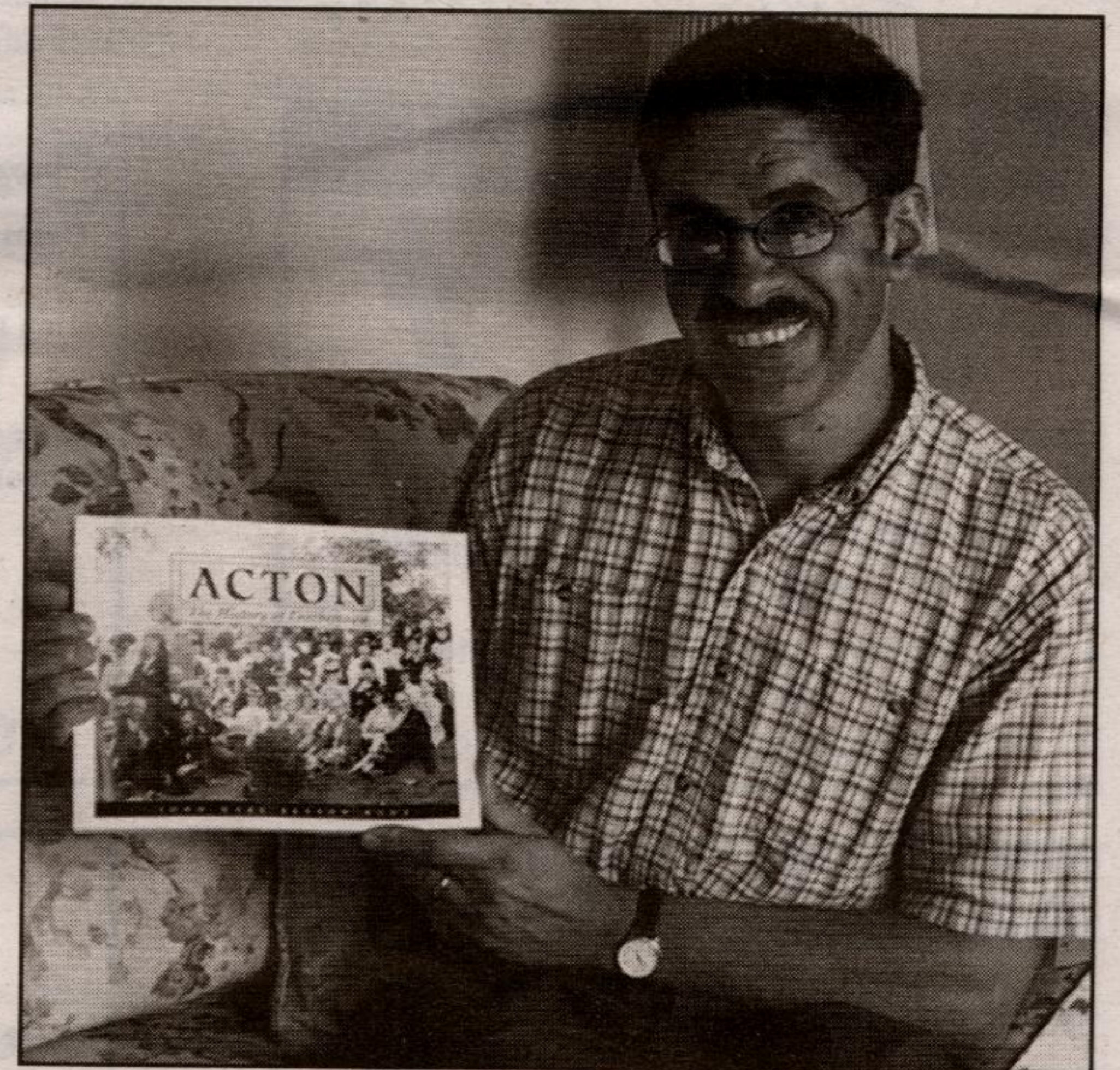


Photo by Deborah Quaile

John Mark Rowe proudly displays a copy of his latest publication, *Acton: The History of Leathertown*.

tlement of the property of the Adams family," Mr. Rowe comments. "The Adams also moved to Nichol Township, or Drayton, and brought people from there to be leaders down here. Four families became prominent in Acton thanks to them.

"The book covers how the town was established on the Grand Trunk, and when the leather industry was established. Acton was principally known for its glove making -

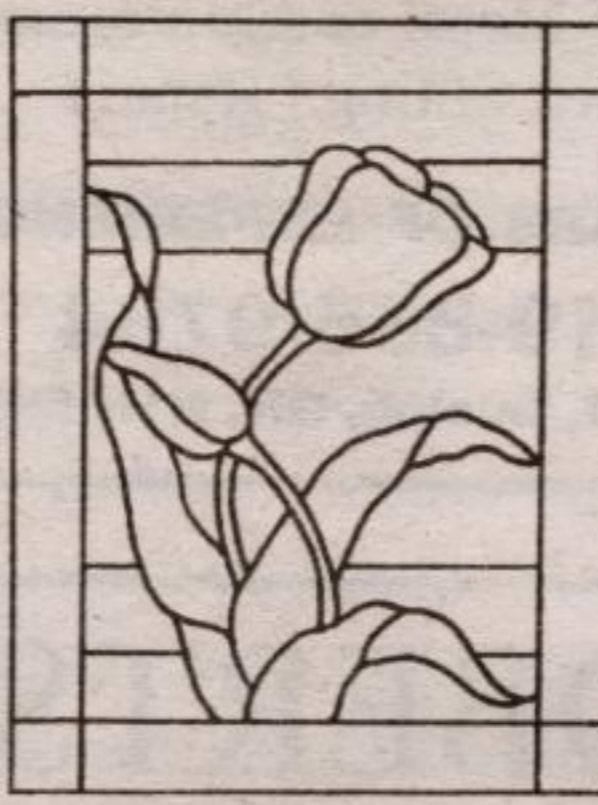
in fact, the tanning industry was quite small at one time. The tanners were ready to pull out of Acton due to the lack of hemlock bark (which was used in the tanning process). When a ready chemical supply became available the tanning industry came back to town."

A random sampling of chapters provides intriguing names such as "Good Times and Bad Times" (covering the 20s and 30s), "Riding Gloves to Driving Gloves", "Political Leaders", and much more. At the end of the book, four full pages of indexed names provide easy reference.

The Esquesing Historical Society has been blessed with a wealth of photo negatives from *The Acton Free Press* and *The Georgetown Independent*, covering the period from about 1956 to approximately 1998. They will be scanning each negative on computer so the images can be pulled up for future reference. The thick files of all photos - even ones that went unused in the week's paper - were inherited from the Dills family. Some photos in that collection were immensely useful for the project.

"The executive (of the EHS) helped out a lot, as well as several people in Acton who assisted with information, particularly Jesse Coles. Jill Stead in Guelph did the layout work," Mr. Rowe notes.

Acton: The History of Leathertown will be available at various locations in Acton in May, such as The Olde Book Shoppe or Wetherby's, or from the Esquesing Historical Society for \$24.95. As of press time a book launch date was not set but will take place shortly in the Acton Town Hall.



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Saturday, June 8th,
12 noon to 5 pm
Artists present