

# Buckskinned Upper Canada Rifles bring frontier to Nassagaweya

By H. Coles

The fog and rain of a recent Saturday probably conjured up visions, but motorists along 25 Sideroad must have really had a turn when they passed the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh MacMillan, just east of the Guelph Line.

Etched against the snow were 15 figures clad in buckskins and toting long rifles which exploded in giant puffs of smoke and sent round musket balls at targets set up against the hill. On the hill's summit stands the partially constructed log home of the MacMillans, erected in a style which the North West Company made popular in trading posts across Canada in the days of the fur trade. Nearby, a 26 foot long freight canoe was supported on wooden horses.

It was almost like stepping into another century when Indians shuffled along forest paths and this infant country was peopled only by fur traders and a few itinerant explorers. The Nassagaweya bush alternately appearing and disappearing from view as the fog lifted and descended, provided just the right touch of authentic atmosphere.

In reality, the movie-like scene was provided by a team from the Upper Canada Rifles. Each man has made his own costume, depicting how Canadian woodsmen dressed a century and a half ago. The rifles they fired, some of them homemade, are reproductions of guns traders used in the uneasy atmosphere of those early days.

On this particular Saturday, despite the rain and fog, the squad was demonstrating a reproduction of the North West trade gun, a rifle which played the more important, but less spectacular role in the history of North America. It followed the traders to Athabasca and the Pacific, and accompanied the Indians in forays against both the British and Americans. History records it was a companion to the mountain men of the 1840's, appearing in Upper Canada (Ontario) in 1780.

**Familiar weapon**  
The gun was a familiar weapon along the French, the Ottawa, Mattawa and Fraser Rivers, wet highways for pioneers, who required firearms to shoot game as well as providing protection against expansionist United States interests and marauding Indians.

Members of the Upper Canada Rifles, a mixed bag of lawyers, technicians, bank manager, salesman, policeman, dentist, veterinarian, mechanics and others from the environs of Toronto, fondled the gun along with their own originals and reproductions of the guns which won a country. While a CBC camera crew scanned the sky for a break in the weather which would allow them to film, the riflemen blazed away at targets. In their belts were tomahawks, long knives and dangling powder horns. Heads wore three cornered hats, Scottish glengarrys, furs and a collection of broad brimmed stetsons common among the early settlers. Feathers that could double as

quill pens, sprouted at jaunty angles. Corn cob pipes protruded from mouths.

The Upper Canada Rifles were formed as the result of an antique gun demonstration at Fort York in Toronto in 1960. The group of men asked to stage the show subsequently was asked other places but it wasn't until 1966 they formed a club and called it the Upper Canada Rifles. There are 26 members, most of them with an interest in the history of the country. President is John Barnes from Etobicoke, while the secretary is Frederick F. Froud, a dentist.

They have made films with the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, the National Film Board and segments for the British Broadcasting Corporation. They meet every second month at the 48th Highlanders hall in Toronto and usually stage a shoot. Only muzzle loading rifles are allowed. It is not uncommon for the sharpshooters to attain a perfect score from 25 to 50 yards off the hand and bench rest, and as far away as 100 yards on a rest, to use their parlance.

The Upper Canada Rifles do not charge for appearances but appreciate being paid expenses for powder, percussion caps and flints required to fire their long guns.

**Ideal grounds**  
The home grounds of Hugh MacMillan provided for their

manoeuvres were ideal, they exulted, as they raised the club's emblem, gold letters on a green background.

Hugh MacMillan is a new resident of Nassagaweya with an appreciation of early Canadian history and the North West Company in particular. He and his family moved to the Nassagaweya property in August from Toronto where he holds down the position of liaison officer of the Ontario Archives, a natural job for someone with his bent.

Twenty-five Sideroad bends around his hill, a few yards east of the Guelph Line, where he is building his home. He foraged for logs in counties as far east in Ontario as Glengarry where Scots settled in dense bush and erected log barns and cabins which still stand today. Broad axes are used to trim the logs down to the proper dimensions before they were fitted into walls. Concealed between the logs as well as wooden stuffing are strips of insulation which give added protection from inclement weather.

The method Hugh MacMillan is using to build his house is called post and fill, where a mortice joins a post at the corner, unlike the dovetail joints used in most log buildings in Ontario. Ends are morticed and the ends on the logs cut down to fit in the mortice. Wooden pegs are used to tie it together.

This method of building originated in Brittany, France, and was introduced in New France by settlers from that province. The French influence in the fur trade spread the method still further to the building of fur trading posts. It is still popular in Quebec but outside of the reconstructed Fort William Hugh MacMillan figures it is one of the only buildings in Ontario built in that style.

The MacMillans are now living in a house trailer while their log home is being constructed. Downhill from the main home another log structure is being erected to resemble an early North West Company trading post, where Hugh hopes to have a collection of early Canadian associated with the fur trade.

**Scots' roll call**  
It is likely Hugh MacMillan's interest in the North West Company was kindled by his Scottish ancestry. The company, Canada's first joint stock company of English origin, blended Scots, French and American traders in a venture that centred most of their activity in the Northwest, the region producing the richest and best furs.

The roll call of the company sounded like a Scottish reunion, studded here and there with French names. Their part in developing Canada and the rivalry with the Hudson Bay

Company are all part and parcel of rich Canadian history which bears retelling without the dullness usually associated with this country's story.

In 1821 the two opposing firms joined forces, ending a tumultuous chapter of Canadian history.

In 1967 descendants of the original partners in the company manned replicas of the original fur trade canoes and retraced a section of the fur trade route from Grand Portage, Minnesota, to Montreal. Among those in the craft was Hugh MacMillan, whose ancestor James MacMillan, was a partner in the original company.

He decided at that time to register the old name and seal so he could deal in trade goods and services from those early days and help finance the North West museum in eastern Ontario.

Hugh MacMillan has the happy faculty of being able to combine his Ontario Archives job with his hobby, lecturing on the fur trade routes in Canada. He recently ran for elected office in Nassagaweya township, just to make sure there was an election for deputy reeve.

Nassagaweya seems to have a penchant for collecting unique places and buildings. The MacMillan home and trading post is another.



THESE TWO MEMBERS OF THE Upper Canada Rifles could be coureur de bois with that habitant look and long rifles, huddling around the trading post stove. The guns are replicas of rifles used in the fur trade. —Photos by H. Coles



HOST HUGH MacMILLAN, right, talks with members of the Upper Canada Rifles, in the cosy confines of his future home, on 25 Sideroad, Nassagaweya township.

## Coffee house closed four days

Faced with a large heating bill and growing maintenance costs, the executive of Milton Youth Council has decided to close the Quonsitt Hutt coffee house on Nipissing Rd. for four days this week. It is closed Monday Feb. 5 through Thursday, Feb. 8 but re-opens Friday.

Fund raising events scheduled this month include a five hour concert by Edward Bear plus Polecat on Saturday, Feb. 10 starting at 7 p.m., and the Snow

Festival Dance featuring Breathless on Friday, Feb. 16 at 9 p.m. MYC will give anyone attending the Feb. 16 dance a 25 cent discount if they arrive wearing a snowman tag—the symbol of the festival.

**Movie night**  
A proposed free dance slated for Feb. 10 has been postponed to a later date, the executive reports. A movie night is also being planned for a future date.

To plan more activities for girls, the executive will hold an open meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 13 at 7.30 p.m. All girls interested should attend this meeting.

*J.W. MacDonald*

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