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At Pagwa is the school, business and road that Hugo built

Pioneer of the north finds his place in Canadian history

If the days of Canada's pioneers were waning by the time Hugo Ericson came to this country—the native Swede did his best to revive them.

He had never worn a pair of mittens until he came to Canada in February, 1925. His new home was Pagwa River, about 200 miles north west of Timmins. He followed a Swedish friend's footsteps, taking a job with the railway but didn't follow that path too long.

The store owner at the small settlement was having financial problems and owed Mr. Ericson some money. His debt was paid by selling the young man his business at a reduced price.

The store carried everything from traps and canoes to dry goods, groceries and hardware, while also serving as a trading post.

"I tried to do the right thing and paid good money for furs," he recalls.

The Hudson Bay Co. was his competition in the settlement of about 1,000 people. Mr. Ericson soon became multi-lingual and attracted French Canadian trappers by speaking their language. His clientel also necessitated the learning of the Cree language.

The 79-year-old remembers one particularly good season when he bought more than \$100,000 worth of furs. His main market was a company in New York where more money was offered for the trappers' wares.

The memories of his years in the north were stirred recently by Jennifer Hawes, one of nine grandchildren. She visited him at the hospital where he was recovering from a mild stroke and brought with her a number of old photographs and a newspaper clipping.

Jennifer thought her grandfather would have time to organize his memorabilia while he was laid up. Mr. Ericson's doctor saw the yellowed newspaper clipping which



Photo by Jon Borgstrom

Hugo Ericson may have sold the business he carved in northern Ontario to retire here but he still has a pioneer heart. This fruit tree has so far escaped the bite of his saw blade, an apricot tree was not so lucky. Removing them from his backyard is a simple task

compared to one he undertook more than 30 years ago when he felled hundreds of trees to create a road to Pagwa River from the main highway.

was sent to his patient several years ago.

The man under his care was featured in an "It happened in Canada" piece. The graphic showed a man chopping trees and the caption gave an idea of the extent of the woodsman's work.

Mr. Ericson was given credit for almost

single-handedly creating a road from Pagwa River to the main highway. Before he can relate the tale of carving a road out of the forest, Mr. Ericson must tell about his family.

He and his wife Greta had three daughters. When they reached school-age

there was nowhere close by where they could attend school. The problem wasn't long-lived because their father built one.

After contracting the inspector of public schools for the area, he and some helpers began to build the log schoolhouse. That was in 1945 and within five years Mr. Ericson

realized when his daughters were old enough to attend high school at Hearst, the railway couldn't be relied upon to allow weekend visits.

The thought of being able to see them regularly if there was a road joining Pagwa River and the main highway, started him on the 10-year project. After the Ministry of Natural Resources completed a survey of the proposed road, Mr. Ericson was left to construct it.

The project cost him thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours. At times volunteers would help him and he hired labourers occasionally. He used axes and saws and went through several pieces of earth moving equipment during the course of the construction.

He doesn't begrudge his investment however and admits "it paid for itself." Transport trucks were able to deliver goods to his store at a much cheaper rate than the railway had in the past.

His daughters got their high school education and each of them completed post secondary programs. One, Jennifer's mother, became a teacher at E. C. Drury School for the Hearing Impaired.

It is that school which inadvertently brought her parents to Milton. The move was Greta's idea but one could hardly blame her for wanting a more modern environment. In 1966 the American radar base near the settlement was closed and with it went hydro and telephone service.

They had lived without these luxuries before but this time the pioneer spirit wasn't there. The settlement is a ghost town today, although the log schoolhouse is still standing. Mr. Ericson's road is still there too.

"Up north there were so many things we had to do to get along. At the time I built the road I never thought the people would die out," said Mr. Ericson.

When they did, a friend who was a school inspector recommended Milton as the Ericson's new home. Don Kennedy, who was instrumental in starting E.C. Drury school, was that friend.

Mr. Ericson lived with his wife until she died eight years ago. He still lives in the house on Wakefield Rd. which they bought 17 years ago.

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