Russell birth riddle . . .

Centennial snuffed?

Evidence that the Russell Village centennial was looming unnoticed has led to an even more disturbing development: Russell may never have a centennial; it's birthday may be lost forever.

The news in the February issue of the Castor Review that Russell would be 100 next year, according to an old souvenir booklet, prompted a number of local residents to rush for confirmation. They did not want their community to become the first in Canada to forget its centennial, if the booklet proved correct.

What the researchers were not prepared for was the possibility that, not only would 1880 seem unfounded as the year Russell was christened, but that the real date was unrecorded. Yet, that appears to be the case.

Although the research is on going, it is not entirely unthinkable that the village may still be officially Duncanville, as it was originally named in honor of the first settler and in the absence of concrete proof to the contrary (in which case the centennial would have been in 1952).

Russell Postmaster Pierre Robinson, who has been heading the research, said that no documents have turned up to show that Duncanville was ever officially dropped in favor of Russell as the village name. The channels where such documents are normally traced have all but been exhausted and Mr. Robinson is urging residents to "search their attics" for any clues that might help solve the riddle.

"The person who finds the answer to this will be a hero," he said.

So far, researchers have contacted at least a dozen public and private sources, including National Archives, Ontario Archives, field services branch of the Ministry of Intergovernmental Affairs, Heritage Canada, Statistics Canada, Energy, Mines and Resources Canada, National Postal Museum, Prescott-Russell counties office, Russell Township office, Russell registry office, Russell's own Tweedsmuir History, Ottawa Public Library and Ottawa City Hall.

What has turned up is this:

In 1848, Russell post office was established, taking its name from the township and county which had been named for Honorable Peter Russell, (1733-1808), former administrator of the government of Upper Canada. The village had been widely known as Duncanville and was officially proclaimed such in 1852 in honor of William Duncan, one of the first settlers and the first postmaster.

From then on things get sketchy. In the years preceding the turn of the century, the village assumed the name Russell, it seems, by osmosis. Records show that the village was still known as Duncanville in 1883 but that it was called Russell when it received police village status in 1898.

Is 1898 the magic year? Maybe but there is no indication that police village status entailed a name change. The implication is that the village was already officially known as Russell ... since when and by whose order?

Russell Phair, the former village fire chief who produced the commemorative booklet in which 1880 was cited as the year Duncanville died and Russell was born, has not been able to trace the source of the information. However, he believes the year is accurate and is continuing his search. More details of village history and of Honorable Peter Russell, as compiled by residents Betty and Jim Kidd, can be found on page 6.

Could they help?

Either one of the two unidentified ladies in this jaunty carriage could probably shed some light on the puzzle surrounding Russell's birth — if only pictures could talk. The photo was taken at the turn of the century when Russell was definitely Russell and its birthday was probably fresh in people's minds. In the background are the original public library (left) and public school, both of which were located where the Russell post office is today and which were destroyed in the fire of 1915. The photo was reproduced from an old glass negative. (Courtesy of Edgar Loucks).

Suspects charged in breakins

Casselman OPP have charged two men in connection with three breakins and thefts totalling more than $10,000 in the Castor area since Christmas.

They also charged a man in connection with two breakins and thefts and car theft in August and September and a man in connection with the possession of $20,000 worth of stolen goods in what they believe was part of the smashing of a major theft ring in Eastern Ontario. They also laid a charge of arson and are investigating the complaint of a Russell man who said he was beaten senseless and left to freeze outside.

David Walsh, of Ottawa, and Claude Patenaude, of Russell, both 18, were charged with break, enter and theft in connection with incidents at St. Joseph separate school in Russell and the home of Alain Dagenais of Marionville from Jan. 12-15. Of $6,500 in merchandise stolen in the breakins, $1,200 has been recovered.

Walsh was charged separately in connection with a third breakin and theft at the home of Ronald Bielski, of Russell, Dec. 24. None of the $2,570 in stolen property, part of which belonged to Russell Veterinarian Geoff Cochrane, owner of the house, has been recovered.

OPP Constable Gilles Marinier, who investigated the breakins, said Walsh and Patenaude offered no resistance when arrested at an Ottawa rooming house Jan. 16. Both men will appear at a preliminary hearing March 22.

Charges were laid against Peter Todd Bourassa, of Russell, in connection with a breakin and theft of pension cheques at the Russell post office Sept. 2 and a breakin and theft of a .22-cal. rifle at the residence of Lola Wood, of Russell, Aug. 31 and the theft of a car owned by Lorne Honey, of Russell, Sept. 2. The car was recovered at a Nepean car lot. Bourassa will appear at a preliminary hearing April 5. He also faces charges of armed robbery in Toronto.

Meanwhile, police have closed the file on a breakin and assault at the home of Meredith and Lois Rombough, of Russell, at Christmas. Constable Marinier said the perpetrator is believed to be a man charged with other breakins in the area but difficulty in identification prevented the laying of charges. Mr. and Mrs. Rombough were brutally attacked when they surprised an intruder in their home.

Sidewalk Talk

By Mark Van Dusen

How about Settlers' Day

Sunny summer day — ladies in poke bonnets and bright gingham dresses strolling, men in wide-brimmed hats snapping reins, friskey horses chomping bits, wagons rattling, buggies squeaking, pig-tailed girls skipping, red-braced boys at mumblety-peg.

It could be a buzzing street scene in Duncanville (perhaps soon to be Russell) 100 years ago and it could be relived in honor of village heritage and history.

The question now is not when Russell will celebrate its centennial (if it's not already too late) but whether it has a centennial to celebrate. The mystery of the village's christening is not the most important thing — it may never be settled.

What's more important is the interest in the village past that the issue is generating. Residents want to know more of these guys Mattice and Duncan who trekked from Cornwall and Baie des Chaleurs in 1841 to hack room on the riverbank for a sawmill and an oatmeal mill.

They want to know more of this flamboyant Irishman Russell, reputed land-grabber and slave dealer, who gave his name to the county, township and, somehow, the village.

They want to know more of the river, of the origin of its French name for the animal that has become Canada's national symbol, of the power it must have once had to drive numerous mills, of huge logs being floated down its swirling expanse to be fashioned into ships masts, of ash and hickory similarly transported to be carved into axe handles by Indian craftsmen.

They want to know more about the runaway slave stonemason who built one of the finest and oldest houses in the Castor area, of the vanished settlements of Luxembourg, Felton and North Russell that today would be within a three-minute drive by car of Russell.

They want to know more of the village which, according to historical records of 1880, was "represented by a population of 300 souls, woolen, saw and grist mills, nine stores, three hotels, a fine brick registry office built at a cost of $7,500, Division Court office and the usual list of minor establishments of industry and trade."

Yes, people want to know more about the village history, so why not relive it — within modern means, of course — in the form of a Settlers Day, Heritage Day, whatever, right here in Russell.

Part of the main street could be closed, period costumes and transportation could be the vogue. There could be sidewalk demonstrations of soap-making, bread-baking, meat smoking, barrel making, timber squaring, harness-making, rug braiding, quilt making, weaving, wool spinning, carding, pottery and other ancestral arts and crafts.

There could be competitions: tobacco spitting, canoe and raft racing, corn husking and hoop rolling. There could be an old-time street dance in the evening. An illustrated pamphlet on village history could be circulated. There could be tours of some of the older buildings and farm visits for those less-acquainted with that most ancient of lifestyles.

Such an event could be annual — not just a once-in-a-lifetime centennial celebration — as a way of actively learning the village history and commemorating the work of its pioneers.