

PIONEER BURIAL SITE BROUGHT TO LIGHT.

by Lewis Zandbergen

In late November of 1998 an archeological dig was undertaken at the site of the Horton Burying Ground on the village of Stirling's eastern limits. The dig was made necessary to allow the construction of a strip plaza, now known as The Creekside Centre. I wrote an article for both *The Community Press* and *The Beacon*, a publication of the Quinte Branch Ontario Genealogical Society. At that time it was hoped a memorial would be placed on the site but this has not yet happened. That article is reprinted here with amendments made to take into account events which have taken place since 1998.

In 1812, the settlement which would one day become Stirling, consisted of not more than a rudimentary mill, perhaps two, several scattered dwellings on small farm plots and perhaps a dozen or so people. Just to the east of the present day fire hall and municipal garages, a gentle slope provided a view of the rolling Oak Hills to the south. This site was the first ground in the area chosen for use as a cemetery. Perhaps it was chosen to serve as a reminder to the people who settled the area, that their roots lay in that direction for many were the sons and daughters of United Empire Loyalists. That gentle rise would become the last resting place of some of those earliest settlers—members of the Horton family.

Now, almost 200 years later, the graves, divested of their markers, lie under a field which is yearly filled with crops, sometimes wheat, other times corn; over the years (roughly since 1920) the grave markers have been removed in order for the farm to be used to optimum capacity. Fancy carved stone monuments, some in pieces, now lie in a jumbled heap around the base of an old pine tree. To those passionate about our history, it's a sad sight.

Because he was planning a large development for the site and because he was concerned the site be preserved to honour pioneers, property owner Charles Cleaver decided to take the first step to insure the graves would not be disturbed. On April 24, 1998, witcher or douser Kryn Vandermei, then general manager of Little Lake Cemetery Company, Peterborough, Ontario, was at the site to determine just where the graves of about 15 people lay. Although most are familiar with witching for water, the witching or dousing method can also be used to determine the location of human remains.

Unwavering concentration, a steady measured pace and faith in the simplest of tools have led to Mr. Vandermei uncovering many "lost" graveyards.

Mr. Vandermei began by simply flagging the general area thought to contain human remains. Then he

wove a crisscross pattern over the site beginning at the north end of the site and advancing south a foot or two at a time. He'd barely made his third or fourth pass over the area when the tines of his dousing equipment reacted and crossed as if by magic. Once it had been established that this was a positive site, Mr. Vandermei went over the area again. Slowly a pattern emerged. In the space of about one hour he had neatly marked out the locations of 14 grave sites with little flags. He said, however, there could be more citing the high mortality rate among infants and their mothers who might have died during the childbirth process.

"These could have been buried together," he said.

It's believed the first burial at the site occurred in 1812 when Jonathon Horton (1741-1812) was interred; his wife Hannah (1746-1815) was also buried on the site. They arrived in the area some time between 1803 and 1810; they and perhaps two more generations are thought to be buried on the site.

Once the cemetery had been witched, giving the approximate locations of any bodies interred there, the work of determining within reason the locations of interments began.

November 19, 1998, Erinsville-based archeological consultant Carl Murphy and his assistant, Bob Young, began patiently scraping away the layers to determine just exactly how big the cemetery was and how many interments there were during the time it was an active burial site. Carl and Bob used small hand trowels to painstakingly peel back the layers of soil and by Friday, November 27, they had ascertained the last resting places of at least 20 people—adults, teenagers and children. This is more than originally thought.

Carl began his work with little optimism. After preliminary work had begun he felt the possibility of finding proof of remains unlikely, saying he had excavated 1,000-year-old native sites with more definite proof of human occupation. He described how he was looking for different shading in the soil; a different colour of earth in a definite shape would denote refilled grave shafts. However, Carl felt that many decades of ploughing, the interference of groundhogs (their filled in shafts were a pale brown in comparison to the lighter sand of the level at which excavation began) and many years of steady erosion could have caused any remains on the hillside site to be scattered all over the rest of the field.

But by late Thursday, November 26, he was convinced of the number of graves in the burial ground. By the morning of Friday, November 27, 1998, the evidence was there for anybody to see. Twenty graves lay outlined with string and the pattern of the