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Liskeard's Founder's Death Recalls Early Days of North

The Late John Armstrong Founded Town on Banks of Wabis River in 1893. Few Families Living at Haileybury at That Time. Late Mr. Armstrong First Reeve of Dymont and First Mayor in North.

The death of John Armstrong, reference to which was made in The Advance last week, recalls to many the early history of the North Land. The late Mr. Armstrong was the real

founder of the town of New Liskeard, though one other family resided here before he did. He was the first reeve of Dymont township, and as the first mayor of New Liskeard he was also the first mayor in the North Land. He was energetic, able and public-spirited and his memory should not be soon forgotten.

Under the heading "New Liskeard: Past and Present," the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation issue of The New Liskeard Speaker last June very effectively reviewed the history of Temiskaming, which was very largely interwoven with the story of the life of John Armstrong. The Speaker said:—

It is a far cry from the bush site for a town which Mr. John Armstrong found on the banks of the Wabis River in the year 1893 to the prosperous agricultural and manufacturing town of New Liskeard of 1927.

In dealing with the past and present of New Liskeard, even though we heretofore told the story and many of our readers are familiar with it, we must tell it again in this our Jubilee number of The Speaker for the information of those who were not residents here in the early days.

During the summer of 1893 the Hon. A. S. Hardy, then Commissioner of Crown Lands, asked Mr. John Armstrong, at that time the reeve of the Township of Chaffey, Muskoka, to visit Temiskaming, report on the agricultural possibilities of the district, and if it suited him, to open an agency for the sale of Crown Lands, or, in other words, to accept the office of Crown Lands agent for Temiskaming. Had Mr. Armstrong given an unfavourable report the settlement of this country, and the discovery of the richest silver and gold mines in the world would have long been delayed.

Mr. Armstrong arrived at Haileybury some time in August, 1893, and then paddled up to the Wabis river where lived Mr. William Murray and his sister Miss Beavis. At his time there were a few families living in Haileybury and quite naturally they would have liked to have had the Crown Lands agency in that village;

but Mr. Armstrong thought that as his duties would bring him in contact with those who wanted land, it would be more satisfactory to all concerned if he were to open his office at a point where settlement would be likely to start.

Mr. Murray owned the two lots next the lake, one on each side of the river, having purchased them from Chief Wabis. On the north of the river Mr. Murray had a clearing of about five acres, but the lot on the south side was all bush. This lot was purchased by Mr. Armstrong before he returned to his Muskoka home.

As soon as navigation on Lake Temiskaming was open in the spring following Mr. Armstrong returned to his townsite on the Wabis river; but this time he brought with him his family and a number of men for clearing land. Also, he brought a large tent in which the family lived until such time as a house could be built.

Here we might remark that Mr. Armstrong having accepted the Crown Lands Agency, sold several lots during the winter previous to the opening of his office here, the purchasers taking chances without seeing the land, and making a first payment of 25 cents per acre. None of them, however, regretted the purchases made. Had they done so when they came to see their locations during the following summer there were plenty of new-comers ready to give these men something for their bargains and take the land. Of course those who purchased land from the agent before he opened his office here made selections as near the Wabis river and lake as they could, and hence they had land which soon became valuable.

It will be of interest to later arrivals, and more especially to those who now cannot purchase more than 80 acres, to know that the first purchasers of Crown land in Temiskaming were allowed a full lot of 320 acres each. But the agent saw that if this wholesale method of selling so much land to each purchaser were to continue the country would be sparsely settled and that many years would elapse ere the land would be cleared. Representations were made to the Department of Lands, and the change was made allowing one purchaser only one-half a section.

Soon after the change was made, however, there was "trouble in the camp." Newcomers did not take kindly to the idea of being restricted to only half the land first-comers had, and decided that it were better that all should be treated alike. In order to give effect to their views they petitioned the Minister of Lands to compel those holding 320 acres to give up half their land. The Hon. E. J. Davis had become Crown Lands Commissioner by this time. He decided that the first arrivals in Temiskaming who had purchased full lots in faith should be allowed to retain this land.

In early days when there were no roads, it will be understood it was of great advantage to a farmer to have his home as close to New Liskeard as possible, and that if all who held 320 acres each had to give up half a section this would enable more farmers to get land where there were roads.

And there was also a little friction caused by "land-jumpers," or "squatters," a number of men who would settle on land which the owner had temporarily vacated while on a business trip or a visit to his old home in the south. But public opinion did not sympathize with the squatters nor did the Government recognize their claims.



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But neither the embryo town nor the district could prosper unless a railroad were built into the country; and this road could not be built except by the Government. Several years previously a charter had been granted to a company to build a railroad from North Bay to James Bay, but capitalists would not venture putting their money into the undertaking.

Doubtless during the winters of upwards of thirty years ago, when the only means of getting in touch with the outside world was by walking or driving over the ice to the foot of the lake, 70 or 80 miles, the question of railroad extension from North Bay must have been the chief topic of discussion. It was known that the Liberal Government of the Hon. George Ross was alive to the importance of the people of Southern Ontario getting in touch by rail with this North Land. It was a Liberal Government which had opened up the country for settlement and it would have been disastrous if the people who had settled here found it necessary to leave the country because of lack of railway connection with the outside parts of the Province. So it may be understood that the Ross Government was quite anxious to undertake the building of the road; but the Government majority was small at this time and most likely the Premier was afraid to risk bringing before the House a bill assuming responsibility to build the road as a Government undertaking.

Evidently some of our pioneers saw that if the Conservative members of the Legislature would join the Government in undertaking the work as a Government railway the work would be accomplished. But could the leader of the Opposition be won over? Certainly not by such Liberals as Mr. John Armstrong and Mr. Angus A. McKelvie. But what these men did do was to go to the Toronto Board of Trade and win that body over, and then the executive of the Board of Trade went to Sir James Whitney. The outcome was that Sir James and

The Premier came to a definite understanding, a bill was brought down in the Legislature and authority obtained for the road to be built by the Government. Soon thereafter Mr. A. R. Maedonnell was awarded the contract. The road was hurriedly built, mines discovered, and a new era dawned on the North Land.

The New Liskeard of 1927 is a pretty and picturesque town with a population of about 3,500, and had an assessment last year of \$1,861,340. The town is the head office of Hill-Clark-Francis, builders and contractors, of the Temiskaming Telephone Co., the George Taylor Hardware with branches in Cobalt, Timmins, and Cochrane, and in the course of a short time will be the head office of the Northern Ontario Light and Power Co. The large three storey brick building which has been built for office purposes is nearly completed.

An indication of New Liskeard's importance as a manufacturing town may be formed when we say that Messrs Hill-Clark-Francis employ locally 100 men, The Wabi Iron Works employ 70 men, The Shepherdson Manufacturing Co. employ in and out of town, 33 men, and the Messrs Eplett & Sons employ 16 men, and pay annually for milk and cream upwards of one hundred thousand dollars.