

Six original families

Hamlet spirit alive for Cedar Grove

This is the second in a series on Markham hamlets. Freelance writer Nancy Hoskin talked to long-time residents to prepare this report.

By NANCY HOSKIN

Things aren't like they used to be in Cedar Grove. But how could they be, after a major expropriation move in the 1970s claimed most of the land.

But though some have moved away, and the hamlet is only a shadow of its former self, the community still retains the spirit which has kept it on the map for so many years.

Cedar Grove was once a bustling farm community. Settled by six founding families, including the Dimmas and Reesors around 1803, its location on the Little Rouge River made it a natural place to build sawmills and grist mills.

A general store, school, tavern, hotel, Mennonite Church and blacksmith shop soon followed. Later, a coopersage supplying barrels for the mills, including the flour mill and later for the cider mill, was opened.

Cedar Grove's community spirit soared winter and summer. The mill ponds provided Cedar Grove with its skating rinks, but through flood damage the ponds gradually disappeared. Then in 1927, Cedarena, an outdoor skating rink was built and became a popular attraction. People still flock to the secluded location and take advantage of the pot-belly stoves to warm their hands or heat up some hot chocolate.

Many Markham families would spend summer days picnicking at Woodland Park and more than 1,000 visitors often attended the annual Cedar Grove Garden Party where local and hired talent performed in an outdoor amphitheatre each summer.

"The Garden Party was a monstrous affair. We all had so much fun performing and dressing in our costumes," said Della Dimma, recalling the event while looking at the old photo album.

As the years went by, the community prospered and grew. But in 1972, the hamlet was dealt a severe blow when the federal government expropriated most of the land for a proposed airport.

The residents, supported by a great many Markhamites, formed the People or Planes (POP) group and put up a great fight. POP finally succeeded in having the airport project put on the back burner, but unfortunately for Cedar Grove, it wasn't until after the expropriation had taken place.

By the time the federal government was through, the small farming community saw more than 41,000 acres of land expropriated. That took in all of Cedar Grove, less 1 1/2 acres.

Lorne Dimma is one of the only two residents in the hamlet who has retained his home and half-acre tree and clear. The original Dimma lot held the cottage, his father's large farm house and 100 acres of land.

Today, some of the leased land is farmed. The hamlet also has the Cedar Grove Cider and Vinegar Works still in operation. Established in 1885 by Peter Lapp, the factory produces apple butter, cider and vinegar.

Between the good and bad times few people have left the hamlet and several families like the Reesors and Dimmas have made it their home for their entire lives.

With 126 acres of land on the outskirts of the hamlet still being farmed by his son and grandsons, Simeon Reesor, 89, recalled his early years in Cedar Grove where he has lived all his life.

"I used to farm this land with two teams of horses. I took over from my father. Now you need a college education to run a farm. I shouldn't have been able to stop going to school at Grade 7, but that's how times have changed," said Mr. Reesor.

Three generations live in the Reesor farm house which was built in 1890.

According to Lorne Dimma there is a sprinkling of young newcomers to the area, but many of the residents are in their 80s, with a few in their 90s. He said the formula for the long lives of the Cedar Grove residents is, "hard work without giving up."

"I've always planned on living until the year 2000. I'll be 90 and eight days old and will have seen two Haley's comets," he concluded.



The Lapp Brothers Cider mill produces cider and vinegar even though the building looks deserted from the road.
— Sjoerd Witteveen



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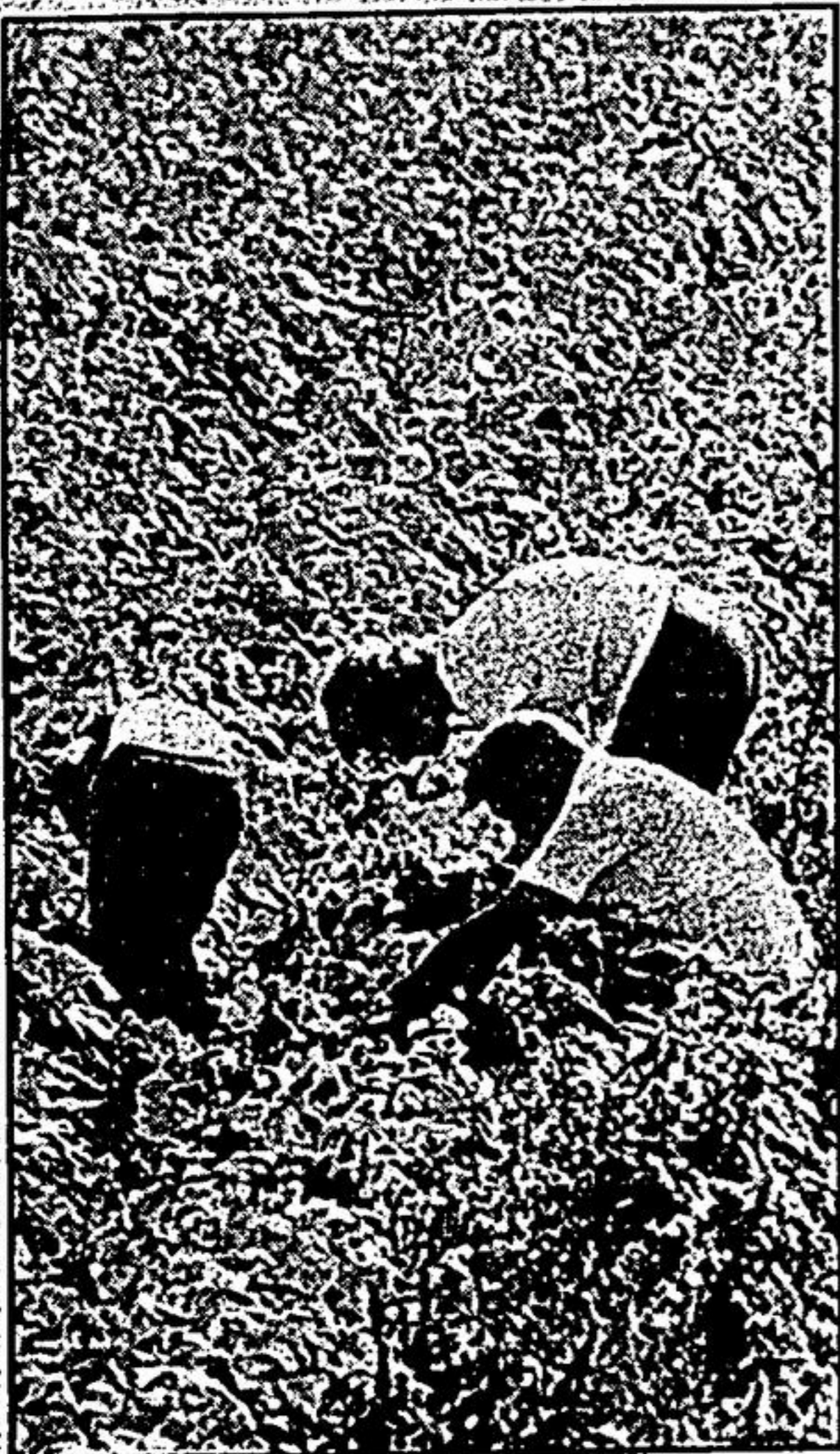
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At Whittamore Farms near Cedar Grove, a family picks yellow beans. Even though the land has been expropriated much farming is still going on in the area.

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