

Memories of a bygone day

Beloved Bethesda resident left us a rural chronicle

By SELENA ATKINSON (1877-1972)

Times have changed since I was a little girl. Everything is speeded up and travelling is much faster — cars, electricity, radio, telephone have all come into use since I was a girl.

The first time I went to Toronto, I was 10 years old (1887). We started off at midnight with the sleigh and horses. Mother made a lunch for us. We stopped at the "Golden Lion" and here father fed the horses. After we rested and had our lunch we went into the city to shop. We left the city around 3 o'clock and arrived home at 8 o'clock.

The next time I went to the city

was to the Exhibition, by train from Aurora, with my parents. On the grounds of the Exhibition the first electric car was being demonstrated. I thought I would never want to ride on one of them. The horse cars were still in use in the city at that time, but shortly after, the electric cars were running in the city, and then they came north to Richmond Hill. Soon I had my first ride to the city, so I went on them after all.

My grandfather came to Canada from England in 1830. He was a carpenter by trade and worked on the first parliament buildings in Toronto. He and grandmother lived at Victoria Square (it was called Reid's Corner then) for

several years, and then moved to Bethesda. My father was nine years old when they move. All the land was covered with trees. It meant a lot of hard work to clear the land. They burned a lot of timber just to get rid of it, by piling up the logs in huge piles and setting fire to them. The stumps of the trees were standing very thick in the fields, but in time they were removed by stumping machines. A Mr. King had a stumping machine and spent all his time going around taking out stumps.

The men used to have "wood bees". They would help each other cut logs with cross-cut saws, one man on each end of the saw. Sometimes they would race to see

which couple could saw their log up first. Then the lady of the house would have a good supper ready for the men, as this hard work made them very hungry.

We made soap in those days too, using wood ashes with fat. They put the fat and rind into a big black kettle out doors and boiled it. The fat was from butchering of hogs. The meat was cured and smoked. When the fat mixture was boiled down, they added water which had drained off a box of ashes (this was the lye). This made a nice jelly and that was soft soap.

We also used to bake in a big outdoor oven made of bricks. We could bake a dozen loaves at one time. I remember the first bread I baked in it myself. There was a big dinner bell on our house to call the men to dinner, when they were working in the fields, because very few men had watches.

One of the pleasant things for me was when mother had a dressmaker come to make a dress for me. The dressmaker would go to several homes to do sewing. A neighbour lady used to knit me fancy white stockings and her husband used to mend our shoes.

My grandfather and my father who were carpenters often made coffins. I remember a small one my father made for a little child. I helped my mother make the pretty lining for it. My father sometimes had to make them on Sunday, and he said the hammering would sound so loud, for Sundays in those days were very quiet.

My grandfather helped build the church at Bethesda and he was the first Sunday School Superintendent. My mother was presented with some books by the Sunday School in 1869 and 1870 for her perfect attendance. One of the ministers (Rev. W.P. Brown) held meetings for the children on Friday afternoons at the church. The children left school at last recess and went to the church.

We used to walk to Sunday School and church most of the time, sometimes we went in sleighloads behind teams of horses. The horses were tied in the big shed by the church. Sometimes our church had a garden party, everybody in the community would come, and we set tables up on the lawn. At one garden party our doctor came. He was Dr. Sangster, and he brought a friend with him, his name was MacKenzie King, who later became Prime Minister of Canada.

The first community picnic I can remember was when I was 10 years old. I can still see the big tin pails of lemonade with tin dippers in them. We had harvest some services in the fall of the year and the meal was served in the church shed, after the meal we went into the church for a special service. The lamp posts were decorated with leaves and pretty red berries, and fruit and vegetables and flowers were arranged on the platform.

In the winter we used to have singing schools taught by different men with musical talent.

One time Indians used to camp in a big bush not far from us. We used to go and visit them and watch them make baskets. We still have baskets in our home which those Indians made.

The first school at Bethesda was on the corner across from the church, it was built of logs. This brick school was built in 1872. This school had no basement, but had large entry rooms to hang coats and hats, and put our dinner pails, there was lots of room to play there too and in winter these entry rooms were heated by big box stoves that burned logs. In the school room there was a platform at one end. The desks faced the platform in rows. Two people sat at each desk, often an older child with a younger one, because everybody was in the same room. We used to write on slates with scratchy slate pencils. Older children would help the younger ones with their spelling, and help them read. We used to have spelling matches and arithmetic matches. The contestants would stand in rows facing one another and the schoolmaster would give us words to spell or oral arithmetic.

The school burned down in 1892 from an overheated stove. While the new school was being built we had school in a shed on the farm of our schoolmaster Mr. Pike.

I think the highlight of our schooldays was our Christmas examination time. Mr. Pike had us well drilled in reading lessons and singing. Best of all was the candy and nuts, and the good taffy he used to make. The girls always had nice new aprons for that day. Our schoolmaster Mr. Pike taught in the Bethesda school for 45 years.

We had lots of fun in our home because there was a large family. The boys played football and baseball. We had a big swing and a whirlingig, and a teeter-totter. Our father built my sister and I a real playhouse.

Often neighbour ladies would come to visit and bring their knitting, the little children came too and we had tea parties together.

On Sunday mornings while the boys of our family were cleaning up, we girls washed the dishes and while we were working, we all would sing, so we had a choir at home.

We used candles and oil lamps to light our homes. My mother used to make the candles. We girls had to clean the glass lamp chimneys, trim the wicks, and keep the lamps filled with oil.

The young people did a lot of skating on the pond at Pike's. They played hockey every Saturday afternoon. They often changed their skates in our kitchen and walked to the pond.

The community used to have oyster suppers held in the homes. We had games before supper and after the dishes were all washed. Sometimes it was nearly morning when we arrived home.

We used to have apple paring bees. The neighbors would help each other. We had some apple peelers, the rest would use paring knives. We finished up with lunch. The next day was the busy day making sauce, outside in big copper kettles. We boiled cider first, then put the apples in, and each one had to take his turn stirring the apple sauce, and keeping the fire going.

The ladies held carpet rag bees too. They got together and sewed rags in long strips and rolled them into balls ready for the weaver. The lady of the home made a big supper for everybody.

I also remember the first shower given by the community for a couple getting married.

In the winter we would go to our community gatherings in the sleigh behind a team of horses. I remember one night a sleigh load of us went to Stouffville to a skating carnival. It was cold, and we had to wrap up well in blankets and robes. We often went to other churches on special occasions in sleigh loads. It was always very cheerie to hear the sleigh or cutter bells. We learned to know the sound of the different bells and could identify the people before we could see them. We would stand outside and listen to the bells and would be ready for our sleigh load. There were no telephones then to tell us when they would arrive. We walked in the summer time because there was no room for many people in the buggies. One time we borrowed a three seater light wagon to go to my brother's wedding.

The first store at Bethesda was on Lot 3. When the second store was built at the corner it also became the post office. Before that the mail was delivered to Gormley. We used to like to get the mail and take it to our neighbours.

There was once an old saw-mill at the corner on the townline (where the waterfall is yet). There were a lot of logs and lumber where the beautiful grounds are now. I often had a ride on a load of logs when I was going to school. This mill later became a cider mill, and later still it was a grist mill where farmers brought their grain to be ground into chop for their cows and pigs. My father built the first mill for Mr. Lewis. My father was 21 years old at the time. West of the mill was a cheese factory.

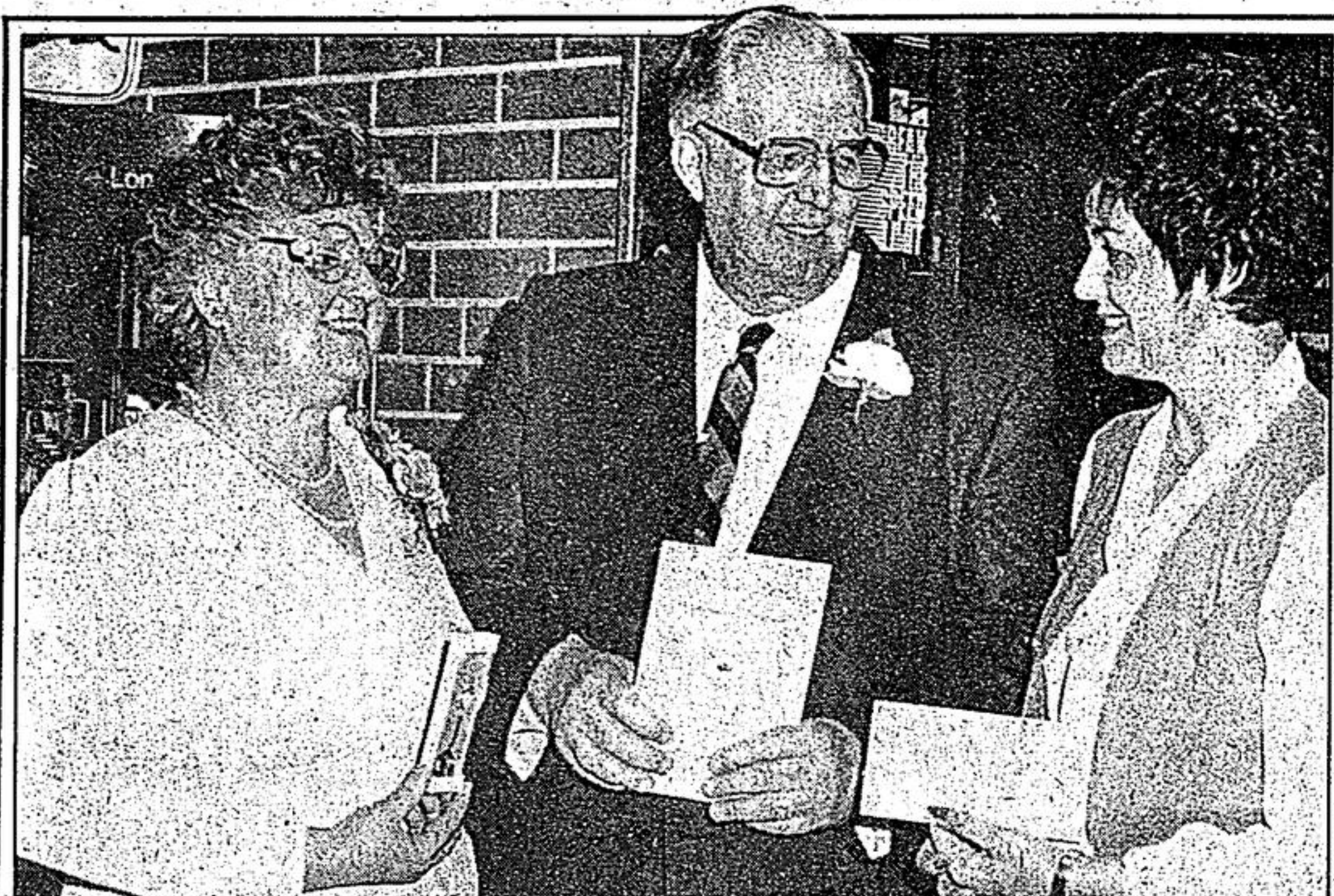
There used to be a saw mill on the corner of the Vandorf Road and the Fifth Concession too.

One of our neighbours used to make straw hats.

In the early days the farmers harvested their grain by hand using an instrument called a cradle. They went round and round the field cutting the grain by hand. Then the grain was gathered into bundles and bound by hand. The grain was threshed by horse power, but the stocks and pods of peas were spread on the barn floor and flailed by hand. The flail was a stick with heavy leather pieces on one end. The men beat the pods with these to get the peas.

In the spring most of the people made maple syrup, for there were a lot of maple trees. We used to have "taffy pulls" and sugaring off parties" in the maple woods. The maple sugar was used in the homes.

We had a good time when I was young, we had to work hard — but we were taught "to work and not to shirk." Many changes have taken place since I was young and many more things will change, but I have many pleasures to remember of the days gone by.



Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor Fran Sainsbury chats with Keith and Mary Hutchinson during a recent retirement party for the couple. They recently sold their John Deere dealership, Hutchinson Farm Supply on Hwy. 48. — Jim Thomas

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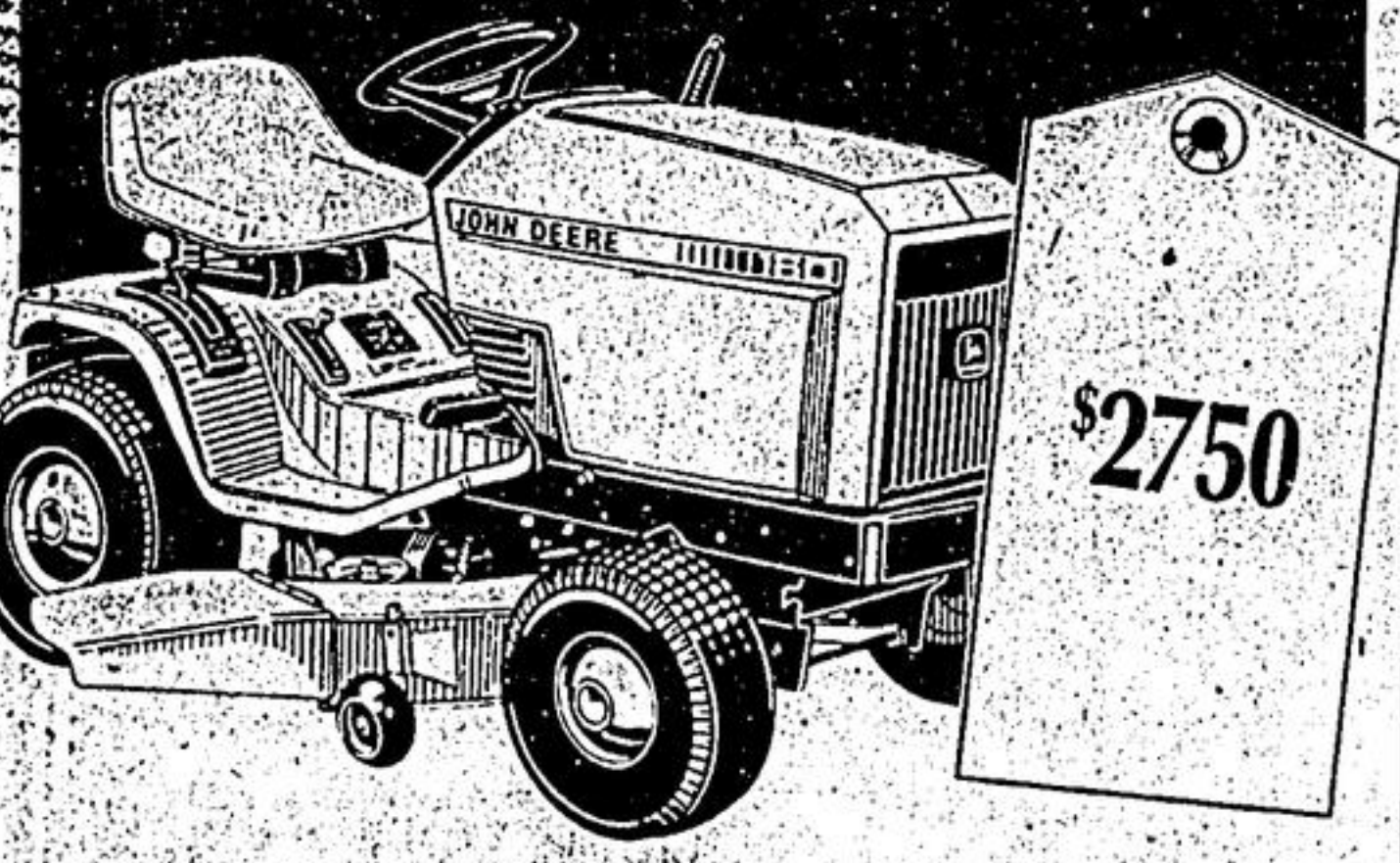
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