Looking at Toogood Pond

Mill was Unionville's backbone

By LARRY RAINEY

With summer fleeting, the best swimming and boating weather fading, the passing of the season often causes us to remember seasons of the past.

As one gazes across the Toogood Pond in Unionville, with late summer breezes rippling its surface, you can't help but wonder about the history of this small, but picturesque body of water.

How did the pond originate? We know it wasn't always like it is today, with modern dam, boardwalks and parklands. How did previous generations use this restful spot?

The history of Toogood Pond dates back nearly a century and a half to the creation of a mill pond by Ira White around 1840. White built a grist mill about the same time, just east of Main Street across from what is now the Presbyterian church.

His milling operation was known as Union Mills and the small hamlet which was just developing along the sixth concession of Markham (now Main Street and Kennedy Road) took its name, presumably, from the mill which was the economic centre of the community.

The mill dam was, of course, originally constructed of wood and required periodic repair and upgrading. By the early 1900s gasoline and then electric power supplanted water power as the energy source for the mill.

In 1918, the Economist and Sun reported on a wash-out of the dam and related some of its history:

"August 1, 1918

The mill dam here on the River Rouge gave way on Friday evening about 8 o'clock. When first noticed the water was coming through in a small trickle and it is surmised that a muskrat had buried under the dam through the bank causing the break. The little trickle developed into a rushing stream in a moment, then into a rushing torrent as about 25 feet of the dam gave way and the waters of Willow Lake escaped with a rush, overflowing the flats and causing a property loss of about $1,000. The dam and grist mill was first built by Ira White about 1840 and passed into the possession of his son-in-law, the late H.P. Crosby about 1860 who did a large milling and elevator business until about 1895 when the property passed into the possession of Mrs. C.S. Carleton of Toronto, who still owns it. The mill at present is under lease to Hubert Stephenson. The Union Mills after which the village of Unionville was named did a large Country trade of late years. It is very questionable if the dam will be rebuilt as it is estimated that it will take $1,500 to $2,000 to repair it. The owner it is said offers $50 if the village will raise the balance. Mrs. Carleton thinks that it is more to the interest of the village to have a fine pond with its bathing and boating facilities than it is to hers from a financial standpoint. The ratepayers take the other view."

It is interesting to note the reference to the pond as "Willow Lake". In fact, Toogood Pond has had several different names over the years.

During the 1920s, it was often referred to as "Stevenson's pond", after the miller mentioned in the article, who lived in a house on the present site of the Crosby Arena.

As a child growing up in the village in the 1950s and 60s, I knew it simply as "the pond". Indeed this is how it was referred to in turn of the century postcards.

However, a report in the Economist and Sun on Dec. 29, 1955 refers to the "Toogood Pond" in mentioning the formation of the Unionville Swimming Club in 1953.

The use of the pond for recreation dates back to the previous century. Postcards and oldtimers' reminiscences reveal that by the turn of the century, pleasure boating (canoes and rowboats) and swimming were regular summer pastimes.

In the early 1950s, after the Toogoods took over the property, concern for safety and supervision of children (particularly near the dam) led to the formation of the Unionville Swimming Club.

The pond was leased to the Club by Mr. Toogood for the nominal sum of $1, and a beach/swimming area was established on the east side of the pond, north of the dam.

Access to the Club was via a laneway off Main Street which still exists just south of the present road into the pond.

The Club operated through the 50s and 60s, offering swimming and water safety instruction to thousands of children, using the Red Cross program.

I remember the "buddy system" and dragging the cordoned off swimming area, searching the muddy water for someone who had gone "missing" (invariably someone who had left without "signing out").

The pond, along with other "swimming holes" along the Rouge provided ample facilities for boys and girls to cool off during the summer months (this was, of course, before the pollution of the system as a result of development which began in the late 60s).

More recently, the pond and surrounding lands were sold by the Toogoods to the town, including the two houses on the north side of Carleton opposite the arena.

These had been, successively, the Toogoods' residences when they lived in Unionville. As the last private owners of the pond, and no doubt as a recognition also of their public spirited contribution to the Swimming Club over so many years, the pond has been officially named after them.

The pond is a legacy from Unionville's agricultural past which is enjoyed by residents and visitors in the present. Old Ira White would wonder at the Unionville of today, which he helped to found and name 150 years ago. But I'm sure that now, as then, he wouldn't mind us having a bit of fun at his old millpond.

Larry Rainey, a Unionville freelance writer, is currently working on a book on the history of Unionville.

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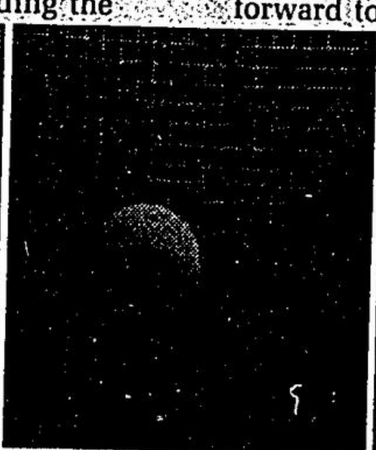
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