

Settling In For The Long Haul

By Maurice Smith

Many readers of this publication are part of the influx of modern-day settlers and the subsequent growth of Whitchurch-Stouffville over the past ten years. We, the new arrivals, have pushed the population of this community beyond the 40,000 mark.

There was a similar ten to twenty year period of population growth between 1840 and 1860, when this area was known simply as Whitchurch Township. Most of those arriving then did not come here to be within commuting distance of a workplace in another community, but to work the land to provide a better life for their families.

The legacy and names of many original settlers can be found in documents in our museum and library. Some, such as Reesor, Grose, Smalley, Cook, Baker, Musselman and Lemon are now found as names on streets, communities, businesses and prominent farm lots around Whitchurch-Stouffville.

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Some of the settlers who arrived in the 1800 period came via Pennsylvania, while others sailed direct from Europe. Many of the latter landed in areas around Montreal

and simply walked or hitched a ride on a cart the rest of the way. Remember, there were no Mayflower Movers, Avis or Hertz to carry their belongings. Certainly, the treks undertaken by many of the families listed above are well documented.

One family who made that trek, and whose name most of us would recognize today, was the Emmersons. Thomas and Sarah (Bye) Emmerson were married in Yorkshire, England before embarking on the sea voyage to our part of the new world. They arrived in Whitchurch in the mid-1800s and settled on a 100 acre farm property on the west side of Kennedy Road. The farm was just south of a dusty, but well-travelled road known as Bloomington. One of their sons, George, married a local lady named Margaret Kester and the couple took up residence on another farm a few acres further south.

The Emmersons raised beef cattle and grew crops on their farms to meet the needs of their family and their livestock. Along with the farming operation, George became a successful blacksmith, with shops in both Lemonville and Vandorf.

To provide schooling for their children and those of neighbouring families, they joined forces with others, as was common in the day, and built a one-room schoolhouse on land adjacent to Thomas's farm. This building remains today but no longer serves as a school facility.

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George and Margaret's oldest son, Arthur, eventually took over the operation of the original 100 acre farm, a section of which is covered by a stand of maple trees. Here he built a sugar shack where local children came for their annual feast of maple sugar. Arthur's wife Freda (Walker) would ensure there was enough left to bottle for the season ahead. Remnants of that 100-year-old shack still stand in the grove of trees.

Arthur and Freda had five children. One son, Mel, married a lady from Stouffville named Margaret McCowan. Around the same time, as a result of health problems, the original Kennedy Road farm was sold and the Arthur Emmerson family moved to Lemonville. Mel and Margaret moved into a home on

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Main Street at the corner of Cemetery Lane.

In those days Stouffville had its own hospital, Brer Bush, at the east end of town. At that time many women gave birth to their children at home. However, when it came time for Margaret to bring her children into the world, she simply walked across the street.

One of her children, a son named Wayne, was born at Brer Bush in 1953, and has lived his whole life in Stouffville. He attended SDSS, played hockey for a local team which won a provincial championship, and went on to work in the community. He married a local lady named Debra.

Wayne Emmerson eventually became involved in

Stouffville politics, from which he retired in 2014, having served our community on council for 23 years, 17 as mayor. He guided the town through a legacy of accomplishments, far too many to name here, but the core infrastructure of Whitchurch-Stouffville was significantly upgraded during his tenure. Mr. Emmerson has moved on to become chairman of the Region of York.

The Emmersons' two sons became part of the sixth generation of the family to grow up in Stouffville. I wonder whether any of our modern-day settlers will have a sixth generation living in this community.


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The Emmerson schoolhouse was built around 1895.



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