



# GRAND RIVER HERITAGE MINES SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER July-August-September, 1995

The heat wave is in full swing! Our Society has been swinging as well since before the snow vanished. Our attendance at Geo-Rama and the Paris Historical Show, both held at the Paris Fairgrounds, brought us many new contacts and members! At Geo-Rama, Ilse was thrilled when she was given a huge chunk of gypsum used in the display; it was from the Westroc Mine which, by the way, closed at the end of April. We had long talks with men who had worked in the Drumbo, Caledonia and Hagersville mines, and who were very excited about our projects. At the shows we displayed historical panels, photos, rock samples and the very old powdered paint tin (the paint, like alabastine, contained gypsum), and a miner's helmet complete with an acetylene lamp and a carbide refill case shaped like a liquor flask to fit into the miner's pocket; the helmet and lamp are on loan from Patrick Smith. Special thanks to Cathy MacArthur, Paul Boulaine, Sanko Kraemer, and Harry Frishette for spelling off Ilse and Jean at the shows.

A new member from Dunnville, Barbara Topp, has been researching the Gypsum Mines area for us. She lived for a while in the only miner's house left at Gypsum Mines, and her cousin has possession of some old family papers including a letter from the secretary of the Grand River Plaster Company, describing the mines and workings. I will include excerpts from this in our next newsletter. We are excited about Barbara's discoveries.

Our field trips have been frequent this spring to take advantage of the time before the plants converged over everything and the mosquitoes targeted us. We had an interesting hike along the Nith River west of Paris, where we found deep V-shaped ravines indicating possible collapsed tunnels of old gypsum mines; history records that there were old mills, roadways and raceways in this area. What a wonderful wilderness spot today - wolves raising their young in dens, a deer herd observed near their own natural salt lick, a variety of birds, beds of wild ginger, pools of water thriving with pond life, muskrat or beaver, and fens developing along the moist slopes.

Another hike took us to the Mile Hill area, where we were ankle deep in mud and up to our knees in skunk cabbages in the areas surrounding deep V-shaped ravines, which indicate where the collapsed mine tunnels are located. We found talus heaps, weathered gypsum chunks and old road beds as well. Huge Jack-in-the-pulpit, trout lilies, spice bushes, wild ginger abounded in the rich soils, and black cherry trees grew on the slope, and enormous trees along the river. Traces of the raceway, shown in the 1875 Brant County Atlas, are still left in this area. The local folk tell about how this canal was used by miners to move the gypsum up-river to the mill, using horse-drawn barges. The gypsum was loaded on small carts that ran on rails from inside the mine tunnels to the raceway.

Our emphasis has been on Five Oaks, a United Church retreat situated at the forks of the Grand River and Whiteman's Creek. The Creek is so named after the first white man who settled there when the native people were still occupying the area. Major Arnold Burdowes, a wealthy lumber dealer, settled on the property in the 1840's, and had an estate of over 1000 acres on both sides of the Grand River. He built a large homestead which he named Strathmore. It was inhabited later by the Turnbull and Pottruff families before it was sold to Five Oaks and torn down in 1965. It is said the old farmhouse was part of the Underground Railroad. A small secret, living compartment in the basement of the house was used to hide runaway slaves from their American owners.

Also, before the turn of the century, records indicate that there was a small village on the banks of Whiteman's Creek, close to the present dam. The village included a brick factory, grist mill, gypsum mill and a distillery along with about eighteen families. We have been looking for evidence on our field trips of these ruins and

of the gypsum mines located nearby. We have also been examining the area for its Carolinian plants and wildlife, and signs of Indian encampments. In the fall, our research group will publish a booklet on the early history of this area.

The following excerpts are from Mary Cassar's notes on some of our field trips:

April 30: On this trip, the research group explored the Cedar Springs Trail and the area north of the Pottruff Rd bridge over Whitemen's Creek, all of which is Five Oaks property. Near the trail, we passed an old well with red trilliums growing abundantly near it. We passed stands of fine white cedars, certainly some of the oldest in the Paris area. A raccoon made his home in one of these historic trees. Below us, the extensive wetland was fringed with red dogwood, ash trees, and marsh marigolds. There was also a native hawthorn tree, a refreshing change from the introduced European variety that seem ubiquitous in this part of Ontario. Ilse tells us that there are 68 varieties of hawthorn worldwide.... On our own level, Ilse pointed to an old cedar log where she watched a fox playing with her kittens last year. Nearby were the rare devil's urn mushrooms, darkly brown and foreboding, shaped like little pots. We encountered an old oak, centuries old that seemed to have one prominent branch giving direction. This was an Indian trail blazer tree. One or several branches would point to the next village. These were the natives' version of sign posts. There are a number of these giants still alive in our area. A branch, while young, would be bound with rawhide and trained to point in the required direction. This old tree reminded us that we were not the only people to pass by here....

A slow stream, stained by tannin, seeped into Whiteman's Creek. A large bank beaver's house of sticks was found on Whiteman's bank. Several trees were lying on the ground with the typical signs that beaver had gnawed them through. One tree was still standing, with fresh chips lying at its base; apparently we had interrupted the beaver in his work. Gypsum tailings and mine sites lay immediately across the creek, on the other side.

May 14: We chose to explore a different part of Five Oaks property - the area bordering to the south of Whiteman's Creek. The old mill road fringed with wild leeks, rare Carolinian white trout lilies, and very old maples planted by man made the beginning of our walk both easy and scenic. Soon the remains of a canal with a water ram came into view. I never saw such an old and huge black cherry tree! Native hawthorns and Solomon's seal coexisted with the old settlement's apple trees. An immense, old European sweet cherry was in full bloom. Gnarled and shaggy, obviously having seen better days, this tree was still a lovely plant, encased in wild grape vines which could eventually sap all her strength. European cherries are short-lived, but Ilse estimated this one to be around 120 years old. Old hedgerows were the only reminder of the foundations of long-ago houses.... We arrived at the site of the old mill race and old brick kiln. Old bricks can still be found here. A few feet onward we found an old sycamore tree--rather a rare sight in these parts--and wild dock (buckwheat family), whose grains can be ground to make pancake flour. As we stood on the west bank, Sanko told us there were five or six mine tunnels in the immediate banks, and an old corduroy road remains somewhat further downstream. There is so much history in these hills! Turning our heads upstream, we could see the north side of Five Oaks where we had been earlier this spring to see old mine tunnels and the heronry. From here, the distant heron nests were tiny black dots.

## COMING EVENTS

A long, hot summer is predicted! We will take holidays during July. **Civic Holiday weekend -- August 5, 6, and 7: the Golden Horseshoe Steam Show, Caledonia. Come and see our display! Volunteer to help us build the shed, and supervise the display!....Plan on field trips every weekend in September. Call Ilse for details! 519-756-6634....Our Annual field trip to Haldimand will be a Surprise Field Trip on Sept. 10 - rain date Sept. 17. Bring lunch and appropriate walking shoes. We will meet at 10 a.m. in front of Cayuga High School on Highway 54, above Cayuga.**

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We are not responsible for inaccuracies. Write or phone for membership information.