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Port Maitland Lock Undergoes a Good Cleanup!

Everyone knows about the Welland Canal that passes through the Niagara Peninsula from Port Colborne to St. Catharines. How many know about the Feeder Canal that was once played a vital, role in operation of the larger canal? The Feeder was as it is named, *a feeder of water* for the main canal. It ran from Dunnville on the Grand River taking a southerly route indirectly towards Port Maitland, for approximately three miles before turning east. From this point at Broad Creek, now known as Stromness, it went as straight as an arrow until it reached the Junction, the present day city of Welland, where it then fed the main canal, providing sufficient water to work the many locks descending the Niagara Escarpment to Thorold. Today, it is filled with silt, water plants, rough fish, and is generally a very tired old waterway! Most of it still exists in this form.

While still being dug as a feeder, it became obvious it should be deeper and wider to be used as a ship canal. This was completed very quickly and for years it provided a highway for hundreds of schooners, barges, and various methods of marine transport on an annual basis. T'is a long and complicated explanation to describe the engineering involved. This is a short story, so I will skip the details. If you really want to know more, write to the editor and tell her how this article sparked your interest and who knows, maybe I will be asked to write another article! What I will tell you is this; the Feeder Canal provided a waterway for carrying many tons of varied cargo, including lumber to rebuild the city of Chicago after their historic fire. Plaster of paris, cheese, plaster, ashes, lumber, fish, firewood, honey, eggs, live stock, live fowl, sand and gravel, are but a few of the many products recorded to have been shipped on the Feeder Canal.

Due to a dam built at Dunnville which raised the water level sufficient to create a natural flow in the Feeder, the lower river became cut off from the upper river. This meant no shipping could take place between Port Maitland and Paris or other Grand River communities above Dunnville. The solution was to build a by-pass canal and lock from Stromness to Port Maitland. This was completed in 1842, when the lock was constructed at Port Maitland. Soon it became apparent that by using Port Maitland as a port into Lake Erie, the shipping season could be extended a few weeks at both ends of the season. This is due to the fact that Lake Erie does not ice up as quickly at Port Maitland as it does at Port Colborne, or in the Niagara River at Chippawa. The reverse is true in the spring, allowing for an earlier shipping season at Port Maitland.

The history of the Port Maitland lock is not well-known. There remains questions as to when it was last used. Questions as to what happened to its wooden gates, and why supposedly years after the main Feeder Canal was closed the lock was rebuilt in 1904.

It sat collecting all manner of debris including household garbage deposited there by local residents. Overgrown, and almost no longer visible from the road only a few short feet away, it was forgotten. As result of an article I wrote about the Feeder Canal in my a private publication, The Grand Dispatch, the old lock became of interest to me. Soon a letter was sent off to the Mayor of Haldimand. This led to many conversations with municipal staff, until in the winter of 2004, I met with the Southern Grand River Advisory Committee (SGRAC), a citizen's committee to advise council on matters relating to tourist and economic concerns in Haldimand County. I had already received implied approval to begin some remedial action, and had already begun the process in the fall of 2003, when the first phase began with the removal of seven large dump trucks full of debris. I still needed to formally propose my vision to council. Phase one continued into the spring of 2004, with yet another two loads and twenty-two volunteers in the water and on the banks. Even our Mayor and one of our councilors got down and dirty!

It is my plan to meet once again with SGRAC before the spring of 2005, when I will outline my suggestions for the second phase. Phase two will include dredging a section of the Feeder Canal at both ends of the lock as well as the lock itself. There is more to phase two than I am prepared to write about here as I have not yet made my formal proposal.

In the spring of 2004, with the help of a couple good friends, Mike Walker who is very involved in the restoration project of the Mohawk Island lighthouse, and Jamie Dickson, a table top sign was erected. This sign measured four foot by eight foot and through the use of photos and text, provided a beginners history of the Port Maitland lock and other historic sites in the area. If the test for success is measured in interest, we passed! I am told by just about everyone who talks to me about the lock they spent an hour or so looking over the information on the sign and toured the lock. While there they tell me two, three and even four more people stopped to take a look. The old lock is finding new life and the interest in it is growing.

Today, though still much is needed to be done, the old lock is for the first time in years looking as if it has potential to teach a new generation the value it once served to the County of Haldimand and the local area. Still rough, the landscaping has improved ten-fold. It still needs a lot of work but the potential for wonderment is clearly there.

Financial support for the work at the lock comes from the Port Maitland, Festival of History, which will be held for its fifth time, - this year, at the Dunnville Airport, at Port Maitland, on July 23rd. Why not mark July 23rd on your calender to make a visit to the Festival and while there take a look at the lock, as it prepares to be restored.

Bill Warnick writes a monthly history column for the Dunnville Chronicle as well as he monthly submits a local vintage school photo in search of names of missing students. He is also hoping to locate more Haldimand County School class photos. Bill has also written for a number of other publications including The Grand Dispatch a history letter he published for the Port Maitland area. Bill started the Port Maitland, Festival of History in 2001. It has grown from five displays to over sixty-five for the summer of 2005 and is expecting a crowd of up to 5,000. You can reach Bill at 905 549-6086 or at wwarnick@cogeco.ca .