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What Horses and Skunks have in Common!

When I was about four years old, my parents moved our family to Port Maitland from Hamilton. My father's family had a cottage there since 1915, and some of my uncles build there as well. Dad's brother Joe's cottage was a bit rustic at best. At worst it was . . ., well kind of primitive. Uncle Joe knew this and I suspect many time over the past sixty or so years he had plenty of opportunity to make improvements, but chose to leave things as they were. Until he sold the cottage a few years ago to his nephews and niece he continued the use of an outhouse. I might have been only four years old when I discovered this wonderful edifice and its bouquet, but I was old enough to know I did not like it, and wanted nothing to do with sitting on a hole I could easily fall through into. . ., well you know!

In earlier articles I have written about Archie McDonald and some of his amusing capers with the younger set, but Archie also had a reputation for getting into mischief with his older peers. This often included over-imbibing and likely loosing the privilege from time to time of driving his car. That was no problem for Archie; after all he owned two horses and they could get him around just fine.

One night I had the urge to visit the outhouse which stood at the end of a snake, and who knows what infested path, some fifty feet from the back door. It might as well have been a two miles walk on the moors! This night as I tippy-toed my way to the little house, I bumped into the largest skunk I had ever seen in my short life. Honestly, it must have been six feet tall, all white, with legs long enough that when I took off towards the house I bumped directly into another skunk with such force I went under it without touching a hair on its belly! It took me a number of years before I realized Archie was visiting my parents and had brought along with him, two old friends. They were Johnny Walker and Tom Collins. He also arrived by means of his two white horses which were left to wonder about our yard.

This put my little brain to thinking about horses, and then of course buggies and wagons! So I delved into my records to find references to these connected items. The first time my computer came across the word "*horse*" was in reference to a boat purchased by Mr. M. A. Smith in 1882. This boat named *Starling* was formerly owned by the City of Hamilton as an excursion yacht on the Burlington Bay. She was fifty foot in length with what was described as a large breadth of beam in proportion to her length. She had a fifteen *horse* power steam engine. Mr. Smith owned the

Starling for only a couple years but during that time she made many pleasure excursions up and down the Feeder Canal as well as the Grand River. In 1884, she was sold to a fellow named R. W. Deaso at Rondeau Ontario.

The next mention of the word *horse* came in a story about Mr. Henry Stout, a farmer from Wainfleet. Mr. Stout lost control of his *horse* which in his fright jumped into the Feeder Canal a half mile from Marshville. With him were his wife and his child. Fortunately for both the child and Mr. Stout, Ira Bessey happened along and rescued both of them. However, Mrs. Stout became tangled in the lines and drowned.

Oddly enough I again came across the name Bessey who happens to be related to yours truly when; “In 1884 Wm Bessey and Miss M. Wardell while on a Sunday outing when after adjusting the *horses* bridle the *horse* started off at full speed dragging Wm. some distance. After a run of several miles the *horse* reached its home only to upset the wagon at this point. Miss. Wardell was tossed out and severely injured”.

Being a man of the cloth has little benefit, when it comes to *horses*. In 1885 Fr. Kelly had his *buggy* badly smashed when he lost control of his *horse*. The irony of this story is that after the rig was repaired by the Avery Carriage Shop, Fr. Kelly was returning it home only to travel a few feet when the *horse* again bolted. This time the *buggy* struck against the McMullen sign post badly smashing the *buggy* for a second time. Maybe Fr. Kelly should have sought the guidance and interventions of St. Francis of Assisi.

That same year the Village of Dunnville, passed a cattle and poultry by-law prohibiting all *horses*, cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, as well as geese, turkeys, ducks and other poultry from roaming the streets. If found running loose they would be impounded. I would bet you from this time on the by-law officers were well fed!

I have seen sketches or paintings of *horse* races held on the upper river, but I do not possess any of these artworks myself, nor do I know where to put my hands on one. In 1886, Winter Races were held on the Upper Grand River and were the annual event of each winter season. A considerable promotion was done leading up to these races each year. Competition was aggressive between villages up and down the river, with Cayuga seemingly being the greatest adversary of our local boys and their *horses*.

Horse racing did not only occur on the frozen waters of the upper Grand. It seems a section of the Rymal Road at Stromness proved a track of some interest as well. In the spring of 1886, Don Rice, S. Root and R. Lockhart staked a whole three dollars on a race won by Don Rice.

William Bessey's name pops back up again. I am not sure if it is the same Wm. Bessey as earlier mentioned, but he still remains a relative of yours truly. This time Wm. had a bit too much to drink and during an altercation in the Victoria Hotel he assaulted the proprietor, Mr. Keogh. On the run, Billy then stole the milk *wagon* of Mr. Francis Kenny, (likely spelled Kenney) using it as his mode of escape. As the pursuit ensued, constables Wickens and Winslow, and Mr. Kenny chased him along the Robinson Rd. until Billy escaped into the bush.

Maybe milk *wagons* were more interesting than I would have thought. In 1888 someone really ticked off Mr. J. H. House, to the point he offered a five dollar reward in the hope of capturing the scoundrel who put colouring into his milk as it sat in his *wagon* parked near Werner's Grocery.

Lately, I seldom write a story without a mention or two of the Port Maitland, lock. During the 1904 reconstruction of the lock Stephen Vanderburg, while delivery a *wagon* load of gravel stepped backward and fell into the it, breaking an ankle and other bones.

All these needles facts because a dumb four-year-old city kid did not know the difference between a large white horse and a tiny black and white skunk!

If you have items, you wish written about or pictures you would be willing to lend, please drop me a note. Let me know how you feel about these articles. William (Bill) Arthur Warnick 180 Rosslyn Ave. South Hamilton, ON L8M 3J5 e-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca