

The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area

“Fair View Hill” and its many Inhabitants?

Mea Culpa, Mea Culpa, Mea Maxima Culpa

In the June 1998 Grand Dispatch, I wrote about various postcards in which I described one looking from Karen Redding's cottage (lot sixty-seven). I told you that the cottage on lot sixty-five was originally owned by Fr. Jim Ford. That was about the only truthful thing I wrote when describing that postcard. I told you the Ford cottage now belongs to Brad and Elaine Dittmer. In fact, Fred and Roberta Cash have owned it since July 1989. My fault! I had the correct information all along but didn't pass it on correctly. My apologizes to Fred and Roberta.



I further misled you by telling you the next cottage (lot sixty-four) belonged to Robert Lavelle, and that it was moved across the road and is now owned by Tom McNally. Sorry! Yes, it was owned by Robert Lavelle and others including Neal and Claire Geisenhoff, and now their daughter Patricia Bleich. The cottage was badly damaged in the very severe storm of December 1, 1985. The lot has since been purchased and a new cottage has been built on it.

However, the new cottage is across the road on higher ground. It is presently owned by Patricia Bleich and Kathleen Randall.

I wish I could tell you that was the final mistake but it wasn't. The cottage that Tom McNally now owns is on lot sixty-three and once belonged to Mrs. Dunn. Tom never bought Lavelle's, cottage, he bought the former Dunn cottage.

Old Photographs & Paintings

In the same issue I featured a number of old postcards depicting Port Maitland. It was the number of postcards I was trying to make my small computer reproduce that caused me my problems and still is! This month I will attempt to show you some early photographs and paintings.

The painting which intrigues me most is one of the hill where my Grandfather Wm. J. Warnick, had his cottage. (Lots thirty-nine, forty-one and forty-three) The hill has been christened by various names including Fair View Hill, Warnick's Hill and now Chateaux Côté, an obvious reference to the Côté families who now own both cottages situated on it.

The painting is called “Ruins of the Old Naval Depot” at the Mouth of the Grand River (1840), by Philip John Bainbrigg (1817-1881) If you are interested in obtaining it, it is in various formats and available from the National Archives of Canada.

“In the early months of the War of 1812, British forces had control of Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence river. This changed on September 10, 1813, when the British, commanded by Captain Robert Barclay, were defeated by Commodore Oliver Perry’s American fleet in a naval battle at Put-in-Bay, Ohio

Four British vessels managed to escape the American ships and sailed across Lake Erie to the mouth of the Grand River at Port Maitland. The Mohawk, Meteor, Comet and Rocket were then scuttled to prevent them from being captured by the Americans.

After the war ended, it was decided that a secure military base was needed on the north shore of Lake Erie. Although the entrance was narrow and shallow because of the sandbar at the mouth of the river, the British chose Port Maitland as a naval depot because of its strategic location.”



The paragraphs above are from the book called “Grand Heritage” put out by the Dunnville District Heritage Association in the early 1990s. This book can still be purchased, from the Dunnville Library for \$25.00 and is well worth the money.

I guess what it is that is so interesting about this picture is I can recall as a young child living in the old house on the hill and always being amazed at the view of the lake and the river. It is a natural location for a lookout over the lake where you could see ships approaching for many miles. I am equally amazed at the history that has taken place on and near this spot. Many of you will still recall that Beckley Beach remained a naval reserve for many years. I don’t know exactly when this

designation was removed but certainly it remained into the 1960s.

Some Residents of the Hill

Aside from the early naval presence we know very little about these lots until the late part of the nineteenth century. The house we have traditionally called the “big house or the old house” has been there for about one hundred years and maybe much longer. It was built as a farm house and a rough one at that. When my grandparents took it over in 1916 it had sand floors, was infested with mice and had been stripped of all its windows and doors. At first it was presumed the floors had been removed but we now understand that they had never been installed. John Newton Beckley purchased it from George Little, for one dollar on June 1, 1915 and then flipped it over to the T.H.&B inside of hours, along with other properties that included all of Beckley Beach for a price of fourteen dollars. Prior to George Little living in the big house, a fellow by the name of Dilly Thompson raised a family there. It is as result of Dilly living there that we guesstimate the house may have been built in approximately 1895. It may have been there much longer. I don’t know.

Once my grandparents took it over as a summer cottage and began some repairs it was rented to a number of people during the winter months. Doctor Wilfred Mills, our county’s former medical officer of health and coroner for many years and my doctor and a good friend during my teens lived in it as a boy. His family resided there while his father laboured for Kilmer Barber and VanHuston Construction Company to build the present east pier. I have been told that Wilfred attended twenty-seven different schools including S.S.# 3 Sherbrooke in Stromness where the Beckley Beach Corporation often holds their meetings. This was even before he began his studies at the University of Western Ontario to become a doctor. Sam Jordan, of whom I know nothing, lived there under similar circumstances.

When my grandparents arrived there was a sand beach in front of the hill. The big house sat back some distance from the edge, so much so that the porch which is now on the south side was once on the front. This is where the first Masses were offered by priests such as Bishop Joseph Ryan, Monsignors John A. O'Reilly, George Cassidy, and Fathers Jim Ford, Wm. G. Goodrow Pastor at Dunnville and many others, before the Sacred Heart chapel was built. My father Wm. Maurice Warnick, moved the porch some time in the 1940's. In a family picture you can see my uncles' Jim and Eugene and some friends sitting on the lawn. They are in front of the big house. In the background you see J.J. Sinnott's cottage, now Father Ron and Dave Coté's (lot thirty-nine). The Sinnott cottage appears to be some twenty or more feet from the edge of the hill. Severe erosion necessitated relocating it back approximately fifty feet during the late 1950's.



Erosion took its toll

As mentioned above, for many years the big house and the Sinnott cottage sat quite some distance from the brink of the hill. With construction of the east pier, erosion on the east side of the Grand accelerated to such an extent that my grandfather had a section gang from the T.H.&B. build a buffer wall at the foot of the hill and Now for a bit of history about Father's Ron and Dave's cottage! As with most of the early Beckley Beach shelters it started out life with a precarious beginning. When the piers at Port Colborne and the east pier at Port Maitland were built, they were constructed at the former Canada Coal docks where Pembina has been recently and where Talisman Energy is today. They were then

hundreds of old railway ties were placed on the hillside. These ties remained until Fathers Sherlock and Kennedy arrived and placed truck load after truck load of fill on top. By the time they arrived, the porch had been moved and the house was sitting dangerously on the brink, waiting for just one more southwester to dispose of it in the Grand.

I am told that prior to the building of the east pier there was sufficient space in front of the old house to have a baseball field and many a game was held there. There was a sand beach with warm river water to bath in and a dock where the Warnick's kept a row boat.

My father brought his young family of five (at that time) to live in the old house during the winters of 1952/53 and 53/54. I was very young but think it was the best place I have ever lived. If I were physically capable of maintaining it and it was on the market, I would grab it up in a flash!

The big house, (lot forty-three) was sold by my grandmother in 1956 to a family from Grimsby, I think by their name was Westley. They kept it only a couple years. They in turn sold it to Bill and Mary Davidson of Hamilton. In approximately 1965, Fathers Kyran Kennedy and John Sherlock purchased it. After a time Fr. John Walsh joined them. In 1974 after being appointed Bishop of London Ontario, Bishop Sherlock, gave up his interest in it. Over the ensuing years Fathers Fergus Duffy and Lawrence Walsh also joined the venture. In July 1996 it was sold once more, this time to the Coté family. Now let's see if can get all these people straight. They are Peter and Sandra, Joe and Marie, Rita Côté, Adrienne Corti and Helen Sheridan. Yes, the same Côté family as in Fathers Ron and Dave!

floated to their location and sunk. A number of construction sheds were used by Kilmer Barber and VanHuston Construction. One of these very small sheds was skidded down the frozen river in approximately 1927 and placed on lot thirty-nine. Once in place, rooms were added with lumber salvaged from old T.H.&B. box cars sent to Port

Maitland as scrap by my grandfather. It became the cottage of John and Mrs. Sinnott. The Sinnotts' enjoyed their somewhat piecemeal cottage (as many Beckley Beach cottages were) until 1948 when Pat and Lillian Leonard took it over. Lillian is my aunt, the daughter of Wm. J. Warnick. Pat Leonard was active in the Beckley Beach Cottage Association for many years as secretary, oddly enough taking over this post from John Sinnott. The Leonards used the cottage for many years but by the early 1970s they seldom visited. After both Pat and Lil died their children sold it to Fathers Ron and Dave Coté. It didn't take them to long before they began some major renovations, first removing the front room of the old structure and replacing it with a modern winterized addition. The rest of the cottage remained intact until 1996, when it was demolished and replaced by a 1½ story addition.

Who is that Baby?

Last issue I told you I had received a suggestion that I start a "Who's that Baby" quiz. Let me know if you think you know who this is.



Financial Support

Thanks again to Paul Dermody, of P.X. Dermody Funeral Homes in Hamilton for your continued financial support of this historyletter.

Thanks

This issue, I am indebted to Tom McNally and Fred and Roberta Cash, for helping me to straighten out my historical gaffe and to another unnamed source who provided me with the baby pictures. A special thank-you to Father Ron Côté and Ed Boyle for your assistance.

In Memoriam

With all the computer problems I experienced in June I was unable to include In Memoriam in and missed Dorothy Hurst-Wilkins and George Barnes.

Dorothy Hurst - Wilkins; died January 13, 1998
Well known dance and baton teacher and guiding light of the Hamilton Tiger-Cat majorettes. Wife of Herbert Wilkins, formerly lot 46

George F. Barnes; Stromness: died April 30, 1998
Longtime contractor for many Beckley Beach cottagers. Husband of Lilian (Pyle)

Father Lawrence J. Walsh; died July 19, 1998
Father Lawrence J. Walsh, a former co-owner at lots 41 & 43

Mailing Address

William Arthur Warnick
180 Rosslyn Ave. South
HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5
E-mail; wwarnick@netinc.ca
Phone; 905 549-6086
Fax; 905 549-6086 You must call first.

Story Update!

Since putting this story to paper, I have become aware of a shooting of one man by another over a fence line dispute between lots forty-three and forty-five. I know a number of details, but since this historyletter is not intended to be hardnose journalism, I feel I must test the water with the families involved to see if I can write about it.