

The Grand Despatch



A brief social history of Port Maitland Ontario, and the surrounding area
Port Maitland, "On the Grand" Historical Association (PMHA) - Free to PMHA members

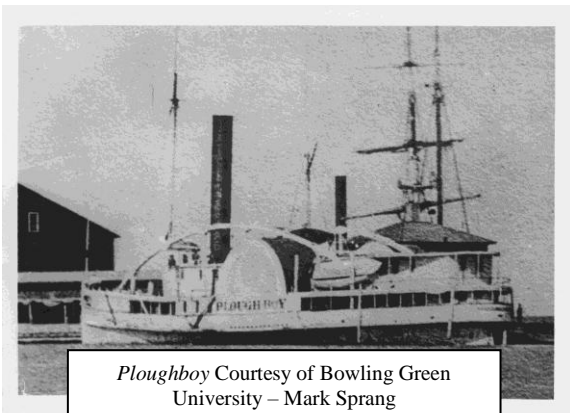
Obituary of a Lighthouse Keeper, Lighthouse, and another Keeper's Home!

Richard Hudson Smithers
Sept 7, 1824 – June 6, 1905

Transcribed directly from his Obituary

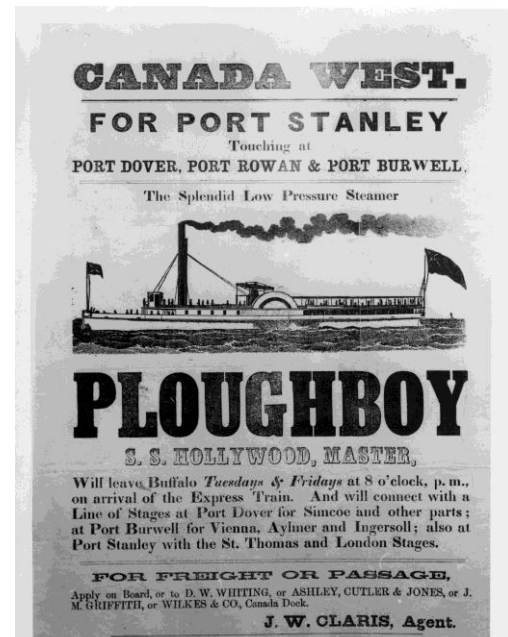
Richard Hudson Smithers, one of the best known and best liked of the old pioneers of this section, passed away at the residence of his son D. W. Smithers, on Tuesday morning last, aged 81 years.

Deceased was born in Kingston in 1824. When 13 years of age he began work on vessels plying on the St. Lawrence River, and later worked on the Erie Canal fleet. Within a few years he had so far progressed by thrift and energy as to be the owner himself of a small schooner, coasting from Oswego on the American side, and from Bay of Quinte to Prescott on the Canadian side. In those days they handled principally bolts, ties, wood, grain, etc.



Ploughboy Courtesy of Bowling Green University – Mark Sprang

When about 20 years of age he traded the schooner for a farm on Wolf Island in the St. Lawrence, and a year later he married Miss Elizabeth Offord of Kingston. Farming proved distasteful to him, and in 1852 he moved his family to Dunnville, and again took up the boating life.

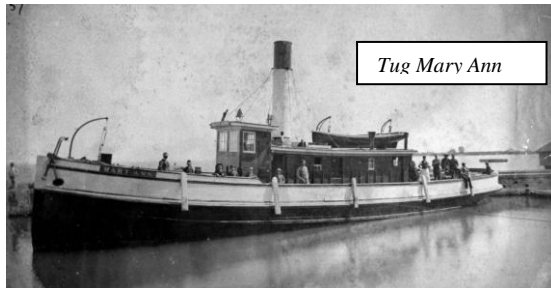


Courtesy of Bowling Green University – Mark Sprang

His first position was that of Captain of the steamer *Caledonia*, a Grand River freight and passenger boat. In 1854 he was mate of the Plowboy "*Ploughboy*", a boat running between Port Stanley and Buffalo, and two years later was

Captain of the steamer *Dover*, owned by Daniel McSwain. This boat burned to the water's edge in Cayuga in 1859. Mr. Smithers took part in raising and bringing her to Dunnville, where he assisted in rebuilding her. She was re-launched and he again took charge of her in the spring of 1860, remaining with her until about 1865 when he became Captain of the tugboat *Mary Ann*, owned by Lachlan McCallum, remaining in that capacity until 1867, when he took charge of the tug *W. T. Robb*, plying between Port Rowan bay and Buffalo and Tonawanda.

She was named after our present assessor, James R. Robb's father, and was sold to Wm Hall of Toronto in the spring of 1870, when he was asked by Hall to take charge of her on a route from Toronto to Prescott. He retained this position until 1878, when received an appointment from the John A. Macdonald government as lighthouse keeper at Mohawk Island, which position he faithfully filled until 1896, when he was succeeded by his son Richard O. Smithers, under an appointment by the McKenzie Bewell government.



Deceased, when he entered the government service, bought a 50 acre farm in Sherbrooke Township, which has been the family residence continuously ever since. In 1901 his wife died, and was interred in Dunnville Riverside Cemetery, in her 74th year.

Mr. Smithers remained on the farm until Wednesday of last week, cared for by his adopted son William Smithers (Stevens). For fifteen years his health had not been good, and quite

recently it was deemed advisable for him to come to Dunnville, where it would be more convenient to have a regular medical attendance.

He was therefore brought last Wednesday to the residence of his son Daniel W. Smithers, where he began to sink rapidly on the Saturday night following, and death ensued on Tuesday. The remains were taken to the residence of his son-in-law Mr. Theo. Blackman, Broad St., west and were taken from there yesterday afternoon to Riverside Cemetery for interment. The pall bearers were George and Mark King, Rich Mossip, A. Hoto, John and Daniel Deamude.

The Rev. James Gourlay conducted the funeral service, in the absence of the Methodist pastor at Conference. Deceased had been a member of the Methodist denomination since about 1857, and was prominent in church and Sunday school work. He was a consistent Conservative all his life, but on one occasion supported Alex McKenzie because the stand of the Conservative candidate was not in accordance with his views on one important public question.

He was survived by three sons, Richard O., and Daniel W. of Dunnville, and William (an adopted son) of Sherbrooke; also three daughters, Sara, wife of Wm. Turton, Acton; Anne, wife of Theo Blackman, Dunnville; and Susie, wife of John Mann, Petoskey, Mich. Two children died in infancy, back in the fifties. ■

Mohawk Island Lighthouse – a *Grand old Lady* in 1847 came into being on what was earlier known as Gull Island, an island of approximately 4 hectares or 9.8 acres. She was given life by a son of Scotland and one of our country's more famous engineers, John Brown designed and oversaw construction. Brown is known for other landmark lighthouses such as the Imperial Towers lights on Lake Huron. A local well known lighthouse at the entrance of the Burlington Bay was also built by Brown. In the spring of 1848 John Burgess a local farmer

(who owned the land which today partly consists of the property where the Rock Point Provincial Park is situated – See story below on John Burgess) lit the parabolic reflecting light for its first time. Over the years both the fuel used to light the lamp and the lamps themselves were upgraded to meet contemporary standards. In 1872, John's son J. L. took provisional charge of the light until the above mentioned Richard Hudson Smithers took charge. The date of this transfer to Smithers varies depending on what information is available. As mentioned above, Richard H.'s son Richard O. took charge remaining there until 1921 when the last resident keeper, Richard Foster took charge.



Smithers family Scattering of ashes of Ethel Watts nee Smithers on Mohawk Is July 31, 1993

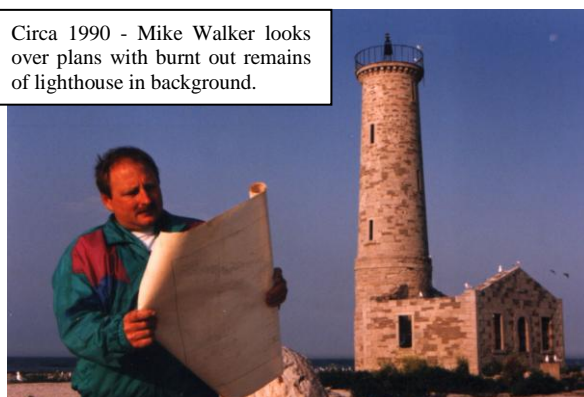
Death came to the old lady in 1969 when among other acts of destruction vandals set fire to her, permanently taking it out of service. I have written about this lighthouse before when in 1932 Richard Foster and his son James lost their lives in the icy water while returning home for the winter. The next spring the light was automated and a variety of land lover keepers visited it regularly to maintain the light; the late Earl Siddall being the last.

In 1977 the government of Canada took over the island and established the *Mohawk Island National Wildlife Area*. Visitation is now limited from September 1st to March 31st during daylight hours only. Even entry to the

lighthouse is prohibited year round!

Once populated by various species of gulls and terns, today the cormorants have for the most part pushed other birds off the island while destroying all of the trees and shrubs that once covered much of the higher parts of the island.


Circa 1990 - Mike Walker looks over plans with burnt out remains of lighthouse in background.



In 1990, Michael Walker a professional diver and until very recently the owner of Mohawk Marina and Hippo's Restaurant founded the Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association with hopes of restoring the gutted lighthouse. Unfortunately, Mike has not had the time to move this project forward. Mike has now sold his business and joined those of us well retired. He and Susan are moving to the Kenora area to live with their son. PMHA has NOT taken over the Preservation Association but has received its archives and any funds left from its bank account.

Here is where the aging PMHA and Mohawk Lighthouse Preservation Association announce their joint interest in having new blood. All interested parties need only to contact us. We look forward to meeting and discussing opportunities with you on how we could work out an arrangement to not only takeover the Lighthouse restoration but the PMHA too!

Contact us at: Email mohawk@port-maitland.ca
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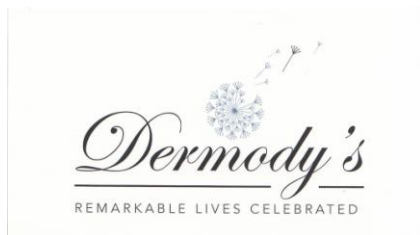
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The following poem was written to commemorate the last lighthouse keeper and his son, and was published in the Dunnville Chronicle

Death Gains a Victory

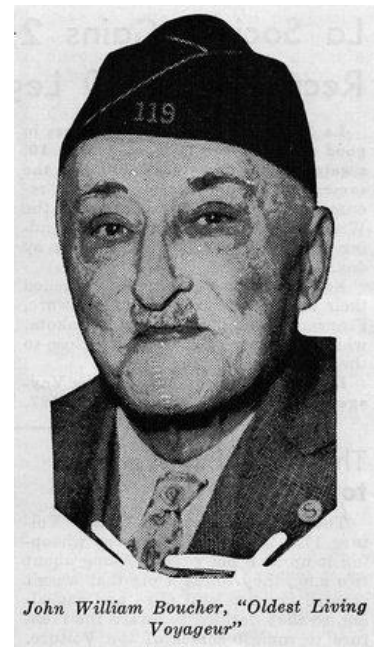
*Three days amid the ice and winds,
They fought their lives to save,
The sky o'erhead was dark with clouds,
And dark beneath their grave.
The slush ice closed about its prey,
Breaking with a thudding crash.
It fell with dull, low splash.
Father nor son, ne'er thought to swerve,
As the boat drifted to and fro,
With weary heart and tranquil nerve,
Each felt his life's strength go;
Each felt his life's strength go and knew,
As time drew slowly on,
That less and less their chances grew—
Night fell and hope was gone.
Their bodies numbed by the bitter cold;
No, not a crust of bread;
No shelter from the nagry blast,
A sand bank was their bed;
Oh, motherland, while thy natives sons
Can live and die like these,
Keeping from shame that honored name,
As mistress of the seas.*

Author unknown

An Old Soldier from Port Maitland!

You have read at least five times in either The Grand Despatch or in my Dunnville Chronicle articles about the Johnson, Jukes and Imlach families (all related in some way or another). You may be getting bored with it but I continue to gravitate to them as they had a momentous impact on our very early Port Maitland area history. To my knowledge none of them lived in what I would call Port Maitland, all living some mile or so to the west and mostly along the lakeshore. A couple years ago I found some information about a fellow by the name of John William Boucher. The article was found on a website called "[Find a Grave](#)" and was written by Lloyd H. Jameson – Grand Publicist of Michigan. He was quite a fellow and guess what! He belongs to these families!

John was born at Port Maitland on Dec.18, 1844. Likely in a home named the Elms. I know he joined the Union army during the American Civil War. It took him three tries to get in as he was rejected at Buffalo and Cleveland, only to finally be accepted in Detroit where he joined the 24th Michigan Infantry. John's mother was Catherine Dirkgie Imlach who was born in Leicestershire England and Bombay India in 1816?



I am certain about the date, but obviously am having some problem nailing down the location! John is the nephew of William J Imlach who wrote *An Old Man's Memories*, a book I have often written or talked about. He was also the great grandson of Lieutenant-Colonel John Johnson, another early Dunn Township settler often written about. In Jameson's article it states that "Boucher comes of a military family dating back to the days of William IV of England." My information leads me to believe this is correct.

I don't know if John returned to Port Maitland following the Civil War, but he did return to Canada. At the age of 70 John attempted three times to enter the Canadian Army. It took him three tries as was his earlier experience in the American Civil War. On the third try he gave his age as "past 48" and was assigned to the 257th Railway Construction Battalion.

John had been working for the Union Pacific Railway so this was a natural place to assign him.

The 257th was assigned to France where he served for 10 months near the front. Jameson tells us that one of Boucher's favourite stories from his war days was "regarding an incident near Ypres, France, in 1917, when he was with the Queens College Battery. The French village, he says, had been mined by the enemy. One of the members of our group found a piano in an abandoned hut and began playing it. Each key he struck set off a mine at some distant point. He finally struck a certain chord which set off a mine in the hut, killing himself and 16 other men."

Upon return to England he was honoured with a visit to King George V when the King offered him a cigar. Hoping to take a souvenir home he began to put it into his pocket only to have the King tell him to light up. Returning home to Canada, he went to the United States and toured the country, promoting the fourth and fifth Liberty Loan drives. Throughout his life he gave service to others as a member of the American Legion wherever he found himself. In 1920, he successfully petitioned the Supreme Court of Onondaga County, New York for his US citizenship. In the years after World War I he lived in various locations around the U.S., finally arriving in Detroit to live with his daughter in 1932.

John is buried in Miami City Cemetery Dade County Florida. His grave is well marked with two tomb stones; on one for his service in the 24th Michigan during the Civil War and the other for his service in the Canadian Army during World War I.



An Old House Speaks

Below is a letter I found on Ancestry.ca while researching John Burgess the first lighthouse keeper on Mohawk Island. The person who posted it got it from the Haldimand Museum. It is poorly typed and in many places very faded; even unreadable. I have done the best I could to fill in the blanks. Any texts you find in it in italics are my personal comments. I have included the birth and death dates of the people mentioned for those of you who may wish to pursue them a bit more. I was able to find another copy at the Haldimand Museum thanks to Karen Richardson which was a bit easier to read. The grammar belongs to the original author.

An Old House Speaks: I am an old house weather beaten and grey, the veranda at my front doorway has been gone many a year, and my kitchen wing has fallen away, I have stood forlorn and uncared for forty years, nothing left but a shell of a house where once a family grew to manhood and motherhood. I am proud to think I housed this family and none other. I was never a pretentious home, just a homey house, mellowing with the years. Happy faces and sad faces have passed through my doors, and now I am to be torn down.

It was back in 1835 when Captain John Burgess (1797 -1885) and his wife Ann Southern Burgess (1797-1866) "the mother of the family" sailed from St. Margaret's Hope Orkney Islands, Scotland to Canada with young Ann (1829-1918), John (1829-1885) and Elizabeth (1836-?). Captain John had been sailing the areas from one foreign port to another since a lad but for the mothersailing across the sea was a new experience taking many days.

For several years they lived at Niagara On the Lake, Margaret (1836-1922), James (1837-1910), Mary (1839-1878) and Isabel (1840-1915) were born there, but the Captain could seldom be there so in 1848 he gave up sailing to be keeper of the light on Gull (Mohawk) Island a mile out in the lake from the Point. This beautiful spot on the north shore of Lake Erie. The Government deeded Captain John twenty acres so he might build a house for his family. *Now part of [Rock Point Provincial Park](#)* While I was in the building, the family lived on the island, but the

mother was not pleased with this; her lads and lassies must go to school. Their older son John gave them their lessons in the winter, but from what I heard them say later, they learned little.

But at last the day came when Captain John and the mother and family came to live with me. And what happiness was theirs as they came through my front doorway into the wide hall and passed from room to room seeing everything.

I was shining with new paint, my newly plastered wall were white and clean, later to bear the marks of many wee fingers. There was plenty of room for the family, my parlor a large square room with adjoining bed rooms across the hall a living room and dining room combined with a step down in my kitchen, a smaller kitchen at the back. There were seven bedrooms, four upstairs and three downstairs that were slept in by two generations of the family.



Home of Ann Lowe Sutherland's Great grandfather on Isle of Hay Orkney. Name of farm "Athlisdale Farm" - Reason for so few windows - because of heavy window tax. Grandfather and Grandmother Burgess left this house with their three eldest children in June 1835 for America.

Then the busy days of settling in, the arranging of the furniture in my empty rooms, the haircloth covered sofa, and chairs and the marble top table in my parlor. The beds made up with feather beds, and the quilts the mother had pieced herself, there was the blue willow dishes brought from Scotland set carefully on the pantry shelves with brass candle sticks, and the old china sugar bowl, with its quaint pictures of Faith and Hope, snow white curtains were hung at my windows, gay rag carpets were tacked singly on my floors when all this was done I felt so happy. There was a beautiful view of the lake from my front doorway, the Captains names me "Lake View Cottage".

I was proud of my name. A path now overgrown with

weeds leading from my kitchen door past the tree the captain planted himself, and near the lake bank the cedar row growing in a circle where the lads and lassies played, the purple lilac still blooms near the kitchen window where the mother planted it. The wild grape vine is running all over the yard where once it shaded my doors step. The mother planted flowers Rosemary and Thyme, Larkspur and Marigolds but there are none there now. The mother was happy here her days were busy with care of the family as the Captain could only be with us during the winter months and as each day the light would shine across the water and she knew all was well with the Captain. The Dear Captain, the lads and Lassies loved him so. They all at different times spent a week or two with him on the island, in summer rowing back and forth in a small boat. We will remember the anxious time for us all that late December day when the captain and young Jamie were frozen in on the island and were forced to walk across the ice to the point, the mother breathing a sigh of relief to have them home again. The Captain was a ruddy faced Scotsman always speaking with the Scottish brogue he never lost. On a pleasant day in winter he would trudge up the road to visit with his friend Mr. McMurdough and on another such day his friend would come to play a game of checkers with him.

When the snow was gone he would walk the four miles to Stromness and would frequently walk the eight miles to Dunnville the nearest town on the Grand River.

He was known as the "Keeper of The Light" giving faithful service until his seventieth birthday (*Should read seventy-fifth 1872*) when he was retired and pensioned.

The family came to live with me in the spring of the year and the lads and lassies started to school at Sherbrooke Forest (*I believe this was an early name for Highbanks There was a school there at one time.*) a walk of a mile or more along the lake bank.

The mother wished her family to be educated. She came from an aristocratic Scotch family. Many times I have listened to her telling them as they sat around the chunk stove in an evening, the mother with her knitting, how her father Donald Sutherland

(1770-1850) and her mother Ann Lowe (1773-1871) were married in Kirkwall Orkney, and built a big stone house where she and her brothers and sisters were all born. The family would coax her to tell more about her childhood in Scotland until they saw it saddened her longing for her kinfolks. My walls are full of pleasant memories of the family. In the summer the lads and Lassies romping over the sand banks and along the beach bathing in the little cove east of the point which was called "Burgers Point".

They would race down the stairs in their night clothes early in the morning to bath in the cove and in the winter they would play in the snow building snowmen to stand in the door yard until the warm spring sun would make them disappear. The years followed one another the mothers steps was slower, grey was showing in her auburn hair, each day she saw her family growing older. Young friends from nearby farms often gathered here of on winter evening. The lads would build a fire in my parlor stove and then they would gather around and sing the old Scottish song "[Annie Laurie](#)" and "[Bonnie Doon](#)" and others, the captain sitting in his arm chair with his pipe enjoying it, or they would all come laughing in my kitchen to crack nuts or make taffy.

But it was lonesome for the young folks especially in the winter time when the snow would drift through the lane and across the yard and the family would be snowed in for a week or two and they were restless and one by one they wished to leave us. Young John followed the Captain and became a sailor. He sailed on the lake boats many years, then Ann went to the city of Toronto for a year to learn to become a seamstress but came home to the family quite often and at one time a young man, an Irishman came with her to ask for her hand in Marriage. But the Captain would have none of it; he saw good and bad in all countries but bad and worse in Ireland. Later three of his lassies married Irishmen.

Elizabeth the red head of the family secured a position as teacher in the school in Sherbrook Forrest and Margaret entered the normal school in Toronto. The mother missed her family but the real parting came when they married. John was the first to marry; I have not forgotten the day he came home bringing his bride Annie, drove from Port Maitland with his bride from the States. The family made her

welcome but she was homesick. She would wander down to the beach watching the lake, thinking of John sailing. The lassies would roll over to the island and to see the Captain. Annie loved the Captain and in the winter when young John came home she was happy. But one spring she sickened and died, it made me feel sad to see young John, he sat in my parlor and cried poor lad. (*I know that John married Martha Melissa Underhill on Jan 16, 1866; likely a second marriage.*)

We had our first wedding in a year or two later when Margaret was married (1857) to James "Sandy" McDonald just over from Scotland a year, this suited the Captain.

The busy days preparing for the wedding and the beautiful day in September they were married. The beach trees shedding golden leaves, the lake as smooth as glass. The Captain rowed over from the island. I saw a sad expression on the mother's face, her first lassie to marry and only twenty one. Young friends and relatives gather for the wedding. After a bounteous dinner the bridal couple drove away to Dunnville make their home well the Captain said I must away to the light. The family missed Margaret; she was always so bright and cheery.

It was on another September day a year later we had the double wedding (1858) when Elizabeth and Mary married their Irishmen George Gamble and George Magee. What sewing Ann's fingers just flew as the wedding day neared. My kitchen was full of savory smells. My rooms were scrubbed and polished. The wedding day was cold and white caps on the lake. They watched anxiously for the Captain to row over from the island. Presently everyone was there and the brides came down the stairs and into my parlor. Mary a young eighteen. What laughing and throwing of rice as they drove away. It was several years later that James married (1866) and lived in Dunnville. Isabella had the next wedding (1863) in my parlor, more sewing and baking of goodies in my old kitchen, more rice and old shoes as Isabella and her new husband William Magee drove away from our yard. The Captain and the mother saw their family growing smaller. Ann was the last to marry (1865); she and James Moore had the last wedding in my parlor. This left the Captain and the mother alone, until young John and his new wife Melissa

came to live with us. The year following John's daughter was born.

Happy days for us all then the old cradle was brought down from the barn loft and fixed for wee Annie

But Sadness comes to us all and in Sixty Six (1866) the year of the [Fenian Raids](#) when boat loads of wild Irishmen came across the lake from Buffalo, determined to take Canada before nightfall, thinking it a narrow strip of land. In June of that year the dear mother Ann Southerland Burgess passed away.

The Captain would sit by the window saying little, remembering how they had come from Scotland together and now he was left alone. The family came home and the mother was laid to rest in the cemetery at Sherbrooke. Soon after the mothers passing the Captain went to Dunnville and brought Elizabeth and her lads and lassies back with him to live with us again. My rooms were filled with young voices and the year following the Captain retired as keeper of the light. Lonesome days for him now, he would sit at my kitchen window in his old arm chair his eyes on the lake, a seaman on shore.



What a lot of excitement the day he came back from Dunnville with the news that the McDonalds were moving to the States going there to live in a town on the south shore of Lake Erie almost opposite of the point from us. They came to visit with us a few days before leaving, they slept in my upper rooms; the youngest named John after the Captain. As the years passed the grandchildren often came to stay with us in the summer when the schools were closed.

Happy days for them running wild over the sand banks and swinging in the big rope swing in the snow apple tree, playing house in the cedar grove, bathing in the cove just east of the point, then they would gather around my kitchen table appetites sharpened down my stairs hiding from one another in my upper rooms and then the year Elizabeth passed away and James and his lad and lassies came to live with the Captain. Of the thirty grand children only three became sailors. The Captain was getting feeble now and in his eighty ninth years suffered a stroke and never rose from his bed. James and his family lived with us for a time but it was far away from James business in the city, so they went away leaving me alone, deserted. Yes, I am an old house soon to be torn down.

A Walk down Memory Lane

I have run out of material to write about, so I am going to show you some postcards and other photos from my collection. I no longer have my original postcards as I scanned them and sent the actual cards to the Ontario Historical Society for them to archive.



The above postcard is of a couple cottages along the lakeshore in Beckley Beach. The white cottage on the hill first belonged to the Dermody siblings, Anne, Clare and Father Vincent Dermody; then down through the family until today my records tell me it is owned by the Hockton siblings; great nephews of the original Dermody owners. The cottage to the right was first owned by Ed McNally. It remains in the family today, owned by his daughter in law Patricia McNally. Both cottages were built circa 1932.

The above postcard is one of the houses I called home

while growing up at Port Maitland. It was located just before where today you enter Beckley Beach. Innophos owns the property and cuts the grass creating an open space where this house once stood. This house was once owned by John and Henrietta Siddall where they used it for a summer boarding house. It changed hands a number of times until about 1954 my father Maurice purchased it. When ERCO purchased the property in the late 1960s the house was torn down.



The postcard above is of the Martin's Exchange Hotel in West Port Maitland. This hotel had a number of names over the years. When it burnt to the ground in the early 1960s it was known as the Maitland Arms. It sat where the building we now know of as "[My Lighthouse Cottages](#)." Or more recently the Port Maitland Apartments I don't know much about Rui and Susan Nunes, the present owner, but they have done a masterful job of fixing the tired old place up.



This postcard is of the Y.W.C.A. Camp Owaissa located where [Sandy Shore Trailer Park](#) is on Niece Rd. Any red blooded young boy of the 1930s

through to 1977 made his way to the camp after dark, or at least that is what he told his buddies. The trip was billed as a Peeping Tom outing, but the ladies were too smart to let that happen. All it turned out to be was boys harassing girls by knocking down the shutters, banging on the sleeping quarters, or making ghost sounds. It was fun to come home and tell the other fellows that the cook chased them over the fence or she caught one, and after shaking him thoroughly she let him go with a warning. Pure fiction in most cases! By the way, this card can sell from \$10.00 to \$50.00, so look for the bargain.



The above photo will have lots of memories for the Blunt family who have summered at Beckley Beach in one way or another since 1925. First, Don and Bob's grandfather Major Andrew Hamilton Frame brought the Boy Scouts from the 27th Hamilton Scout Group to Camp Teetanka on the eastern end of Beckley where the Blunts now have their cottages. Don and Bob Blunt's mother at age four came along. The camp remained open until 1939 and in the early 1950's Don and Bob's parents built their cottage where Bob currently has his.

Grace as said at Camp Teetunkah:

Be present at our table Lord.
Be here and everywhere adored.
These mercies bless and grant that we
May feast in Paradise with Thee



The photo above is not a postcard but rather a small piece of a larger circa 1929 photo. It shows the location of the Cairn in the Port Maitland East Park. The shoreline has changed considerably but you can see the former ferry that at first took horses and buggies across the river. Later it would take cars and foot traffic back and forth across the river. This spick of land jutting out into the river during the 1940s through the 1970s was known as Brown's Point. In the late 1960's, Pinky and George Martin had a refreshment stand in what was once the Brown's garage.



This is a photo from the late Julia Hall nee Clark. It is of the Cable Ferry *Chummy Heaps* named after its owners Chummy Clark and Heapes Pyle. In the background you can see the home I grew up in. Ferry service started at Port Maitland as early as 1815 when the river's mouth would silt up in late summer and a horse and buggy was used as transport across the river. I am not sure exactly when the above service ended but I believe it was in 1952. We old-timers will remember the remains of the ferry dock at the south end of the Cairn Park, just where the garbage containers are located.

Will this be the last year for the printed Grand Despatch?

PMHA has a commitment to its sponsors to print four issues in 2019. I have not decided if we will continue into 2020 with a printed issue. We certainly will not charge our members nor our sponsors the current price to continue sponsorship or membership should we discontinue with the hardcopy of the Despatch. If you have any questions, concerns or ideas, please contact Bill at president@port-maitland.ca.

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Note. The grammar, punctuation etc. in stories written by others was left as it was.