

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

PMHA taking Grand Despatch Digital!

Our last Grand Despatch!

It has been twenty-one years and fifty-six issues of the Grand Dispatch/Despatch since I put together the first issue. Though I have not made much of a point of it, I am dyslexic, which I am sure showed up more than once. Having to research and write has helped me considerably. If nothing else, I am grateful for that. Over the years I have tried a number of ideas to hopefully make your reading more interesting and informative. It has pleased me that there have not been too many errors of fact, though there were lots of screw ups regarding grammar and spelling. This will be the last hardcopy Despatch and what follows is still not clear; however it will be digital.

Exceptions have been made for a few of you who have still not caught up with the rest of the world. You will receive whatever I produce as a hardcopy, but PMHA will not take any new members who don't have a computer or at least the new members will not receive any hardcopy issues.

There are so many people to thank for the donation of their information and photos but I want to name only a few. First there was Earl Siddall who was a trove of information and photos. Through the Dispatch, and our common interest in local history he and I became very good friends. Then there was Carroll Kenney (often called Carl) who was equally knowledgeable of local history. In Carroll's last years, I spent every Friday afternoon visiting him at his house and later at his seniors' home. Pat Hayes has also provided many photos and information about Beckley Beach. I am particularly grateful to Pat for his photos and history of the Sacred Heart Chapel.

The past few months has been a bit of a torture as I went from one idea to another trying to decide how to end this twenty-one year journey. I have kicked

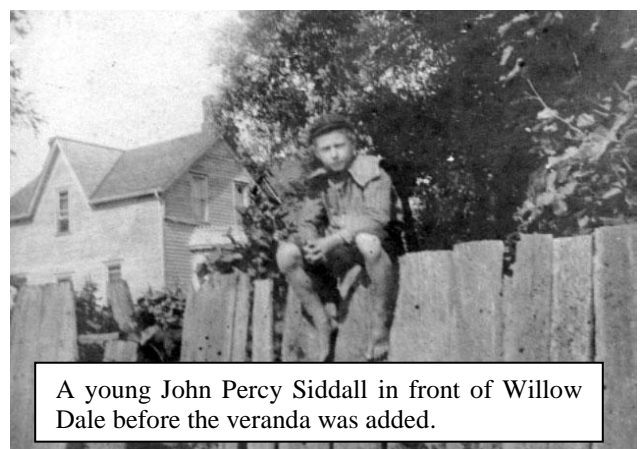
about a number of ideas and all seemed unfitting for a final issue. My final choice is to be simple and offer you an article or two from the past fifty-six issues and some tidbits from my Dunnville Chronicle articles.

Thanks for being such good followers.

My Walk Down Memory Lane!

From Vol 4 No 3 - July 2001

As I write this Dispatch, I am also producing a multi-part history that has been ongoing since February in the Dunnville Chronicle. In it, I reminisce about buildings that were in a 1929 aerial photo of Port Maitland that are no longer there. My first article briefly touched on buildings on the east side of the Grand, of which only three remain. I then skipped across the river to chronicle buildings that are now gone. By September I intend to return to the east side and tell of the buildings that no longer share this community. One place I will tell you about is the old home where I grew up, (called Willow Dale). It once stood on the former lot eleven. Today it would be the last one inside the fence just before entering Beckley Beach.



A young John Percy Siddall in front of Willow Dale before the veranda was added.

It is not known when it was built but I suspect it was

around or slightly before 1880, and was likely built by Thomas Bessey. Thomas was my first cousin three times removed. Of course he never knew that and frankly it is likely he wouldn't have cared! Thomas a large strong man nearly drowned at Byng in 1890, being saved by Archie Gordon when Bessey lost control of a skiff he was on during heavy water flow. Archie managed to secure the skiff allowing Bessey to get to safety. I believe the house was built for John and Henrietta Siddall as a boarding house, one of a number to dot the local landscape. Henrietta it seems was the business manager of the boarding house while John dabbled in some farming on the fields nearby. The boarding house business was so good that an annex was added that has since been removed and now sits on the corner of the Downey and Niece Side Roads.



Willow Dale in better days with verandah on three sides

When we first moved into this house around 1954, it had been duplexed. We lived in the front half while a family by the name of Meehan lived in the back. We were not there long when the Meehan's moved to Toronto and shortly thereafter Dad (William Maurice) purchased it from Canada Coal for about three thousand dollars. As it was built as a boarding house the design was much like a hotel with the upstairs hall running through the middle of the top floor from front to back. Six bedrooms led off this hallway, three on either side. To remodel it into a one family home Dad removed a wall dividing this long hallway upstairs and then another wall covering a pre-existing door between two very large rooms on the first floor. As far as I know it had never been a one family home other than to John and Henrietta

Siddall who lived in it, while running it as a boarding house.

At the front of the house there was a bending staircase with a great railing you could slide down, but you had better be careful where it made the bend or you would find yourself rolling the rest of the way down the steps. Another less exciting set of stairs led down the back hall to the kitchen and out the side door.

On the first floor there were three very large rooms and a large kitchen. We never quite figured out which room was the living room as there were two of them. The dining room faced the back of the house as did the large kitchen. When Dad bought it around 1956, there was no indoor plumbing. We made visits to the little house out back; you know the one with the crescent moon or star just over the door! A well had been dug at the north side of the house that provided sour marshy water for dishes and to bathe in. The little ones took their baths in the large kitchen sink. My mother (Irene) would heat water on the stove and add it to the ice cold-water from a hand pump, or a bit later after Dad added some modest plumbing, she would flip a switch hooked to an electric pump. The adults could only sponge bath.

Winters were cold and drafty at first while summers were generally comfortable. The old house was not insulated and I don't think weather stripping had yet been invented! To help deal with the summer heat, Mrs. Siddall planted numerous willow trees and lilac bushes around the property that provided cooling shade. In 1904, John Siddall built a beautiful covered verandah around three sides of the house. Later, someone else screened it in and put windows around the north side. In summer Dad put up two large beds in the screened in portion and my sisters (Maurene, Lallee and Margo) would share one while I and sometimes my brothers (Skip, David and Robert) used the other. It was like tenting - only it wasn't!

In winter we heated with Quebec heaters burning soft coal purchased from the coal docks just across the feeder canal. Mornings were cold until someone could get the fires started. We learned at an early age how to stoke a coal fire and make those little Quebec

heaters pump out the heat! At first they were placed directly under a hole in the ceiling designed to take the pipe to the upper room and into the chimney. Dad moved one of them to the opposite side of the room and extended the pipe horizontally just below the ceiling. This provided more heat, but looked terrible and could be very dirty. The pipe extended up through the bedrooms above and many a close call was had when we set our clothes or cold socks too close to the pipes to warm them, only to find them smelling, holey and burnt.

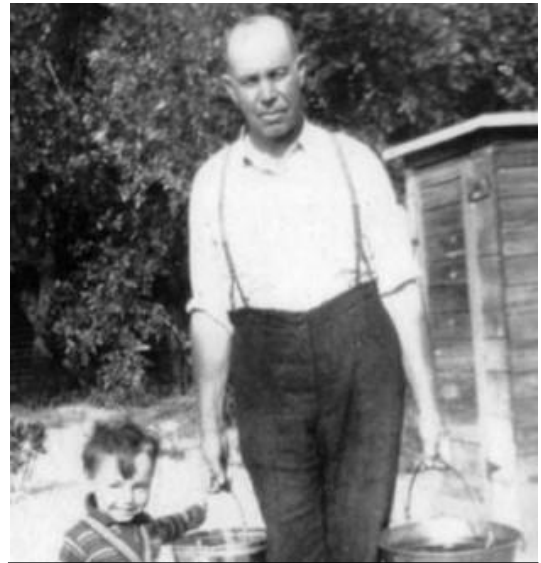
Dad began a substantial renovation project that took a number of years and every dollar he had. On September 13 1958, the day my sister Maurene married Jerry Ollen-Bittle we flushed our first toilet. Dad and I had worked around the clock from Thursday afternoon until Saturday morning, which was only hours before the nuptials in order to get our two, "yes two" new washrooms working. Dad had the first bath and I was close behind. The next job to finish was to remove the old sink as there was a reception about to take place in our former kitchen and bathing room. I remember when some friends of my parents who were still using the little house out back visited with their children. A few years later one of those children, then in high school remarked to my sister, "You are the people with all those bathrooms!" I think it was the only time in our lives we thought, "Wow we are rich!"

My memoirs of the Beach at Port Maitland

By Helen J. (Fergie) Root nee Ferguson
Vol 3-A No. 1 - Winter, 2015

The year would be 1929 or 1930; Dad would pack Mother and the two kids in the Model A Ford every weekend, heading for the beach, to camp. The first trip of the season was the hardest; no trunk for the camping gear, so we had to get into the car and it was packed around us. There was a gate on the running board that had to be closed and packed after we were all inside the vehicle. Dad crawled in last. Dad and Manny Hurst worked together and he had a lot with a large platform installed where he pitched a large circus sized tent for the summer. He allowed us to pitch our tent closer to the road and it remained there all summer. We camped for two summers, rented


McPherson's cottage for one summer and in 1933 my grandfather George Ferguson had our cottage built. Do you remember Sam Hildebrand and his wife Daisy? Sam built quite a few cottages at the beach and was the original tenant in Frances McDonald's (no relation to Archie and Jesse) cottage.



Young Rick Wilkins and Grandpa Manny Hurst

Our cottage was named "Craigellachie" after the small community in B.C. where the last spike was driven, completing the C.P.R. (Grandpa Ferguson and Dad both worked for the T.H.&B.). The 24th of May was the opening date, and we had to air mattresses, scrub floors, sweep cobwebs, wash dishes, prime the pump and check the outhouse for animals (no plumbing facilities in those days). Hopefully Merle Jenkinson had already turned on the local natural gas. Later he would be around to collect \$5.00 for the use of the gas for the summer. Yes 5 dollars, a real bargain by today's standards. We had to carry our drinking and cooking water by pail from Milan Culp's home located at the start of the pier. We had bread delivery from Reichel's Bakery in Dunnville, along with milk, ice, butter and eggs delivery by Dunnville Dairy and Root's Dairy (yes, I married the milkman - Earl Root). We also had fresh vegetable delivery and a meat truck would make the rounds, once a week, but there was a small convenience store on Spray's front porch.

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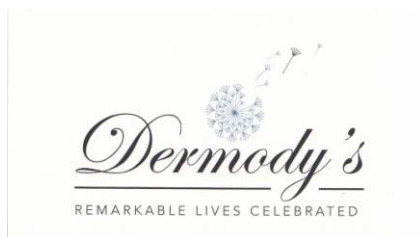
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Continued from pg 3

Later it was operated by the Curtis family located over the ice house.

In the late 30's and early 40's our lazy, hazy days of summer were never long enough. We were fortunate that most of the residents had children all about the same age and we all played, swam and boated together. Father John O'Reilly (later Monsignor) had a large parish at The Church of Our Lady, in Guelph and would bring his altar and choir boys to the beach for a holiday the first two weeks of July. We played ball early evening (the boys against the beach) and we all went for a swim at dusk, with a campfire after dark. Father John played the accordion and when Murray Hurst was in residence he would come with his guitar. Who can remember Johnny Ford? He was our umpire, and he certainly had to take a lot of complaints from both teams.

Entertainment at the beach was unlimited. James L. Grightmire built a raft that was partially anchored in deeper water and when a storm came in it was always washed up on shore, but we would all get together and float it back out. This was before we were old enough to swim the break. We had field days, weekly bingo games in the chapel and once a year Father O'Reilly had a festival/fair (often called housie's) on his front lawn, as a fund raiser for the chapel. There were games (fish pond, roulette and horse racing, etc.) each costing a nickel or so to participate.

The boating was pretty well restricted to the river area, although there was one very unfortunate accident involving Brenda Boyle that happened on the lake and gave us all a scare. There were coal boat carriers, and many fishing tugs that took off early in the morning and returned later in the afternoon. Perch sold for .25 cents a pound and it was filleted. Tom Kenny (station master) had a motor launch and we were invited to go for a spin once or twice a year. He seemed to prefer a day when there was a good wind blowing and waves were a mile high!

I remember being out when you couldn't even see the boat between swells (no life jackets in those good old days). His son Carroll owned a "Seaflea" that could be heard all over the beach when he was on the river. The Warnick family had a small blue motor boat and Arthur asked if I would like to go for a ride. All went well as we headed up the river toward Dunnville, but all of a sudden the motor sputtered and died. To complicate matters Arthur threw the paddle overboard. It was then that I realized he was playing a game with me and I threatened to swim back to shore. I wonder how many girls he tricked with that antic! Then there was the fog horn. I must say that I miss the sound of that foghorn every day.

In 1940 there was a National Registration and if you were 16 years of age you had to register. In August of that year about 15 or 20 of us walked up the old canal bank road to Stromness to register at the school house. It was a fun day and I'll try to remember some of those in the group. There was Eileen and Tom McNally, Jimmy McGowan, Catharine, Ed and Joan Boyle, Kathleen Hurst, Norman Denman, the Crossman girls, Grightmire girls, Eddy and Murray George, Dean Montgomery and myself. Most of us would walk to the Mohawk lighthouse, once a season taking a lunch and enjoying a swim along the way. Crossing the river by the ferry boat was a daily ritual as there was no mail delivery and we had to get our mail at McKee's store (across from the Maitland Arms hotel). I think that Tom was relieved when mail delivery came to the beach. He had a "one armed bandit" and quite often he had it turned toward the wall when we arrived as it paid liberally.

The war years changed many things at the beach and God willing and the devil doesn't interfere, I will be back with more memories.

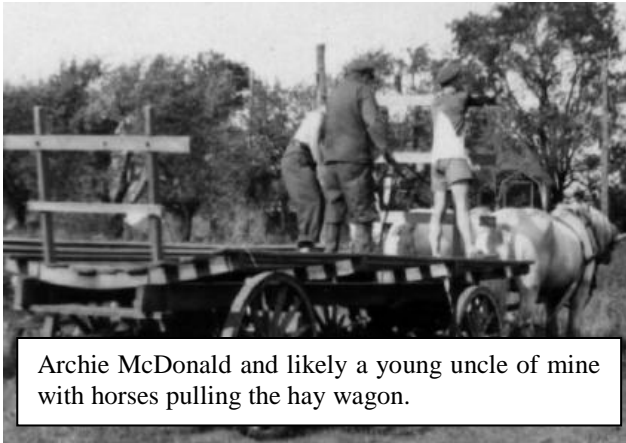
Helen J. Root (Ferguson) married Earl Root of the Roots Dairy family and spent her early married days living in her parents' cottage at Beckley Beach.

Helen passed away on March 18, 2018

What Horses and Skunks have in Common?

Dunnville Chronicle October 2005

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 built cottages there as well. We moved into my Dad's brother Joe's cottage which was a bit rustic at best. At worse it was . . ., well kind of primitive. Uncle Joe knew this and I suspect many times over the 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 was young when I discovered this wonderful edifice and its' aroma, 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, well you know!



Archie McDonald and likely a young uncle of mine with horses pulling the hay wagon.

Over the years 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 losing the privilege of driving his car from time to time. 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 fifty or more footpath infested

with snakes and who knows what else. It might as well have been a two mile walk on the moors! This night as I tip-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 to ten feet tall, all white with legs long enough that as 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. Oh and he also arrived on his two white horses which were left to wonder about our yard!

All these useless 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!

We get a name!

Vol 1 No 2 - April 1998

A meeting of the Summer Cottagers residing on the east side of the Grand River at Port Maitland was held on Sunday afternoon July 25, 1937 in the Sacred Heart Chapel at 2:00 p.m. Mr. William J. Warnick occupied the chair and opened the meeting.

On a motion by Mr. Marvin W. Angle seconded by Mr. Val Springstead, it was voted that those present at the meeting and all cottagers at Port Maitland form an improvement association. The Sacred Heart Chapel had been built only recently answering a need of the Roman Catholic community.

On a motion by M. W. Angle, Seconded by Edward F. Boyle it was voted that in future the community be known as "Beckley Beach", Port Maitland as a tribute to the late John Newton Beckley who for many years was president of the TH&B Railway and who was largely instrumental in opening the section to summer residents.

With the above motions passed and its first president, James L. Grightmire, in place, two defining moments occurred in the history of Beckley

Beach. First, the formal establishment of an improvement association took place. It was to be known as the “Beckley Beach - Port Maitland - Cottager’s Association”, and secondly the naming of our favorite vacation place at the mouth of the Grand River.

The following were present:

Warnick, William J.	Shorer, Mr.
Hayes, Michael J.	Kelly, Jack
Kenny, Thomas. J.	Kelly, Joseph
Grightmire, James L.	George, Albert
Jones, Steve	Ferguson, Winston
Ford, John	McNally, Ed
Ford, Rev. James	Springstead, Val
Wilson, Harry	McGowan, Dr. James
Carr, Frank	Johnson, Norval
Misener, J. W.	Sinnott, Jack
McDonald, Miss Frances	Farrell, Ed.
Petman, Harold F.	McDonnell, Mr.
Angle, Marvin	Spray, Tom
Hurford, W. H.	Hall, Mr.
Lavell, Robert J.	Sullivan, B. G.
Strachan, A. R.	Boyle, Ed. F.
Culp, Milan	Warnick, Paul
Boyle young, Eddie	

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only cover the cost of printing but have been the major source of funding for most of the projects PMHA has supported. Without this sponsorship and generous donations by members and business PMHA could not have maintained the lock and the cairn, nor supported other projects.

Over the years PMHA has had a number of officers and many, many members. We will continue to go forward, just not with the printed Despatch. We/I need to thank one person in particular. That is Janet deVos who has been with us from day one and has done a superb job of keeping me and the books straight. Thank you Janet.

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AULD LANG SYNE

By Rabbie Burnes

“The Words of [Auld Lang Syne](#) were written, or perhaps at least in part "collected", by the Scottish poet [Robert Burns](#), in 1788. Burns himself claimed that he, "took it down from an old man," and that Auld Lang Syne was an old folk song. The song is traditionally sung on the stroke of New Year, and also sometimes at graduations, funerals and other farewells. The phrase "Auld Lang Syne" itself means, depending upon how you translate it, either as, "old long ago", or "long, long ago" or "days gone by". So we can certainly say that the song is about looking back on the past.” The Grand Dispatch/Despatch has always been about looking back while moving forward.

If you read the Despatch digitally open the link below by “right clicking then open hyperlink”

[Auld Lang Syne!](#)