

REMINISCENCES

of FORT ERIE and NIAGARA RIVER

OVER HALF A CENTURY AGO

Written for this paper by
RICHARD RATCLIFFE

(Now residing in Goderich, Ont.)

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In the summer of 1855, the writer arrived at the village of Fort Erie, better known then as the "Ferry." It was a small country village, and very much country at that. There were no sidewalks or improved streets or roads; not even a well in the whole village, the water supply being obtained from the river. Indeed everything of that sort was pretty much as nature had left it, but for all this it had its advantages as a place of residence. One whose tastes inclined that way could enjoy the peace and quiet incident to country village life; while if they desired greater excitement, from one and a half to two hours would take them into the heart of the city of Buffalo where one could enjoy all the advantages, gaities and pleasures of the city along with the peace of the country life combined. When I mention one and a half to two hours, it must be borne in mind that there were not the same facilities then for reaching that city that there are at the present time. The ferry was a horse boat and there were no trolleys or even horse cars. Niagara street was only paved as far down as Ferry street, and a line of omnibuses made half hourly trips from Black Rock Dam to Main street. If one was lucky enough to catch a bus at the top of the hill on Ferry street, the delays caused by the frequent stoppages to take on and put off passengers made it rather tedious, so that if one arrived at Main street in an hour, he was fortunate.

On my arrival at Fort Erie my first consideration was to obtain comfortable quarters. There were three hotels in the village, the first being the Forsyth house, an Anglo-American, in the upper part of the village, kept by one Southworth, the second being the ~~house~~ ~~which~~ ~~was~~ ~~then~~ ~~situated~~ ~~about~~ ~~500~~ ~~or~~ ~~600~~ ~~yards~~ ~~farther~~ ~~down~~ ~~the~~ ~~river~~ ~~than~~ ~~the~~ ~~present~~ ~~landing~~. This was kept by a big burly Englishman, named Sam Couthard. Across the road and about 100 feet farther down was the third kept by Wesley Lewis (better known as Capt. Lewis). At this latter house the writer took up his abode, obtaining a comfortable room, plenty of good food, well cooked and well served, all for the magnanimous sum of \$3.00 per week, with your "bit-
ters" included in the morning, if you desired them.

A Hold-Up Gang.

Very shortly after my arrival there was a rather exciting incident occurred. At that time the whole countryside was very much agitated owing to the depredations of the Townsend gang. This was a gang of men banded together for the purpose of robbery, plunder and frequently murder when necessary to carry out their designs. Every tramp and disreputable-looking person who could not give a proper account of himself was supposed to belong to the Townsend gang by the excited populace. One bright, moonlight night, between 12 and 1, a stranger obtained access into the hotel of Capt. Lewis, and proceeded to appropriate several articles of clothing belonging to some of the inmates, such as coats, trousers and boots. The noise made by putting on the boots aroused one of the inmates, who quickly gave the alarm, and in a few minutes the whole hotel was aroused. The stranger quickly made his exit and proceeded up the road. In a few minutes the village constable, John Magwood, with a couple of comrades, who had been drawing a fish seine a short distance below the hotel, were quickly on the spot and

gave chase to the stranger, who, finding himself hotly pursued, took to a small boat and started for the American side. In a few minutes Magwood and his companions were in another boat in full chase, the current carrying them down the river. They had nearly reached the head of Squaw Island and when the constable demanded him to halt in the name of the Queen, this he naturally declined doing, when Magwood pulled his gun on him and shot him dead. The boat and the stranger were towed back to the Canadian side, and the following morning the usual coroner's inquest took place. I do not remember exactly what the verdict of the jury was, but, as no one appeared either to identify or claim the body, it was quietly interred, and it has never been known, from that day to this, who the individual was, but everyone supposed he was one of the Townsend gang. The writer was always of the opinion that he was some unfortunate tramp who merely wished to replenish his wardrobe. Townsend, the leader of the gang, was caught shortly afterwards, tried and convicted in Welland for the murder of a farmer somewhere out near the canal. Had this incident occurred a few years later when the friendly relations then existing between the United States and Canada

were more strained, it might have resulted in some international complication, as the man was certainly shot in American waters and was within a few rods of American territory.

Fort Erie was by no means a pretty village, its chief beauty being that grand old Niagara river. The dwellings were all old fashioned and unpretentious and but few possessed external adornment in the way of trees, shrubbery or lawns; but it contained a very good society consisting of from 12 to 15 families of the better class, as Louisa Tomlinson, an old colored woman, used to term "de quality folks," none of whom were rich, but all apparently in very comfortable circumstances; and their hospitality was proverbial.

I will now give a brief description

of a few of the principal one their surroundings. Commencing the upper end of the village and going down the river as I proceed down the river the first was Mr. V. A. Thompson, his residence was very prettily situated, facing the river and immediately opposite the rapids. It had formerly been the old Col. Kerby property. Mr. Thompson had been in mercantile business in Buffalo under the firm name of "Thompson Bros., who were for many years termed the Hardware Kings. This was previous to the advent of DeWitt C. Weed & Co., which is now, I believe, the oldest hardware establishment in that city. Mr. Thompson, on retiring from business, came to Fort Erie, purchasing the before mentioned property, and tearing down the old buildings, erected a commodious and up-to-date dwelling for that time. His wife was a southern lady and he had a large family of young children, principally daughters. About this time there was a considerable land boom in Western Ontario, then Upper Canada. Every one who had any money and those who had very little, were investing in town and village, vainly expecting that every village and hamlet in the country was immediately going to become a city.

Mr. Thompson caught the fever and made several very extensive purchases, but, unfortunately for him when purchasing land, in several instances, he also purchased a lawsuit. Every one who can remember as far back as that, will well know what a Chancery lawsuit meant in those days. This fact, together with the boom never materializing, ruined him financially; but a few years afterwards he recovered himself, and eventually died a comparatively rich man. It was through his exertions that the railway, now owned and operated by the Michigan Central, then built from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Chippawa, was extended from the latter place to Fort Erie. He was the original promoter of the Canada Southern, also owned and operated by the Michigan Central, and a few years after Confederation was a Member of Parliament for the county of Welland.

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We next come to the residence of Mr. Jas. Wallace, C. E., situated on the corner of Queen street and the main or River road. This had been a portion of the old Hardison homestead, but very much improved and stead, but very much improved and renovated by Mr. Wallace. It also faced the river with very pretty grounds and shrubbery in front. Mr. Wallace was the engineer in front. Mr. Wallace was the engineer who built the old Buffalo, Brantford and Goderich railway from Fort Erie to Paris, now the Buffalo and Lake Huron branch of the Grand Trunk, and for a couple of years after it went into operation was its superintendent. His family consisted of one daughter and two sons, very bright young men who had assisted

their father greatly while acting superintendent of the road.

Two or three hundred yards farther down, on the opposite side of the street and immediately adjoining the then railway depot and freight sheds, was the store, postoffice and residence of Mr. Rainsford. He had been master for a great many years, his family was two sons and two daughters, and being Irish, they possessed the national characteristic of hospitality in a very marked degree.

A few doors up Forsyth street, immediately opposite this, was the residence of Dr. John Cronyn, a very successful and popular practitioner. He also being Irish had all that suavity of manner proverbial to his race. His bright smile and cheerful manner on entering a sick room frequently did his patients as much good as his medicine. He left Fort Erie in 1859, going to Buffalo, where he became as successful and popular as ever. His eldest son, Dr. John Cronyn, has succeeded him in his practice in that city.

On the corner of the same street, where the Sterling Bank now is, was the residence of Mr. Nelson Forsyth, almost immediately opposite the then railway station, which stood just about where the present ferry landing is. Mr. Forsyth was a very active energetic man, taking a very deep interest in all public affairs; was Reeve of the village for many years on several occasions. His wife was a most charming lady and an admirable hostess.

Residences Were Plain

We next come to the residence of Mr. Alexander Douglas. This, although by no means pretentious, was yet the prettiest little place in the village. The grounds, not large, was prettily laid out with trees, shrubbery etc.

We now come to Bertie street, then called the Hershey road; crossing this we come to a very uninviting, old fashioned dwelling, which had formerly been the residence of Mr. Jas. Stanton. During the boom before mentioned he had disposed of that portion of his property from the foot of the hill to the river road, to a Buffalo syndicate, and built a substantial brick house up on the hill which is now owned and occupied by Mr. E. Baxter. This, although a very nice dwelling, was entirely void of any external adornment, not even a single tree. Mr. Stanton had a large family, the most of whom had all passed

His wife died in May, 1911, after her 94th birthday.

A short distance back of this, and facing the Hershey road, was also a large frame dwelling occupied by the Rev. Elliot Grasett, the rector of the parish. This was also void of any external adornment. Indeed, most of the people had neither the taste nor the inclination to beautify their prop-

erties externally. All they seemed to think about was eating and drinking. The majority of the ladies were ways vying with each other as to who could make the best bread, the lightest biscuits, and the best preserves, and keep her house in the best order; and a few of even the most cultivated and refined did not think it derogatory to their social standing to indulge in the mysterious art of making soft soap; but for all this they were exceedingly nice and agreeable people socially.

Returning to the River road, and a few hundred yards farther down, we come to the residence of Mrs. Kenneth McKenzie. This was the proverbial old fashioned frame dwelling, and, although it was only ten or twelve feet back from the road, yet it had some pretensions to external adornment, as there were a couple of lilac bushes in the front yard, with a hop vine growing over the porch. The latter was both useful and ornamental, as everyone in those days made her own yeast. The hops, when matured, were made use of while the vine acted as an adornment. At the side and rear there was a nice fruit and vegetable garden. This dwelling, which was but recently torn down, was the oldest in the place, being considerably over one hundred years old. There were also two large pear trees on the west side, bearing much superior fruit to anything grown at the present time; the fruit being of that old stock brought to this country by the Jesuit Fathers when Canada belonged to the French. These trees are still standing and bearing fruit. The only place that I know where the same variety of fruit is grown, is on the Canadian side of the Detroit river near Windsor. Before her marriage to McKenzie she was the widow of Col. John Warren, and had a family

Waiter 1913
Richard Rodcliffe