



THE ONE-TIME FISHERMAN AND A SNAPSHOT OF BYGONE COLLINGWOOD

H. David Vuckson

When my beloved grandmother Hewson died in February 1957, the house that she had received as a wedding present from her parents (my O'Brien great-grandparents) in 1905 was left to my mother and her younger brother Howard Hewson. The house, so full of family memories for more than half a century, was tired. It needed a new roof, the verandah needed to be totally replaced, and the rear portion (kitchen, pantry, bathroom, woodshed, coalbin, and summer kitchen) beyond the main two-storey section needed to be torn down and replaced with something new. My parents contemplated going there to live and asked me if I would like to move there from Ste. Marie St. and, being in my 10th year, I was not keen on the idea of being uprooted from my friends. In addition, my grandmother's house at 433 Hurontario St. was (and still is) located at almost

the very back of the lot and there was no large back yard to play in or to have a vegetable garden like we had on Ste. Marie St. From a Hurontario St. location I also would not have been able to see the trains coming and going to and from town as I could from my bedroom window or backyard on Ste. Marie St. At the time there was an unobstructed view from our house all the way to the tracks—very important to a lifelong rail fan!

Granny's house had to be emptied out and as we sorted through it we discovered my grandmother had written "This is Catharine's" on the back or inside of a number of items including furniture. We already had a piano at home and so the Mason & Risch upright piano that my grandfather bought for my mother in 1920 was donated to the First Presbyterian Church where it still lives in the Lower Hall. We got the furniture items that were designated for us and the china figurines that had been saved from great-grandfather O'Brien's store during the Great Fire of 1881 but, as in most cases when a home has to be cleared out, a lot of stuff was thrown out. I did receive a couple of old wrist watches that had belonged to my grandfather but they didn't work and after keeping them for a time, I let them go.

One item that, regrettably, disappeared (and no one could ever account for where it went) was my grandmother's main floor clock, one of those kitchen shelf or mantle clocks with a

gingerbread-like ornate wooden cabinet that sat on a table in a bay window in the dining room. The face had the typical Roman numerals, and, uncommonly, this clock had a “mercury pendulum”. This type of pendulum, instead of having the usual round bob weight, has two or three glass tubes partially filled with mercury which would expand or contract with temperature changes so that the clock would keep more accurate time without needing seasonal adjustment. I was always fascinated by that clock, and used to love watching the minute hand approach “12” and then listen to the gong strike. When my parents were away I would stay overnight at my grandmother’s house and I used to love hearing from the upstairs bedroom the sound of the clock striking downstairs in the night. I loved that sound so much, that for many years now, to recreate that sound and the memories associated with it, I have a vintage clock in the den (two rooms away from our bedroom) and if I happen to be awake in the night and hear the clock strike the hour, it takes me back more than 65 years to my grandmother’s house and to what a special place it was for a child and what a special person she was to me.

Since neither my mother nor my uncle Howard wanted the house, it was sold to a Mr. Leonard for about \$12,000.00 (1957 dollars), an amount which, today, might barely pay for the foundation of a new house. My grandmother’s 1951 Studebaker which my parents had the use of and kept at our

house was traded in at Hanna Motors for a brand new 1957 Ford. The new owner of the house demolished the rear portion and built a new addition there and also replaced the roof and the verandah. The old wooden garage with the dirt floor (my mother called it “the barn”) that had stood at the back of the lot since the 1920’s was replaced with a 1957 version; this, in turn, disappeared in later years as the house expanded.

The “barn” dated from the years when cars were not winterized and streets were not plowed. Most people did not attempt to drive in the snow although those brave enough would put chains on their tires. Farmers came into town to shop with horse and sleigh. Grandfather Hewson would put his car to bed for the winter, jacking it up, removing the wheels to preserve the tires, and leaving the car sitting on wooden blocks. The radiator and cylinder block were drained and the battery was taken into the house for the winter and kept warm by wrapping it in a blanket and putting it behind the kitchen wood/coal cook stove where it was kept company by an old hunting dog that slept there for the warmth. In good weather, the family car was indispensable for commuting the seven miles to the Hewson summer cottage at Brock’s Beach in the 1920’s. It was common for people to “name” their summer cottages and so the cottage was named “FIRSTERE—THE HEWSONS”, meaning “First Here”. The core of this cottage at the bottom of Inverkip Rd. had been originally built by the Brock family when

they acquired 200 acres of property in the early 1900's for logging and firewood and the cottage originally had served as a logger's cabin when they were working in the bush. In December 1919 a plan of subdivision was registered under the names James Reid and Fred A. Brock. A family legend states that my grandfather Hewson—the "Hewson" of O'Brien & Hewson Men's Wear at 69 Hurontario St.—got the cottage property for one dollar when someone who owed him money could not pay. Immediately to the west of the Hewson cottage was that of my grandfather's brother-in-law Harry R. Storey (father of Dr. Bob Storey). Some of the homes on that dead-end road (originally named Gourock Rd.) are still owned today by the families that owned them in the 1950's.

Following my grandmother's death, the Hewson family cottage at Brock's Beach went to my mother's younger brother Howard Hewson. Mom's older brother Reginald Hewson who lived in Toronto already had his own cottage named "BRIGIDENE" (the name perhaps adapted from the 1954 movie about the mythical village of Brigadoon) built in 1955, at 13 Glen Rogers Rd. in Collingwood. I was present the day the cement was poured for the foundation of the fireplace. From uncle Reg's cottage my cousin Greg Hewson and I used to venture out and explore the nearby World War I Rifle Range, part of Collingwood's distant past (once on the edge of town) that has long since been given over to new housing.

There have been a couple of further additions to my grandmother's old house since the late 1950's and the current owners very kindly allowed me and Pam to see inside the house in 2017. While some of the rooms are used for different purposes than they were originally and the walnut trees on the south side of the house are gone, nevertheless there are still sufficient landmarks from yesteryear and for me the years fell away as I stepped through the front door and was transported back to my childhood. The house still sits in splendid seclusion from the street behind tall fir trees as it did before I was born.

Among the things we found in the rear part of the house behind my grandmother's kitchen in 1957 were two ancient fishing rods that had belonged to my grandfather who died the year before I was born. Like many men of his generation he was into hunting and fishing. I was asked if I would like to have his fishing rods and I agreed, thinking that someday I would try using them. When it came time to try fishing, a friend and I rode our bikes down to the dead end of Collins St. The street was little more than a dirt country road for much of the distance beyond Harry Bell's property. At the end of Collins St., we left our bikes, climbed over the broken-down wire fence that marked the edge of the CNR right-of-way, climbed the embankment up to the tracks and walked south to the bridge over the Pretty River. These were the same railway tracks that my grandfather Hewson, when a young man in his teens in the

second half of the 1890's, walked along to and from Collingwood from the Hewson farm on the 6th line at Batteaux to attend the original Collingwood Collegiate on Hume St. Now, 60 years later, I was retracing some of his steps with his fishing rod as we hiked toward the Pretty River. When we got there with our fishing gear, sandwiches and bottles of pop, we placed the bottles in the moving water to keep them cold and for the first and last time in my life I tried fishing.

In the 1950's this adventure was like going way out into the country. On Collins St. beyond the intersection with Robinson St. there were J. H. Grant & Son's cement block factory and a few houses ending with that of public school teacher/truant officer, giver of sleigh rides to local children, provider of horse-powered backyard vegetable garden plowing in the spring and future Mayor of Collingwood, Harry Bell, on the right. The empty area beyond Harry Bell's property was called "The Commons". Readers familiar with the area south of Collins St. as it is today must understand that in the late 1950's, long before all of those streets and new houses were put in, most of it was a combination of bush and empty scrub land plus a nine hole golf course that was entered off Hurontario St. south of Campbell St. The southern limit of the Town of Collingwood at that time was at the southern boundary of the Collingwood Golf Course which occupied land all the way to the railway tracks. For those of you who remember C.C.I. English teacher

Jack Kenney (1912-1980), his house at 774 Hurontario St. (west side) was just inside the southern boundary of the town. Across the street on Golf View Drive, the homes of C.C.I. Principal J. C. McIntyre (1905-1996), Richard Browne (of Georgian China) and Jack Aldridge were in the Township of Nottawasaga, their address at the time being RR2 Collingwood. The present southern boundary of the Town of Collingwood at the Poplar Sideroad was established in 1994 when the Townships of Nottawasaga and Sunnidale were amalgamated into the Municipality of Clearview.

The Jean Vanier High School, Admiral Collingwood School, and all of the houses on Leslie Dr., Bryan Dr., Lockhart Rd., Katherine St., Brock Crescent, Carmichael Crescent and Krista Court were not there. A large part of that land had been occupied by the golf course which was subdivided in the late 1970's/early 1980's by Roger Lockhart. A watercourse meandered through forest and field from Hurontario St. near C.C.I. over to Collins St. It crossed under Collins near Katherine St. (and still does) and worked its way north and east through more empty land heading for the CNR tracks where it became the CNR Creek running parallel to the railway tracks toward Hume St., down through the railway yard and out into the harbour beyond Huron St. It is still there today, much of it open and some of it underground in places between Ontario and Huron Sts. Once when a friend and I were exploring along

this stream, a woman came out of the brick farmhouse at the end of Collins St. and yelled at us: “Get out of here! This isn’t a public road you know!”. Actually, there wasn’t *any* road there.

A large expanse of “The Commons” north of Collins St., except for that long-gone two-storey brick farmhouse at the very end of the street adjacent to the railway, was also empty land and the houses on Sproule Ave., Bell Blvd., and Alice Street were not there. On the east side of the railway, the houses on Williams St., Lynden St., and McKean Crescent and those off the southern extensions of Minnesota, Napier and Peel Streets were not there either. The area was largely bush and field except for the odd building including Nip Spooner’s farm on the east side of the tracks, accessed from Raglan St. In the late 1950’s this rural area alongside the railway tracks had not changed much since it was the scene of the 1903 murder of Glory Whalen (see my story *The Unsolved 1903 Murder of Glory Whalen*).

Collingwood, in the 1950’s, was a blue collar working man’s and woman’s town where people worked hard to provide their families with the basic necessities of life. “Lifestyle” businesses such as Day Spas, etc. were unknown in Collingwood. The noon hour meal was called “Dinner” and the evening meal was called “Supper”. Besides the vast amount of new development that has taken place since that time, the proliferation of many

dozens of backyard swimming pools visible on Google Maps Satellite View in the south end of town, and, to a lesser extent, in the older long-established core of the town, is indicative of the change in the makeup and lifestyle of the town from 60 and more years ago. There was a time when, if people wanted to swim, they went to Sunset Point or Wasaga Beach, or the braver among them—the young, invincible ones—might have chosen to swim in the old quarry on Ontario St., now the site of the Royal Canadian Legion or in the long-gone mill pond on the Pretty River off Raglan St., or practised their diving from the Sheer Leg crane in the harbour, hoping to avoid the old wooden pilings below the surface left over from the former wooden Grand Trunk grain elevator.

When I and my friends biked down to the end of Collins St. and hiked south along the railway tracks in the late 1950's, we were leaving civilization behind for a few hours and when we came back to the end of Collins St. our bikes were still there waiting to take us back home to Ste. Marie St. Depending on the time of day we may also have seen a train go by and perhaps placed a penny on one of the rails to have the wheels of the train flatten and expand it.

I actually did catch a fish in the Pretty River that day—the only fish I ever caught in my entire life. It may have been a speckled trout. This first-time-successful fisherman brought the catch

home and my mother cooked it for me and...I couldn't eat it! This was the first time I had ever had a real fish direct from the water. I was quite accustomed, of course, at that time, to Captain High Liner's frozen, breaded fish sticks/fish & chips, but I couldn't stomach the real thing. My mother said I wasn't the first person who couldn't eat my catch. I had much better luck fishing with the children's card game called "Fish"! My mother also had an incident in which she couldn't eat a fish when we were at a dinner at the Nancy Villa at Wasaga Beach for my 16th birthday. My mother ordered trout and when it was brought to her with the head still on and the eye looking at her she sent it back to the kitchen to be decapitated.

After that first-time experience at the Pretty River I never went fishing again. The old fishing rods seized up and were thrown out and I had lost interest in fishing anyway. I was a one-time fisherman. Nevertheless, I still have other precious belongings from my grandmother's house, and I have never lost interest in the history of Collingwood where my roots run deep back into the 19 Century.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C. where they enjoy eating fish every week.