



COLLINGWOOD WAS SPARED FROM A FENIAN RAID

150 YEARS AGO

By H. David Vuckson

Excitement was at a high level throughout Canada West (as Ontario was known in the years prior to Confederation) in late 1865 and early 1866 because of fear of the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenians were militant Irish nationalists living in the United States who thought they could advance the cause of Ireland's independence from Britain by attacking and capturing British colonies in North America then using them as a bargaining chip. The threat was real, although greatly exaggerated at times.

Collingwood, because of its prominence as a transportation hub and its central position in commerce between Chicago and Toronto via ships and the railway,

was perceived by the locals to be vulnerable to attack. By the spring of 1866 the rumors of impending attacks on Canada West were abundant, actually causing hysteria. Chicago was a prominent hotbed of Fenianism and one of the rumored planned attacks, credible at the time, was that the Fenians from Chicago were going to use numerous ships in their possession to sail to Collingwood under cover of darkness, seize a railway train and use it to attack a seemingly unsuspecting Toronto from the rear, as it were. Perhaps they thought that there was little other civilization between Collingwood and Lake Ontario to hinder them and that they could somehow breeze through the railway junction at Allandale including getting their train switched onto the main line for Toronto without anyone being aware. Then they would sneak up on a sleeping Toronto unnoticed and capture it. Rifle companies from Collingwood and Barrie were mobilized and sent to the Niagara region where the danger was most credible near the border with the United States. My O'Brien ancestors were residents of Barrie at the time and my great-grandfather's older brother, Fred O'Brien, age 21 in 1866, was a veteran of these southern Ontario Fenian raids which did occur in

the Niagara area. Ultimately, the Collingwood and Barrie rifle companies were amalgamated into the 35th Simcoe Battalion of Infantry, subsequently to become the Simcoe Foresters, (since 1936, the Grey and Simcoe Foresters).

In any case, there was great alarm in Collingwood over this possibility of a surprise attack. The steamer *Wabuno* was provided with weapons and commissioned to patrol Georgian Bay for several weeks. In early March of 1866, ten thousand militiamen were called up and even more thousands joined up. With the militia gone from town, Collingwood was even more vulnerable and on edge, necessitating the formation of a home guard. Georgian Bay was carefully watched 24/7 and arrangements were made with the lighthouse keeper on Nottawasaga Island to signal suspicious activity at night by putting out the light.

One night, an hour or so after midnight, the light did appear to go out. Try to imagine the panic in Collingwood, population around 1500 to 2,000 at the time, where most everyone was asleep. Imagine a town crier-type person running through the dark streets

clanging his bell to rouse people to the imminent danger or possibly a Paul Revere-type rider on horseback galloping through town yelling “THE FENIANS ARE COMING! THE FENIANS ARE COMING! WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO THE DEPOT!” Preparations were underway to evacuate the women and children by train when the light from the lighthouse suddenly reappeared. I suspect that few people in town slept the rest of that night. Imagine being awakened out of a deep sleep, and having to light candles and kerosene lamps and get children dressed, etc. It must have been the height of stress, but, we are told that after the danger had passed, the ladies made coffee and served it to the men of the home guard throughout the rest of the night. The next morning it was learned that fog had obscured the light from the lighthouse and the people of Collingwood could calm down and get on with their lives.

The Fenian attacks did come at the Battles of Ridgeway and Fort Erie in June 1866 during which nine Canadians were killed and thirty-two wounded. One of the Fenian objectives was to destroy the Welland Canal. By this time, the unity of the Fenian movement had split into

two factions with the original group wanting to raise funds for rebels in Ireland and the second group who were mostly veterans of the American Civil War, wanting to invade Canada. Many of the Canadian volunteers were inexperienced youths; some were college students, others were working in stores and offices. They left their homes almost literally overnight unprepared and ill-equipped to face battle-hardened veterans of the Civil War who were spoiling for any fight anywhere. The Canadians faced a “baptism of fire and blood” on June 2, 1866 at Ridgeway.

A few days after the invasion, the President of the United States got involved, stating that neutrality laws must be maintained and the U. S. Army was ordered to prevent border crossings and to arrest anyone suspected of being a Fenian and to confiscate their arms and ammunition. Most of the Fenians were demoralized following another failed attempt in 1870 to conquer Quebec. Their leader and President, General O’Neil was imprisoned for six months by the Americans for again violating the Neutrality Act. On his release, he made plans for one more attempt. This time his intention was

to conquer Manitoba in October 1871 where he was arrested shortly after crossing the border. His failures caused him to turn heavily to alcohol which hastened his death and the Fenian movement died out.

A wealth of information on the Fenian Raids can be found in “Troublous Times in Canada—A History of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870” written in 1910 by Captain John A. MacDonald [not our first Prime Minister], himself an eyewitness to these events.

There was one positive outcome from this period in our history: because the United States had appeared to tolerate the activities of the Fenians on American soil while they made preparations to invade Canada in 1866, sentiments on the Canadian side galvanized into support for the union of the four British provinces a year later to form the nucleus of the Dominion of Canada.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C .where he works as a piano tuner while maintaining a keen interest in the history of his hometown.