



THE REMINISCENCES OF A GRAVE DIGGER

H. David Vuckson

The Collingwood First Presbyterian Church Cemetery on the Poplar Sideroad is a quiet, peaceful place, the final resting place of, among countless others, my parents, my Hewson grandparents, my O'Brien great-grandparents, assorted great aunts, uncles and cousins, all on my mother's side. Sandwiched as it is between the First Baptist Church Westmount Cemetery on the east and the Trinity United Church Cemetery on the west, it can be difficult to tell where one cemetery ends and another starts. The main entrance road into the Presbyterian Cemetery is lined with mature shade trees that create a green tunnel leading up to the pump house/tool shed.

For twenty-one years from 1942 to 1963 members of my family were the caretakers at the Presbyterian Cemetery. My great uncle Roy Hewson and his wife Jean Drummond Hewson along with a big collie dog named "Skipper" lived in the brick farmhouse across from the cemetery and looked after this 33 acre property year-round. In those days the Poplar Sideroad

was a dirt/gravel road as were all rural roads and we had to drive up over a hump and down the other side where the embankment of the CNR tracks (originally the Hamilton & North Western Railway) crossed the Poplar. Uncle Roy (actual first name was “Royal”) was one of my grandfather R. J. Hewson’s many brothers. Born at the Hewson farm on the 6th Line at Batteaux in 1892, Roy was an outstanding athlete in his younger days and known for his running ability. For years he was a rural mail delivery person and also served as Postmaster at Batteaux. In 1942 Roy and Jean took on the Caretaker/Superintendent duties at the Presbyterian Cemetery.

Roy’s nickname was “Bumper”, probably bestowed on him as a joke by some friends. This requires some explanation. In 1933 Al Jolson starred in a Depression-era movie titled “Hallelujah I’m A Bum” (the movie can be seen on YouTube). In American English-language slang a “bum” is a hobo, vagabond, tramp and unemployed/unemployable drifter. In British and Canadian English-language usage the word signifies the part of your body that you sit on. In order to release the movie in England, Canada and other English-speaking countries of the British Empire and to avoid offending the sensibilities of movie goers in those countries, the title had to be changed to “Hallelujah I’m A Tramp” and Jolson had to re-record the title song composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

In the movie, Al Jolson as “Bumper” was the popular, jovial “Mayor of Central Park” in New York City where the hobos hung out during the lean years of the Great Depression when there was no work to be had. Uncle Roy as “Bumper” was seen by his friends as the Mayor of the “residents” of the cemetery. Roy was also a practical joker. About seventy or so years ago there was a young couple who used to frequent the cemetery by night to neck and pet on one of the benches and Roy saw his chance to scare them off. One evening he hid in the cemetery and awaited their arrival after dark. While things were getting hot and heavy on the bench, Uncle Roy put a white sheet over his head and started making moaning sounds as he slowly rose up from behind a gravestone nearby. The young lovers had the fright of their lives, took off and were never seen again. Today, a sign posted on the gate states, **“NO ADMITTANCE AFTER SUNDOWN—NO PETS ALLOWED”**. In Roy’s day he might have posted a sign over the bench stating **“NO PETTING ALLOWED”**.

Before the cemetery had the benefit of electricity, there was a windmill that pumped water from a well to supply the water taps throughout the cemetery for people to water the flowers on their family plots. At the same time there was an ancient truck named “Jake” parked near the windmill. This old truck was reminiscent of the one that Jethro drove on the *Beverly Hillbillies* TV show. I remember what a momentous occasion it was when the old windmill was taken down and replaced with a

concrete block pump house/tool shed with an electric water pump and pressure tank. (Another advance in modernization took place a few years later when the Cemetery Board installed a bathroom in the Caretaker's house. This surprised and delighted Aunt Jean's sister, Miss Margaret Drummond, a missionary in Formosa [Taiwan], when she came for a visit). Old Jake was also replaced with a 1949 International pickup truck. It had the standard "Three on The Tree" gearshift [gear shift lever on the steering column] and on this truck I and Uncle Roy's two grandchildren learned to clutch, to shift gears and to drive on the network of roads in the cemetery before we were old enough to get a driving licence.

In those years graves were dug by hand in the sandy soil with a shovel: six feet deep, six feet long, and three feet wide. Some of the soil was saved for backfilling the grave after the rough box or concrete vault was placed but the rest of it was heaved into the old truck until the tires bulged and then taken out to "the back 40" area and shovelled off.

Uncle Roy died very suddenly on March 12, 1953 in his 62nd year. He had gone into Town to attend a hockey game at the Arena and when he came out he suddenly collapsed in a snowbank from a heart attack and it was too late for medical help. His obituary said it was known that he was not in robust health. Prior to his death he had been engaged in some

strenuous activity in the vault under the cemetery Chapel. In the winter months when the ground was frozen and could not be dug by hand, it was customary to store the caskets of the dead in the basement vault of the cemetery Chapel until spring. Roy had been, against doctor orders, moving caskets around by himself and the work he was doing that day proved to be too much of a strain on his heart. It seems strange that both Roy and his brother (my grandfather) were such outstanding athletes in their teens and twenties and yet they both died from heart attacks in their sixties as a result of moving heavy objects.

After Uncle Roy's death Aunt Jean continued on as the Cemetery Superintendent with casual hired help until her untimely death on August 5th, 1963. To supplement her income Aunt Jean worked at two other jobs. One job involved cleaning the one-room schoolhouse just down the hill at the corner of the Poplar Sideroad and the 10th Line; the other involved working in the kitchen at the Little Red Hen Restaurant downtown in the evenings. Late one evening while on her way home from the Red Hen her car was struck by a drunk driver on the Poplar Sideroad not far from her driveway. The next morning, unaware of what had happened the previous night, my mother drove me out to the cemetery to work. We noticed that Aunt Jean's car was missing and no one was home. A neighbour spotted us and came over and explained that there

had been a bad “smash-up” just down the road. Despite being told by her doctor that she had “a heart like a horse” Aunt Jean was badly injured, and died at age 71 in the G & M Hospital. Henry Nobes was hired to replace her and we dug Aunt Jean’s grave beside that of Uncle Roy. Ironically, the two cars that had collided head-on were both “Monarchs”, one red, one green.

For several summers before I began my Office Boy/Messenger career in the Collingwood Shipyard, I had been Aunt Jean’s hired hand and chauffeur—cutting grass, digging graves and driving the truck. Digging graves is one of the few professions where you *start* at the top and work your way down. Usually I would ride my bike out to the cemetery and in the afternoon my bike went into the trunk of Aunt Jean’s car and she dropped me off on her way to the Red Hen. To keep the sun off my head I wore a battered old hat of my father’s from the early 1940’s. At lunch time we got in the truck to drive across the road to Aunt Jean’s house and she would say, “Home, James!” I must have looked like Jethro Bodine (see the above reference to *The Beverly Hillbillies*).

I dug many graves during my time at the cemetery but the most illustrious personage I buried was Alfred Staples, Collingwood’s “Man of Nature” and here follows some of his interesting story. **(It should be noted that much of this information is from his own account in the book mentioned below; other information*

*about him and his life from other sources differs somewhat in details, for example, his age at certain points in his life, and the dates of events.)** Born in Devonshire, England in 1870, infant Alfred and his family emigrated to Canada in the fall of 1871, ultimately settling in Toronto via Hamilton and Rochester, New York. Due to various investment misfortunes that reduced the parents and their eight children to poverty followed by the abandonment of the family by the father, young Alfred and several of his brothers were sent to the Boys' Home of Toronto. His life story *THE CANADIAN HOME BOY* up to about the time of the First World War, was written under the pseudonym S. A. Francis. Simcoe County communities and individuals were given fictional names to disguise the identity of people still living at the time the book was published (1913).

Alfred credited the Home for having implanted in him the Christian principles of sobriety and chastity. He was taught sewing and darning which laid the foundation for his future career as a tailor. He spent four years in the Home and was then adopted by a family from Duntroon where the father was a prosperous tailor. Alfred arrived in Duntroon in May 1881 via the recently-completed Hamilton & North Western Railway branch line between Beeton and Collingwood. He did not really feel a part of the family due to the stigma of being a charity case and they rather treated him as an outsider and a servant/slave and he was shunned at school by the other

students. By arrangement with the Boys' Home he was to be under the authority and care of his adoptive father until age 18 and taught a trade to make his way in life. At age 17 he "escaped" briefly to the outside world making his way in tailoring in Toronto for a short time but his conscience prevailed and he returned to Duntroon.

Having received the \$150.00 held in trust for him until age 18 by the Boys' Home, Alfred headed out for a couple of years to see the world and its vices and virtues in the American West but ended up being repeatedly taken advantage of financially and he returned to Duntroon not only broke but broken and disillusioned. He also returned to the abuse that characterized his childhood with his adoptive family.

Eventually marrying and settling first in Nottawa (where he had a general merchandise store and tailor shop) and then in Collingwood, he was now his own master and finally happy and life was going well for Alfred when tragedy struck. His wife Catherine, age 28, died from puerperal septicemia (a severe blood infection following childbirth) three days after the birth of their third child in 1902 and the light went out of his life. Several years later with his second wife Mary Elizabeth Kamar, under the tantalizing prospect of "fortunes to be made out West", he moved to Vancouver where he indeed became quite prosperous by speculating in real estate there for four years

while continuing to work as a tailor. He made a triumphant return to Duntroon proving to all who knew him as a “Home Boy”, whom they thought would never amount to anything, that he could make something of himself and be a success. He eventually settled in Collingwood for the rest of his life, some of those years living part-time at the Scenic Caves.

Alfred Staples was known, or one might say, renowned, for his exploits of endurance which earned him the title “The Man of Nature”. Living to the age of 91 he had, at least in his extended prime, superb genetics, a cast iron constitution and absolutely no fear of cold weather. My father encountered him in a snowstorm in the 1940’s. In the 1930’s and during the Second World War years my father sailed the Great Lakes with the Algoma Central Railway’s fleet of steamships. Dad was a Mate on the *Algocen*. Because the officers were needed to run the ships during the navigation season from April to about mid-December, they were deemed an “essential service” and could not enlist for war service. During the winter months my father worked on the construction of the “Victory Village” wartime houses.

One day in the midst of a 1940’s winter, my dad was walking home to his apartment on Maple St. for lunch from his house-building job in a blinding snowstorm when suddenly out of the whiteout conditions emerged a strange apparition. It was

Alfred Staples, then in his early 70's, wearing little more than shorts and shoes. He was pursuing his passion of physical fitness in below-freezing temperatures; this was just a routine day for a man who was said to bathe in cold water or to roll in the snow daily (cold baths every morning were a ritual at the Boys' Home too). He was said to have walked great distances such as from Collingwood to Chicago (whether in 1893 or in 1933-34—both of these dates being years when Chicago hosted a World's Fair—is not clear), living off the land as he went. Once he walked 21 miles across the ice on solidly-frozen Georgian Bay to Christian Island, presumably just because it was there. Running ten miles every day regardless of the weather or time of year was as effortless for him as it is for us to switch on the coffee maker in the morning. He demonstrated this in the summer of 1935. At age 65 when most men think about retirement and putting up their feet, Alf Staples challenged four of C.C.I.'s best runners to a five mile run around the track at Exhibition (now Central) Park. He left the seventeen-year-olds in his dust and he still had another five miles to run to fulfill his daily quota.

The Lethbridge, Alberta *Herald* reported on November 23, 1950 in its "Orillia Newsletter": "*Collingwood's grand old man of nature, Alfred Staples, celebrated his 80th birthday the other day by walking to Duntroon and back, a distance of 16 miles. The remarkable Mr. Staples has done much during the years to keep*

Collingwood in the spotlight by his endurance feats. When younger he used to live in a cave in the Blue Hills [i.e. Blue Mountain], go swimming in the winter time by breaking the ice in the frigid Georgian Bay, and come out and run in the wind to dry himself. He never felt the cold, he assured shivering reporters.” It has long been a tradition for fishing enthusiasts to put their fish huts on the frozen Collingwood harbour in the winter, cutting a hole in the ice to lower their fish hooks into the water. Alfred, by contrast, would cut a hole in the ice and lower himself into the frigid water.

When we prepared to dig the grave for Alfred Staples in 1962 I noticed on the grave monument that he had outlived three wives. In addition to his feats of endurance and his work as a tailor, he was also a visionary who first saw the potential of what became the Scenic Caves as a tourist attraction when the land was in its natural, undisturbed state. Alfred's second wife Mary died in the G & M Hospital on July 22, 1933 in her 63rd year from a combination of Toxic Goitre and Grave's Disease of several months duration and from Diabetes of several years' duration. The following year in the depths of The Great Depression, like a few other brave souls who started new businesses in hard times, he purchased that land, naming it the Blue Mountain Caves. Widower Alfred built and lived in a cabin in the summer months at the Caves giving tours to tourists for a number of years before he married his third wife Annie

Woodrow Travis, the widow of William Henry Travis, in 1938 after which they lived in Collingwood; from this point he wore regular clothes instead of his loincloth. Annie died May 17, 1949 in her mid-70's after which Alfred spent the rest of his life as a widower. Ownership of the caves property, later renamed The Scenic Caves, remained with his descendants into the mid 1980's when it was sold to other interests.

When reporting his death, the Brandon, Manitoba *Sun* of March 14, 1962 stated: *“Collingwood, Ontario—Alfred Staples, 91, the Blue Mountain hermit, died here Sunday [March 11]. Mr. Staples, known by thousands of tourists who visited the Blue Mountain Caves, about 30 years ago developed the rugged section of land for tourists. When he was 80, a physical examination showed his condition equal to that of a healthy man of 55.”*

However true or embellished the many legends about him were, it seems that no one could keep up with this hardy individual, this human dynamo. However, at some point in his last decade he ended up in Dundurn Hall Nursing Home on Third St. from the effects of a stroke and then in his 92nd year with his health-defying exploits long in the past, his time ran out as it will for all of us one day. Death had summoned him and, in Aunt Jean's words, the Man of Nature was now “going

back to nature". I dug his grave; I buried Collingwood's Man of Nature.

In May 2016 at the monthly meeting of the Collingwood & District Historical Society, Carole Stuart from the Local History and Genealogy Dept. of the Collingwood Public Library gave a very informative presentation on Alfred Staples including reading excerpts from his book *THE CANADIAN HOME BOY*. Carole's talk is available on YouTube. In addition, the Collingwood Public Library has a copy of Alfred Staples' book.

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.