



THE CRAIGLEITH SHALE OIL WORKS

By H. David Vuckson

Unlike the Pretty River Valley Oil Scam of 1941 which was a total flimflam, the Craigleith Shale Oil Works (1859-1863) was a genuine operation that produced barrels of oil that were shipped out of Collingwood by the railway for a few short years before the cost of production was eclipsed by the discovery of easily recoverable oil that could simply be pumped out of the ground in southwestern Ontario. In 1858 the first commercial oil well in that area had been found by accident when a man digging a water well struck oil instead. That location was given the name Oil Springs. In 1866 oil was discovered at Petrolia, about seven miles away. These southern Ontario oil wells were to be the nemesis of the Craigleith operation.

A blue and gold historic plaque in Craigleith Provincial Park tells of the enterprise that produced oil from the shale in the area. As a child, when we went to Craigleith Park for a picnic in the 1950's, I was shown how a loose piece of shale on the shore could be turned over revealing the fossilized bugs, etc. embedded in its layers. Little did I realize at the time that this same shale had, in the 19th Century, been quarried just south of Highway 26 to produce oil for illumination and lubrication in a

unique enterprise located on what is now the Provincial Park property—an enterprise that was the only one of its kind in Ontario.

It was known for hundreds of years that shale rock had an oily smell and that it would burn. It was subsequently learned through trial and error experimentation in the 1800's how to heat it to release and collect the oil contained therein in a process called "retorting". In a retort furnace the shale was heated separately from the actual flames of a wood fire and this would release the oil for collection after which it was refined into different grades. The Craigleith Shale Oil Works started a quarry where they extracted up to 35 tons of shale a day which yielded about 250 gallons a day of two grades of oil: a lighter grade for use in oil lamps, and a heavier grade used for lubricating machinery. The lighter oil for lamps was said to be better than kerosene or coal gas, smelled better, gave more light, and was cheaper. The principal owners of the operation were William Darley Pollard, a British-born Collingwood lawyer resident in the town from about 1856 who devised his own patented method of oil extraction, and Duncan and John McDonald, father and son respectively, wealthy capitalists of Toronto.

To get to market, the finished product in barrels had to be laboriously hauled between seven and eight miles to Collingwood over a rough road in wagons to get to the St. Paul St. railway yard for shipment to Toronto. The railway would not be extended from Collingwood to Meaford until 1872 nearly a decade after the Shale Oil Works had closed down. (The former CNR right-of-way, now the Georgian Trail, passes so close to the former quarry, that had the oil business lasted longer, they could have had a railway spur right into the Shale Oil

Works property for convenience in deliveries and shipping out product.)

The Shale Oil Works, built on the farm of George and Sarah Lunan, who were among the first settlers in Collingwood Township, was like a small version of a “company town” and for a time it was called “Shalefield” until use of the name Craigleith became more common. An article by Frank Dabbs (who lived in Collingwood as a boy in the 1950’s) in the *Petroleum History Society Archives, March 2007, Vol. XVIII, Number 2 pages 4-6* indicates the scope of the operation which included the quarry, loggers to produce firewood, a boiler/engine house for steam power needed to operate pumps because ground water kept leaking into the quarry trying to fill it, workshops for blacksmiths and carpenters, 24 distillation retorts, a still room for the rectifying process and a 2-storey log bunkhouse/kitchen for 100 men. One can imagine the appetite worked up by the heavy physical labour of these 100 men and it would seem that one or more Collingwood merchants must have done a good business supplying the place with groceries, meat, produce, tobacco and other supplies while the operation lasted.

By 1863 the commercial development of the southern Ontario oil wells and their economic advantage in the cost of production spelled the doom of the Craigleith operation because it could not compete and had to close down. W. D. Pollard moved on to Meaford, established a law office there and became the first mayor when Meaford was incorporated. At Craigleith the equipment rusted and the buildings rotted, the quarry filled with water and the forest grew back. The abandoned bunkhouse was burned down around 1908 in an arson fire. The old quarry, known as Hidden Lake, is now surrounded by private residences. All that remains today is the Historic Plaque in Craigleith

Provincial Park. It was unveiled in August, 1973 by David Lunan, an old school friend of mine, the great-great-grandson of the original owners of the property. The text of the plaque reads,

THE CRAIGLEITH SHALE OIL WORKS 1859: A growing demand for artificial light lead to the establishment, in 1859, of a firm headed by William Darley Pollard of Collingwood. He erected a plant here to obtain oil through the treatment of local bituminous shales. The process, patented by Pollard, involved the destructive distillation of fragmented shale in cast-iron retorts heated by means of wood. The 30 to 35 tons of shale distilled daily yielded 250 gallons of crude oil, which was refined into illuminating and heavy lubricating oils. The enterprise, the only one of its kind in the province's history, failed by 1863. The inefficiency of its process made its products uncompetitive after the discoveries of "free" oil at Petrolia and Oil Springs, near Sarnia.

We now turn to the fateful night of November 24th, 1872 for an unsolved mystery and an unproven conspiracy theory that rather loosely links the then-defunct Craigleith Shale Oil Works and a ship called the *Mary Ward* that was purchased that year by some Georgian Bay business men. The new owners took possession of the ship at Sarnia where it was loaded with cargo bound for Collingwood with a stop along the way at Owen Sound. Among the freight items on board were barrels of oil from the oil wells of Petrolia. It is well known in local lore that captain William Johnson of the *Mary Ward* somehow mistook a bright light on the Craigleith shore that night for the Nottawasaga Island lighthouse. One theory is that fishermen who stored their gear in the abandoned Shale Oil Works bunkhouse near the shore had hung a bright light in one of the windows and that the ship mistook this for the lighthouse, thereby steaming confidently ahead in the wrong

direction until she was firmly (and permanently) grounded on Milligan's Reef. That theory has been expanded to suggest that the ship may have been deliberately lured off course by "land-based pirates" bent on plunder after the ship was stranded close to shore and that there was a long-standing grudge over the fact that the Shale Oil Works had been put out of business by the very oil that was being carried on the *Mary Ward*. The Shale Oil Works had been closed for nine years at the time of the wreck of the *Mary Ward*; that is a long time to hold a grudge considering that the employees would long since have moved on.

Whether the grounding and subsequent wreck of the *Mary Ward* was intentional or accidental, we will never know this side of eternity. In addition, I have never seen an explanation of how a seasoned steamship captain could mistake a constantly shining light in a window for the Nottawasaga Island Lighthouse beam that flashed intermittently as it revolved. The night was clear and calm when the ship grounded. The storm that caused loss of life came up hours later so there is little reason to expect that the bright light a mile-and-a-quarter away on shore was only intermittently visible due to the weather unless it appeared to flicker because of the distance. By comparison, the light from the lighthouse flashed every thirty seconds and was said to be visible for seventeen miles.

In Craigeith Provincial Park there is a second historic plaque, unveiled in 1972 by young Cindy Moberly, great-granddaughter of one of the heroes of the *Mary Ward* disaster, the text of which follows:

On the night of November 24, 1872, the steamer Mary Ward ran aground on Milligan's Reef, two kilometers offshore. Recently purchased by five Owen Sound men, the vessel was making the trip

from Sarnia to her new home port of Collingwood with twenty-seven aboard including a Canadian Pacific Railway survey party when the accident occurred. The first lifeboat safely reached shore, then a fierce gale sprang up, delaying rescue operations. After a perilous journey the second lifeboat succeeded in landing but the third capsized and all eight aboard drowned. A group of local fishermen, led by Frank Moberly and Captain George Collins, later rescued those remaining on the wreck, and they were subsequently recognized by the Canadian government for their heroic actions.

Ironically, Captain George Collins was the Lighthouse Keeper on Nottawasaga Island at the time of the *Mary Ward* disaster—it was his light the ship somehow missed. The local fishermen mentioned above were rewarded for their “humane and gallant exertions” by the Government of Canada with cheques in the amount of \$15.00 while Frank Moberly, a member of the Canadian Pacific Railway survey crew was presented with a medal by the Federal Government.

While the Craigleith Shale Oil Works is just an historic footnote, the skeleton of the *Mary Ward* still lies offshore in shallow water and the site is frequently visited by kayakers and tour zodiacs

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