



THE COLLINGWOOD CENTENNIAL OF 1958

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For six days on either side of the Civic Holiday weekend in August 1958, the Town of Collingwood, population 7800 at the time, celebrated one hundred years of being an incorporated town. Collingwood owed its existence to the arrival of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway in 1855, a line linking the three lakes in its name (Georgian Bay being part of Lake Huron). The arrival of the railway brought a boom of prosperity to the formerly-named Hen & Chickens Harbour. The Township of Nottawasaga took note of that prosperity and, as recorded in the history book *Reflections*,

The Township considered the newcomers good subjects to bleed, while the townspeople determined they would not be bled so freely without resistance...In 1857, the people grew tired of fighting for what they considered fair play from the Township, and determined to strike out for themselves. At a public meeting held in one of the Taverns, situate where the Globe Hotel now stands [in 2021 read "stood"], it was determined to apply for Incorporation. The Bill of Incorporation passed in the Fall of 1857, and Collingwood came into existence as an incorporated town, January 1, 1858.

In many ways, the Town of Collingwood in 1958 was a snapshot of the past and the way things used to be done. We still had manual telephones and party lines

requiring operators who spoke the phrase “number please” countless times a day. Milk was still being delivered by horse-drawn wagons. Ice was still being delivered for ice boxes to those who did not own an electric refrigerator. We still had passenger trains and would have them for two more years before modern highways and the loss of the lucrative contract to carry the mail made them redundant and unprofitable. Sunday evening band concerts in the park were a long-standing tradition. On Saturday, July 12th, 1958 the Orange Lodge held its grand parade celebrating “The Glorious 12th” in Collingwood as part of the town’s Centennial year. Hundreds of Orange Lodges were expected to come to town from far and wide around Simcoe County including between 600 and 700 members from four Orange Lodges in Midland alone. It was expected to be the largest Orange Parade ever held in Simcoe County up to that time.

Coal was still the major fuel for heating homes, public buildings and to power factories, the Collingwood Shipyard consuming huge amounts of coal to pump out the two drydocks and to operate several steam-powered cranes. Other fuels like wood, oil and propane were also in use and, heralding a new era, the natural gas pipeline was just over the horizon, as it entered Simcoe County in September of that year.

In 1958 the Collingwood Shipyard launched two new ships: the package freighter *Fort York* was launched into Drydock #2 on January 15th and the canal-size tanker *Tyee Shell* was launched into Drydock #1 on July 23rd just days before the Centennial celebrations began. The shipyard entered the new St. Lawrence Seaway era that year as well. When the building berth was cleaned up after the January launch of the *Fort York*, the keel was laid on February 4, 1958 for the largest ship ever built in Collingwood up to that time, the 715 ft. long *Menihek Lake* which would take eleven months to build and necessitate the decommissioning of Drydock #2 as a drydock and lengthening it to become a launch basin for seaway-size ships. There would be 20 years of work ahead for the shipbuilders of Collingwood in rebuilding the Great Lakes fleet to take advantage of the new allowable dimensions of the Seaway before overcapacity and foreign competition started a slow decline that spelled the end of Collingwood’s largest employer in 1986.

Some modern developments in town included the inauguration of the town's sewage treatment plant at the foot of Birch St., and on Pine St. the modern age of warfare was represented by the Martin-Baker Aircraft Company that built ejection seats for jet fighter planes, including, it is claimed, the Avro Arrow. Martin-Baker ejection seats were used by the air forces of twenty-seven nations.

The 12-member 1958 Centennial Committee, headed by Town Councillor and future Mayor Alick McDonald as Executive Chairman and Mrs. B. J. Hill as Secretary planned a lot of activity for people of all ages in those six days of perfect weather in August. This was in contrast to the Old Boys/Old Girls Reunions of 1903 and 1938 that were primarily for grownups. As evidence of the "all ages" aspect, the opening event on **Friday, August 1st** was the Kiddies' Costume Parade at 7:00 p.m. About 150 children assembled at the grounds of Senior Public School on Hume St. and then paraded down Hurontario St. and then around to the CNR Station grounds on St. Paul St. for the judging. The parade was led by a bagpiper and a drummer and Art Bull was involved as well with his sound truck to provide recorded marching music. The judging categories were: Best Dressed Pair; Best Dressed Girl; Best Dressed Boy; Most Original Boy or Girl; Best Comic Costume; Best Decorated Bicycle; Best Decorated Wagon and Best Decorated Doll Carriage. Also on that Friday evening, the Centennial Midway opened for business (daily except Sunday).

The first full day of the programme, **Saturday, August 2nd** began at 11:00 a.m. with the unveiling of a plaque in memory of Collingwood-born Madge [Margaret] Robertson Watt (1868-1948), the daughter of pioneer lawyer Henry Robertson, Q. C. The Ontario Government honoured Mrs. Watt with a plaque at 63 Maple St. in front of the house in which she was thought to have been born. It was true that she had lived at that address in her earlier years, but it was found out some time later that the house at this location on Maple St. was not the original Robertson home on the lot. Mrs. Watt was recognized for her work in organizing Women's Institutes in Britain during the First World War and these became highly involved in agriculture to increase the food supply when so many men were away. In 1933 a number of rural women's organizations united to form the Associated Country Women Of The World and Margaret Watt, a driving force in its founding, became

the first President and thus became a Collingwood native with an international reputation.

Years after the 1958 Centennial, issues developed with a new owner of the house on Maple St. being annoyed by strangers invading the front yard to have photos taken with the plaque. Eventually the plaque was removed to storage and then lost. In 1990, a newer version with somewhat different wording from the Ontario Heritage Foundation was erected at the north end parking lot of the Collingwood Museum on St. Paul St. The plaque at The Museum reads:

THE ASSOCIATED COUNTRY WOMEN OF THE WORLD A non-political international women's organization, the Associated Country Women of the World was formed largely through the efforts of Collingwood-born Margaret Watt. Mrs. Watt was a member of the Women's Institute, a Canadian association devoted to the concerns of rural women, and she introduced that organization to Great Britain during World War I to help in work to counteract food shortages. With the expansion of the Women's Institute movement to Commonwealth and European countries after the war, Watt began to advocate the establishment of an international alliance. Finally, in 1933, in Stockholm, Sweden, rural women's organizations, including the Women's Institute, united to form the Associated Country Women of the World. Watt, by then a member of the Order of the British Empire, was elected the body's first president.

Madge Watt is also famous on Vancouver Island where she lived during the first decade of the 20th Century when her husband Dr. Alfred Tennyson Watt was chief medical officer at the William Head Quarantine Station. During this time Mrs. Watt helped found the first Women's Institute in British Columbia in 1909. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada and Parks Canada unveiled a plaque in her memory in suburban Victoria in 2015.

The Saturday events continued in the afternoon and evening with the Swifts Pet Parade for children sponsored by Swift Canadian Co. at 2:00 p.m. when about 200 boys and girls, with some adults mixed in, paraded their dogs, cats, squirrels, etc. on leashes, in wagons, in doll buggies, and cages. Prizes were awarded. My friend Donald Kelly who had two ponies named Barney and Peter and a pony cart

likely participated in this parade. In the afternoon at 4:00 p. m. there was a softball game at the Exhibition [now Central] Park.

The Official Opening Ceremony took place at 7:30 p.m. with speeches by a number of people. This was followed by a Beauty Queen Contest at 8:30 p.m. and at 9:00 p.m. an “Old Time Quartette Contest” and the Opening Fireworks. Miss Arlene Kennedy of Collingwood was chosen as the Centennial Queen.

Sunday, August 3rd was a day of church services and band concerts. This was an era when churches held services both in the morning and in the evening before television and Ed Sullivan killed the evening services. Movie theatres and stores were closed by law under The Lord’s Day Act (in effect from 1907 to 1985). One of the few exceptions to doing business on Sunday was that one of the four drug stores on the main street had to be open to dispense medicine and they did this in rotation. People were invited to go to the church of their choice in the morning. A Royal Canadian Legion Parade and Drumhead Service followed at 2:00 p.m. at the Cenotaph with the Orillia Kiltie Band and the Barrie Citizens Band participating. A band concert took place at 4:00 p. m. A large open air stage was erected in the boys’ yard at Senior Public School and featured a Community Church Service at 7:00 p.m. followed by a “Massed Band Concert” of four bands at 8:45 p. m. The Orillia and Barrie bands had to miss this event because they had to be in Orillia that evening for the official opening of the new band shell in Couchiching Park.

Monday, August 4th was the day of the “Mammoth Parade of Floats, Bands, Majorettes, Old Cars and Fire Fighting Equipment, etc.”, starting at 1:30 p.m. The parade for which Max Campbell, the Proprietor of Arrowhead Ranch, provided thirty horses, assembled at Exhibition [Central] Park on Hume St. and, according to a published map, followed a two mile route exiting the park and proceeding west along Hamilton St. to Hurontario, north on Hurontario to Second St., west on Second to Maple St., south on Maple to Eighth St., east on Eighth/George to Robinson St., north on Robinson to Hamilton and back to Exhibition Park. Spectators lined the streets many rows deep and gathered at the second floor windows and on the rooftops of buildings on Hurontario St.

My father was a member of the Oddfellows Lodge (I.O.O.F. #54) and their float was assembled in our driveway on Ste. Marie St. using Alan Jardine's tractor and farm wagon. Lodge members and their wives (Rebekahs) were in period costume. Activity on the float included Norman Skelton's wife Rhoda who operated a spinning wheel and another person operating a revolving butter churn. The Oddfellows and Rebekahs float was in position number 59 in the parade.

While the Oddfellows Lodge float honoured the pioneer days, the Martin-Baker Aircraft Co. float featured one of their famous pilot ejection seats that was rigged to "eject" a volunteer a short distance upward to the top of a rail and this was done multiple times throughout the parade, testing his endurance.

Stores on Hurontario St. decorated their windows with period displays with staff dressed in period costumes and wooden nickels were used as negotiable souvenirs. For some of the events my mother wore my grandmother's wedding gown from 1905.

From the *Enterprise-Bulletin* came this assessment of the Centennial Parade:

Amazing—tremendous—wonderful—a whopper—a whale of a show—these are a few of the descriptions uttered by some of the many, many thousands of people who saw the Monster Centennial Parade on Monday afternoon, August 4, one of the best such parades ever held in Collingwood. Included in this outstanding parade were 8 or 9 large bands, 4 or 5 smaller bands and country-style orchestras, several groups of smart-stepping Majorettes, and about 75 floats, decorated vehicles, and numerous old time and new cars and fire-fighting equipment, along with many a fine horse and buggy of bygone years. There were clowns, and cowboys and Indians, and Redcoats guarding the fort, and many a younger bearded gentleman along with many a real genuine "old timer". There was color, and flash, and humor, and surprise. There was fun, and there was nostalgia. Man!—That was a parade!—and great appreciation is extended to Parade Chairman Lee Stephenson and his Committee members for a job exceedingly well done.

At 4:00 p.m. there were baseball games at Exhibition Park and at 8:00 p.m. a “Big TV Variety Show” with a comedian, singers, dancers, a ventriloquist and others on the outdoor stage at Senior Public.

Activities on **Tuesday, August 5th** began in the afternoon with the invitation to “Visit Your Old School” being a nostalgic event for countless people. Throughout Centennial Week people had also been encouraged to visit old friends, the Museum (The Huron Institute on the ground level of the Carnegie Library) the Hospital and to take a trip to Wasaga Beach. At 2:00 p.m. there was Kiwanis Little League Softball at Exhibition Park followed at 3:30 by “Football—Two outstanding soccer teams”. The evening had two events: at 7:30 the outdoor stage featured “Gusdal and Stiener, Hypnotist. An hour and a half of entertainment and laughter” followed at 9:00 by “Monster Bingo at the Arena by Branch 63 of the Canadian Legion”.

The final day of the Centennial celebration was **Wednesday, August 6th**. At 2:00 p.m. the “Presentation of Gifts to the First Baby born in 1958 in Collingwood by the Oldest Citizen of Collingwood” took place. Collingwood’s oldest citizen was Donald McKechnie, born near Brampton on December 23, 1858, who farmed all his life in the area of Gibraltar (west of Nottawa/southwest of Castle Glen Estates) until age 75 when he retired and moved to Collingwood. Wearing a top hat, he was driven in the big parade on Monday in a buggy pulled by a team of horses under a banner proclaiming “Mr. Centennial”. The town’s youngest citizen was William John Carswell, born three minutes after midnight on the morning of January 1, 1958. John is the son of W. J. Carswell, the Architect and Irene Carswell, the Home Economics teacher at C.C.I. By a twist of fate, both the eldest and youngest citizens in town lived on my street (Ste. Marie St.)—Donald McKechnie at #518, the Carswell family at #448 and myself at #639. Even more interesting than the three of us living within a block-and-a-half of each other is the fact that many years later John Carswell would become my father’s financial advisor at RBC Dominion Securities, and, after my father’s death, John was financial advisor to me and Pam. Small world isn’t it!

Donald McKechnie was a hardy soul, known to have been still chopping firewood at age 90. He died in the G & M Hospital October 25, 1959, two months short of his 101st birthday, two weeks after an accident on Ste. Marie St. He was out for a walk and allowed some children to wrap a skipping rope around his legs. His feet became entangled in the rope and when he tried to continue on his way he fell and suffered a broken hip. His fracture was repaired in the hospital and he was looking forward to turning 101 in December, but, sadly, he did not survive. He is buried in the First Presbyterian Church Cemetery on the Poplar Sideroad.

At 7:00 p.m. on the final day, the judging of the Beard Contest took place (some Collingwood men had let their facial hair grow for five months before the Centennial depriving the town's four drugstores of revenue from the sale of razor blades). At 8:30 on the outdoor stage there was a big variety show featuring "Gordie Tapp and the Mainstreeters, starring Jack Kingston and Wally Traugott; Lonny and Lottie, Vocal Duet; Len Mitchell, Vocalist; Morris Bolyer, Banjo; Paul Trio, Comedy and Singing". The big event wrapped up with Closing Fireworks. The Official Centennial Programme ended with the words *God Save The Queen*, Elizabeth II being just five years into her reign since her coronation. And so with a blaze of fireworks to end Centennial Week and the new strings of colourful Centennial lights strung across several blocks of Hurontario St. activated for the first time, the Town of Collingwood proudly marked its first one hundred years and looked with optimism to the future.

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.