



JOEL UNDERWOOD'S CREEK

H. David Vuckson

This story originally appeared in the Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on March 20, 2015 under the title Joel Underwood's Collingwood Legacy. This is an expanded version of that story.

Around 1852-53 before the Hen & Chickens Harbour had its name changed to "Collingwood Harbour", and then eventually to just "Collingwood", there was a great deal of unsettled land in what is now the old, long-established part of town west of Hurontario St. An American lumberman named Joel Underwood had been in the area since about 1847 and was the recipient of advance information that the Hen & Chickens Harbour had been selected as the terminus for the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Union Railway (the railway did not officially reach Collingwood until January 1855).

As usually happened in those days, just the mere whisper of the possibility of a railway coming in a certain direction was enough to inspire a frenzy of land speculation and visions of wealth in the hearts of men. For those fortunate enough to have certain knowledge that a railway—the last word in land transportation in the 19th Century—was coming their way, that information was tantamount to a licence to print money.

Andrew Hunter in his monumental book *A History of Simcoe County*, tells us that Underwood, although without capital, was a persuasive promoter and he convinced several other men of means to join him in a partnership to build a steam-powered sawmill on land he owned at the mouth of what is today known as the Hickory St. Canal in the Arboretum. This watercourse, now largely underground south of First St., was the western branch of the Oak St. Canal starting at the corner of Oak and Second Streets where the creek diverged into two streams. The *official* name of this watercourse is “Underwood Creek”, named after Underwood who owned some 335 acres of land in the Collingwood townsite. He is credited with naming the north-south streets on his land after trees: Pine, Maple, Beech, Birch, Oak, Cedar, Walnut, Hickory, Spruce, Elm and Balsam. Joel was also a civic-minded individual: he donated a lot on the west side of Cedar St. between First and Second Streets for the very first Anglican Church (designated the “English Church”) which opened in 1855 and was the forerunner to All Saints Church on Elgin St.

One of Underwood’s business partners was the Simcoe County Sheriff, Benjamin Walker Smith who just happened to be a director of the railway company and was rumoured to have had “inside information”. These guys knew an opportunity when they saw one. Aware of both the prosperity a railway would bring and the unlimited opportunity for producing lumber that would be needed in great quantities for the town that would rise on this spot, the partners erected their sawmill in late 1853. Since the railway would not arrive for another two years, the boiler and the mill machinery all had to be hauled by teams of horses from the railhead at Allandale, a distance of at least 30 miles. The sawmill location can be seen on the June 1856 Plan of Town Lots on

page 24 in the history book *Reflections*. Underwood also erected a store on the north side of First St. just south of where the creek emptied into the harbour.

Draining northward from the Nottawa area, Underwood Creek crosses under the Poplar Sideroad east of the 10th Line and then through land that bordered Smart's farm where, long ago, it was dammed up to create an irrigation pond for the crops. Continuing on through town mostly between Oak and Birch Streets it originally, in Collingwood's early days, diverged into two streams just south of Second St. The above-mentioned 1856 map shows the eastern fork of the creek going down the *middle* of Birch St. [!] from Second almost to First and then turning west, crossing First St. at Oak, then north-west and out into the harbour. By the time of the 1875 Bird's Eye View of Collingwood, the section of the creek on Birch St. was gone—filled in—and, in its place, a man-made channel straight as a ruler ran along the eastern edge of Oak St. (north of Second) when there were hardly any houses on that side of the street. The western fork of the creek over to Hickory St. is also shown on the 1856 map. For a very long time until the Underwood Creek diversion channel into Black Ash Creek in the area west of High St. was made in the 1970's, there was another legacy of Joel Underwood that many residents must have wished they had never received: annual spring flooding. The creek could have been nicknamed "Old Faithful" because every spring it flooded over its banks as chunks of ice got hung up on the many bridges creating misery for the residents affected. Many houses in the area received an annual baptism of ice water.

Between First and Second Streets on Oak, where the creek/canal ran parallel to the road, every house on that side of the street had a

wooden bridge for vehicular and pedestrian access to their property. When my parents were married in December 1941, my mother told my father that she would live in any part of town except near the Oak St. Canal because the spring thaw and run-off guaranteed that the creek would spill its banks and flood homes. It was commonplace for people to be warned when this was about to happen and they would hasten to put their furniture up on wooden blocks, and in one case, it was said the water ran into the house through the front door and out the back door. The Collingwood Works Dept. had to resort to dynamiting the ice to break it up—this was done all the way from Second St. down to where the CNR railway tracks crossed the creek near the harbour.

In the 1980's that troublesome open portion of Underwood Creek between Second and First Streets was buried underground in a large concrete box culvert all the way to First St., eliminating the wooden bridges and the ice jams forever; this explains why that first block of Oak St. is somewhat wider than the rest of the street south of Second—the creek is entombed in concrete and paved over. The spring flooding of yesteryear, of which many baby boomers still have vivid memories, is a thing of the past with much of the spring melt water now diverted around the periphery of the town via Black Ash Creek.

There were at least two other occasions when a large volume of water came down Underwood Creek, but these had nothing to do with the spring thaw. On Friday, October 15th 1954, as Hurricane Hazel carved a path of destruction and death through Toronto and continued on its way north through southern, central and northern Ontario (including Simcoe County) before veering off into northern Quebec, the outer fringe of the storm dumped four inches of rain on the Underwood Creek watershed. Residents on Oak St. were warned that the creek

would likely flood, even without chunks of ice to assist in the process. The next morning, a young Terry Geddes came downstairs to find six inches of water on the main floor of his house. The other occasion happened during a summer in the early 1960's when the irrigation dam at Smart's Farm broke sending an unseasonal wave of water to the harbour. Today, Joel Underwood's creek is now a relatively peaceful greenbelt in Collingwood, some of it underground, some of it open, serving mainly as a conduit for water from municipal storm drains.

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.