



Fred O'Brien Wore Many Hats

By H. David Vuckson

My great-grandfather's older brother, Fred Weber O'Brien was born in Barrie in May 1845 to parents Frederick O'Brien and Mary Weber from Dublin, Ireland. Throughout his long life of 81 years, Fred wore a number of different hats in several communities where he lived, including in Collingwood.

When Frederick O'Brien Sr. died in Barrie at age 48 in February 1866, his widow and six children were left without any financial support. Since about mid 1843 after his discharge from the military, Frederick had been a pioneer mover and shaker in Barrie where he owned real estate/speculated in land, was a Director of the Barrie Building Society, an Officer of the Barrie Regatta Club/Lake Simcoe Boat Club, a merchant and investor, all of which came to a screeching halt in the financial Panic of 1857 which counted him among its victims.

Thereafter he was appointed by Simcoe County as a Revenue Inspector (taxes) and Crier of the Courts at a modest salary. Being ill for some months before his death, his resources were depleted. A couple of his friends opened a "subscription", what we today would call a trust fund

or a GoFundMe campaign, and raised a considerable sum for his widow and children.

The subscription notwithstanding, with Fred Jr. being the eldest son and several months shy of age 21, the responsibility to provide for the family naturally fell to him, but less than a month after his father's death, Private Fred O'Brien, like many young men from Barrie (as well as Collingwood) was off to the Niagara Frontier as part of the Barrie Rifle Company No. 1 under the command of Captain Alex McKenzie, sent to repel the Fenian Raids. The Barrie Rifles served at both Dunnville in the Niagara region and at Toronto from March 4th until sometime in June of 1866. Fred's younger brother, Robert, age 16, also joined the Barrie Rifles and served at Dunnville and Fort Erie between March and August of 1866. Both O'Brien brothers were civilian reservists as opposed to full-time military career men.

With both sons now away to war, their widowed mother Mary and her four daughters relied largely on the trust fund for their spending cash while waiting for the boys to come home. Additional relief came from Simcoe County. In Andrew F. Hunter's *A History of Simcoe County*, Hunter relates that the Simcoe County Council "provided for the wives and families of the volunteers of this county called out for active service in the Fenian Raid, by a grant of \$2.00 for each wife or infirm adult, and 25 cents for children, per week, commencing with June 1st, 1866. The towns of Collingwood and Barrie also contributed to the relief of the families of the volunteers" (Part I, pg. 278). Twenty-nine years earlier, Frederick, the father, had served the Crown during the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837 as part of the Simcoe County Militia sent to counteract the activities of William Lyon Mackenzie. Following the Rebellion, he continued serving as a member of the Royal Foresters

Militia for much of 1838 before enrolling in the 1st Battalion Incorporated Militia, Hamilton as Quarter Master until it was disbanded in 1843. Service to Queen Victoria and her Empire was in the O'Brien family's blood in the 19th Century and two subsequent generations of the O'Brien family in Collingwood served King and Country in both World Wars.

In January 1867 with the Fenian Raids behind him, Fred, the younger, opened "The West End Store" in Barrie at the corner of Mary St. and Elizabeth St. (now Dunlop St. West) and in a style similar to the 1875 Poetical Directory of Collingwood found in the book *Reflections*, he announced his business with the following ditty in the *Northern Advance* entitled "Hurrah For The West End Store!"

*Ye gentlemen of Barrie; ye ladies, one and all,
Give Frederick O'Brien a very early call;
He's opened Store for Groceries, and Provisions too;
His stock is of the very best, more than that is new.
Prices you'll find very low; so come and give a call;
His wish is to do business, tho' profits may be small.
Ye farmers and your wives, too, who live around about,
Call on me, and I will please you both without a doubt.
My terms are CASH, but I will take good Produce as well;
Therefore, friends, a call do make, and see what I do sell.*

Three months later in April at the Railroad Hotel in Newmarket Fred married his first wife, Canadian-born Augusta Hanham who was living in Michigan at the time. The marriage did not last; Fred and Augusta went their separate ways but not before they produced a son, Fred Ulysses O'Brien born in 1869 in Michigan. This child grew up to become a famous newspaper editor/publisher and promoter of Prohibition in Michigan and established a branch of the O'Brien family that survives to this day in that state. Augusta appears to have abandoned the marriage, leaving Fred in Barrie with his family and his grocery store. She went back to Michigan to have her child and lived out her life in that state, becoming a naturalized American citizen in 1873 and re-marrying, apparently twice. She died in Michigan in 1921.

The 1871 Canadian Census lists Fred in Barrie living at home with his widowed mother and siblings, his profession, "Dealer in Grain". He was still a Private in No. 5 Company of the 35th Battalion of the Simcoe Foresters and participated in the Annual Drills held in September 1870 and 1871. The Drill lasted eight days for which he was paid \$1.00 a day. That the men were away from their homes in camp is indicated by the Militia providing "Camp Kettles and Tins", costing \$6.00. Fred's younger brother Robert was also listed in the Census as a Dealer in Grain so he may have covered for Fred while he was away.

In 1874 while living in Guelph, Fred married his second wife, Margaret Colby in Fergus, Ontario giving his status as "Bachelor" leading one to suspect that the first marriage may have been annulled. His profession now was "Painter". The couple lived in southern Ontario for about four years. Following the death of an infant son aged 9 months in Arthur, Ontario they moved to Collingwood by 1879 and for a dozen or more years Fred O'Brien and his brother Robert were both part of the

Collingwood business community at a time of great change, growth, disaster, and rebuilding in the town.

In Collingwood Fred O'Brien wore several hats. He was a volunteer fireman, a member of the Georgian Brigade who, on that fateful September Sunday, fought the Great Fire of 1881 that reshaped much of the northernmost block of Hurontario St., all of the north side of Simcoe Street over to Ste. Marie St. and the west side of Ste. Marie St. down toward Huron St. Fred missed the evening service at All Saints Anglican Church that day as he and his comrades tried to prevent the destruction of Collingwood.

His regular "day" job in Collingwood which he advertised in one of the town newspapers in November 1881 was: "*House Painter, Paper Hanging, Graining, Glazing, Kalsomining [i.e. whitewashing], etc; Shop & Residence Hurontario St. opposite Melville, Fair & Co.*" This location would place him in the new brick business block completed in the fall of 1881 by the Long Brothers and Charles Cameron on the west side of Hurontario St. between First and Second Streets, adjacent to and south of Cameron Park. This project was bookended by 3-storey sections with two 2-storey sections in between. The entire site is now Loblaw's parking lot north of the Federal Building. Considering all of the new buildings that were erected following the Great Fire, as well as the general growth and expansion of the town taking place in those years, there must have been plenty of work in Collingwood for everyone in Fred's profession. His business would have prospered greatly and he likely had all the work he could handle.

The art of "hanging" wallpaper is not generally well-known in this modern age of drywall construction and stippled ceilings. Younger

generations have not known ceilings and walls built with plaster over wood lath. Putting wallpaper on walls is challenging enough, but applying it correctly and artistically to a plaster ceiling so that it stays up there is an art and from this comes an old expression of exaggeration of a person being busy that is seldom heard anymore and even less-understood by young people: "*He was as busy as a one-armed paper hanger*". Try to visualize such a person up on a stepladder trying to apply wallpaper to a ceiling with one arm and you will understand the expression.

While living in Collingwood Fred O'Brien also found time to have a Confectionery business on Hurontario St. according to the Ontario Business Directory & Gazetteer for 1884-85. His wife Maggie sold the candy in the front of Fred's decorating shop while tending to their two children born while the family lived in Collingwood. Fred was also one of the enumerators for the April 1891 Canadian Census in Collingwood. The district he canvassed included his own address; his brother was canvassed by Fred Telfer. That Census revealed that the O'Brien brothers were prosperous enough to each have a domestic servant as part of their household in 1891.

In January 1891 the O'Brien brothers had shared in the making of medical history when their elderly mother, Mary Weber O'Brien, apparently died twice according to Collingwood's two main newspapers. The Collingwood *Bulletin* said she died at the residence of her son Mr. R. W. O'Brien, Deputy Reeve, on Pine St. and that the remains were taken to Orillia for burial. The Collingwood *Enterprise* announced that she died at "the residence of her son Mr. Fred O'Brien, of this town" and that the funeral would take place in Barrie. We know that there was a lively, frequently bitter rivalry between the two

newspapers at the time, but for both of them to mix fact and fiction (each paper got it half right and half wrong) in a death announcement is quite remarkable. The O'Brien matriarch was in fact buried at the Barrie Union Cemetery.

At some time after 1891 Fred O'Brien, now well into his forties, moved to Guelph in pursuit of greater economic opportunities. The Recession of 1893-97 may have significantly reduced his employment prospects in Collingwood. An 1895 Collingwood Business Directory lists only "*Mrs. Frederick O'Brien, Confectioner, etc.*" on Hurontario St. while an 1896 Guelph City Directory records Fred as a painter and living in a boarding house, apparently without the rest of his family but later, his wife and children were recorded in the 1901 Census for Guelph. There he continued working as a painter/decorator through the years of the First World War. His wife Maggie died in 1915 of liver cancer in her 62nd year.

In the spring of 1912 at the age of 67 Fred had applied for a grant under the Fenian Raid Volunteer Bounty Act of 1912. Under this Act, the Federal Government offered a "bounty" of \$100.00 to those men, still living, who had participated in defending Canada at the time of the Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870. Fred O'Brien had to travel by train from Guelph to his hometown Barrie in order to have a "Comrade's Declaration" filled out by Robert King (1844-1923), the Barrie Chief of Police, attesting that he personally knew Fred O'Brien and that Fred had indeed served in 1866. King himself had served in both the Barrie Infantry Company and the Barrie Rifles in 1866 including guarding public buildings and Fenian prisoners at the Toronto "gaol". Getting a comrade's declaration could be challenging for some of the veterans considering that the event a comrade had to attest to happened forty-

six years earlier—not all of the veterans were still alive as evidenced by King’s own application for the Bounty. When the Militia Department in Ottawa requested the names of the two Commanding Officers that King served under in Toronto in 1866, King supplied the names but had to inform them that both men were dead. The Militia Department made each applicant fully responsible for providing proof of his service.

Anxious for his \$100.00 cheque [equal in purchasing power to \$2522.49 in 2016 dollars], Fred wrote to the Militia Department Secretary in September 1912 to inquire whether they had received his application and was told in reply that, yes, they had it and that there were over 9,000 applications ahead of him—his was number 9240—and they would get to it in due course. One of those ahead of him in line was his brother Robert in Collingwood at number 2035 who had applied just one month earlier. “Due course” for Fred turned out to be February 1913 when the Department of Militia and Defense sent him an additional form requesting further information. It is not known whether his application was approved. Hand-written along the edge of his application form is the following: *“On Drill Paylist, Capt. McKenzie; No Active Service Paylist; Called Out”* (i.e. civilian reservist).

By the time of the 1921 Canadian Census Fred was living in the Parkdale section of Toronto with his daughter Nevada and son-in-law George Fraser (they had all lived together in Guelph as well) and still working as a painter at age 76. The word “retirement” was apparently not in his vocabulary.

Fred Weber O’Brien, the lean and wiry son of Irish immigrants, native of Barrie, civilian soldier/veteran of the 1866 Fenian Raids (awarded the Canada General Service Medal) and subsequent member of the Simcoe

Foresters Militia, store keeper/poet, dealer in grain, painter/decorator, volunteer fireman, confectioner and census taker, wore a number of hats in his lifetime—several of them in Collingwood—and participated in the rebuilding of Collingwood’s downtown business section after the Great Fire of 1881 in those boom years when our town was referred to as “The Chicago of the North”. He died in St. Joseph’s Hospital in Guelph in July 1926 of heart disease and pneumonia.

.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.