



COLLINGWOOD WAS A WELL-LUBRICATED TOWN IN 1875 WHEN MY ANCESTORS PUT DOWN ROOTS —H. David Vuckson

As stated in the biography at the end of each of these stories, my roots in Collingwood go back to 1875 when my maternal great-grandparents married and settled in town. This story is about the state of whiskey drinking and its attendant evils in Collingwood from the time of the town's founding in the 1850's and up into the 1880s. It will also tell of the background of my O'Brien great-grandparents and the circumstances they encountered when they settled in Collingwood to conduct business and raise their family. Special thanks to author Larry D. Cotton whose series of books "Whiskey And Wickedness" (available at the Collingwood Museum) thoroughly details the culture of drinking in 19th Century Ontario. Larry has kindly given me permission to quote from his work. Special thanks also to Alexina Heron Reid, whose family lived for 45 years in what was once the original location of the Presbyterian Church on Ontario St., for information on that early church building.

Robert Weber O'Brien (1849-1919) was born in Barrie, the second son of Frederick O'Brien and Mary Weber who emigrated from Ireland at the time of their marriage in July 1844. Frederick had already been in Canada for 10 years, much of that time in the militia, and went back to Dublin to marry his teenage sweetheart. Newly discovered information from old family archives in late 2020 has revealed that Frederick O'Brien was the illegitimate son of Donough Acheson O'Brien (1780-1847), one of the six sons of Sir Lucius Henry O'Brien, 3rd Baronet of

Dromoland Castle, County Clare, Ireland. Frederick and Mary's son Robert Weber O'Brien, whose life story has been largely covered in my edition of October 2018, moved to Collingwood from Barrie in 1874 and obtained a position as a pork inspector, most likely in the pork packing house of C. E. Stephens. His bride, Catharine Amelia Robinson (1846-1933) was the younger daughter of Dr. Charles John Robinson (1812-1874) and Janette Wilkie (1807-1878).

Dr. Robinson came from a wealthy family on Jersey Island in the English Channel. Janette Wilkie was the daughter of a wealthy, noble Scottish family, some members of which carried the titles "Sir" and "Lady". While pursuing post-graduate studies in Paris, Dr. Robinson had distinguished himself by successfully treating cases of cholera in the troops of the Government of France. In 1832 (some accounts say 1834) this couple came to Canada and were among the pioneering settlers in the Orillia area. Dr. Robinson purchased a large amount of land from the Crown 5 miles north of Orillia and, in his later years in retirement, lived the life of a "country gentleman" while his sons saw to the daily running of the estate. Contrast this statement with information in a hand-written transcription of his obituary recounting his life as a medical doctor in his earlier years in the Simcoe County wilderness which states in part,

For many years he successfully followed his profession and many were the hardships he underwent in those early days, where the country was but very sparsely settled and roads were not begun to be opened. Many a long journey he made on foot, through almost impenetrable swamps and forests [this almost sounds like a description of the downtown Collingwood area before the arrival of the railway] and perhaps receiving as his fee a bag of potatoes or a few bushels of oats. After some years he gave up his practice and retired upon a farm, beautifully situated on the western shore of Lake Couchiching...

The part of his land where he built his home on the west shore of Lake Couchiching was named "Otterfield" after a colony of otters in the bay. The area is now known as Ardtrea along Highway 11, one of the nearest landmarks today being the famous site of Weber's Hamburgers with the privately-owned foot

bridge over the highway to prevent people from crossing the highway on foot, risking life and limb.

At Otterfield, the Robinson family lived in splendid isolation. From a private document on the history of this family, we learn that *“Dr. Robinson built a splendid, large house and furnished it with furniture from the old country, fine dishes, an extensive library and other pieces from his ancestral home”*. This building was lost in a fire a few years later and replaced with another house. All of the family’s supplies came by way of the steamboat and barge from Holland Landing, up Lake Simcoe, through “The Narrows” and on to Lake Couchiching. The sons of the family learned farming, for they had a lot of farm land to manage. The daughters, Catharine Amelia and her older sister Wilhelmina (1842-1892), who would each eventually marry an Irishman, were well-taught the fine points of gracious living by their mother: *“English papers, books, and periodicals arrived regularly, and were eagerly read and discussed. Much knowledge was gleaned from their parents’ wide experiences and travels. Both parents were fluent in French and Spanish, used often when not wanting their children to know what they were saying”*.

The eldest daughter, Wilhelmina, was married at age 21 in 1863 to a local man, Henry Nolan (1837-1878), identified as a “Clerk” in Orillia in the 1861 Census. They soon after moved to Collingwood.

It is not known for certain how R. W. O’Brien and Catharine Amelia Robinson met but a likely possibility is that it was through Catharine’s older sister Wilhelmina. As confirmed by the 1871 Census and the *Gazetteer and Directory of Simcoe County for 1872-73*, the Nolans operated the Manitoba House Hotel on the north side of Huron Street in Collingwood. It was a very narrow brick building, just three windows wide, directly east of the Globe Hotel. This structure can be seen in an early 20th Century photo on page 98 of Christine Cowley’s book *Butchers, Bakers & Building The Lakers*. The name “Manitoba” is visible on the narrow building sandwiched in between the Globe Hotel to the west, and the Shipyard Machine Shop to the east. When the Manitoba House was demolished, the site became a Hydro substation for the Collingwood Shipyard.

Henry Nolan's display ad in the above-mentioned Gazetteer stated:

MANITOBA HOUSE, H. NOLAN, PROPRIETOR. Travellers will find every Accommodation with moderate charges. ADJACENT TO BOATS AND RAILWAY. HURON STREET COLLINGWOOD.

Henry Nolan's Manitoba House Hotel was a short walk from the railway station and it would have been one of the first buildings O'Brien came upon after stepping off the train from Barrie. Nolan and O'Brien were both Irish and this, too, could have been an incentive for O'Brien to patronize the Manitoba House. As a single young man he may have boarded with the Nolans after moving to Collingwood and, through them, been introduced to his future bride. Years later, in November 1892, Robert Weber O'Brien, Commission Merchant, was the "Informant" when his sister-in-law Wilhelmina Nolan, by now a widow, died at the age of 50 after suffering with cancer for a year. Consider this charming Victorian language from her obituary: *"On Tuesday morning Mrs. Nolan died suddenly. For some time deceased had suffered from cancer, but her death was unexpected, and she was sitting up when the last call came"*.

What is known about that period in time was that a young man, when courting a girl, was usually expected to agree with her father in politics and with her mother in religion. Henry Nolan, who married Dr. Robinson's elder daughter Wilhelmina, was an Anglican but turned Presbyterian on his marriage. Likewise, O'Brien was a member of the Church of England in Barrie, as his parents had been members of the equivalent Church of Ireland in the old country. Dr. Robinson was also Church of England, but his wife, being Scottish, was a Presbyterian. Mrs. Robinson prevailed and on July 14, 1875 at Otterfield, Robert Weber O'Brien married Catharine Amelia Robinson, their Marriage Registration listing the Religious Denomination of both as Presbyterian. R.W. adopted his wife's denomination and remained a Presbyterian for the rest of his threescore and ten years. Henry Nolan remained Presbyterian for his brief life of 41 years. Unfortunately, no death registration or cause of death for him seems to exist.

As for politics, Dr. Robinson died the year before R. W. and Catharine Amelia were married and whether the two men had agreed on politics is not known for

certain. However, O'Brien was an Orangeman, loyal to the British Crown and Dr. Robinson was described as "an ardent Tory Imperialist". Having married into money, R. W. O'Brien soon went into business for himself in Collingwood, first as a grocer and general/commission merchant, and later as a furrier. In an expression from that era, "he would never work for others again". In Collingwood the O'Briens would produce five children including their eldest daughter who would become my beloved grandmother. Their middle daughter would become the grandmother to four of my Storey and Thompson cousins. Of the other three children, one son and one daughter would die unmarried, and the eldest son, although married, had no children.

The Village of Orillia was a wild, whiskey-soaked place during the years the Robinson family lived 5 miles north of it at Otterfield. Dr. Robinson's wife *"attended the Orillia Presbyterian Church, traveling over the rough corduroy roads in her coach with a coachman handling the spirited horses. Even in this raw, unsettled country she was ever the gracious lady"* although she must have encountered scenes to severely offend her refined upper class senses because in Orillia drunken carousing and fighting were an everyday occurrence. The genteel isolation of Otterfield was a far cry from the rough and tumble daily goings on in Orillia and Collingwood into which the two Robinson daughters would be initiated as they grew out of their childhood innocence, married and moved away from their Lake Couchiching home.

Author Larry D. Cotton, in his series of books titled *Whiskey And Wickedness* tells us of the drinking habits of Upper Canada/Canada West/Ontario society in the 19th Century:

During the initial settlement, none of the churches had objections against moderate drinking, defined as being "no more than four glasses a day". The established churches, out of touch with actual conditions in the back woods, were slow to change despite the growing evils of the unrestricted liquor trade. Settlers such as the Highland Scots, who were accustomed to drinking fairly copious amounts of whiskey in Scotland, had a great deal of difficulty coping with the much stronger potent brew distilled in Simcoe County. Since the manufacturing of

whiskey was poorly regulated before 1864, distillers often produced spirits that would be two hundred proof and more. Temporary (and sometimes permanent) blindness, hair loss and even death, were some of the side effects of over-imbibing too much of this quasi poison (Volume 4, pages 1 and 2).

The society of Upper Canada was on an alcoholic binge that lasted from the 1830's until well into the 1880's. Hard drinking was equated with virility. In a physically taxing pioneer society, almost all activities involved the use of alcohol—work bees, sporting events, elections, agricultural fairs, meetings of fraternal organizations, the militia and almost every social event...The established churches in England, Scotland and Ireland were slow to change their attitudes toward the evils of alcohol. They condoned moderate drinking. A certain amount of alcohol a day was considered necessary to maintain a healthy body. Medical professionals as well as the most respected classes in society supported this viewpoint...Pioneer societies seemed to need whiskey. Life was hard in the clearings and often too short. For some, whiskey seemed to be the only escape from their harsh reality (Cotton, Volume 4, pgs. 126 and 128).

Veteran Collingwood pioneer, promoter and architect, Fred T. Hodgson, in his reminiscences of the town's early days in the period 1848-1857, recorded in the Huron Institute Papers And Records, Volume II, and speaking particularly of the building of the railway into Collingwood, states:

The chopping, grading, and stumping of the road, brought in a large number of people of all classes, creeds and nationalities, and to be a little slangy, "times were mighty lively". Money began to pour into the country, and people who had never seen a dollar in cash in their lives, soon had money to burn, and most of it was banked by the saloon keepers...There was no improvement in morals, and the worst and wickedest lot of men I ever saw or heard were the crowd brought here by the contractors for the wharf work [today's Heritage Drive], from Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. They kept the air blue with oaths of indefinite length. Two-thirds of their daily work consisted of the vilest of oaths...Nearly every other building was a saloon or a tavern and whiskey which could be had for 10 cents a

quart, was as plentiful as water, but there was not as much drunkenness then in town as there was later on.

Just as with the arrival of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway in Collingwood in the mid 1850's, the arrival of the Midland and Northern Railways in Orillia in the early 1870's again brought in a flood of single men—over a thousand, according to Cotton—to build the tracks and associated infrastructure. Drunken fights in the taverns were especially prominent on pay days and *“a month's salary would be spent in two or three days of drunken carousing in Orillia” (Vol. 6).*

John Nettleton, in his reminiscences of Collingwood in the late 1850's, states:

“There were fifteen taverns and saloons in town, and all the grocery stores sold liquors. Whiskey could be bought at the stores for 10 cents a quart.” Alcohol was ubiquitous and cheap. Retail shops, like grocers, could obtain a license to sell whiskey. Larry Cotton tells us that shop licensing was a serious problem:

“Any retail shop with the appropriate license could sell whiskey in the minimum quantity of a five gallon jug or twelve bottles in Canada West [Ontario]...Much of the public drunkenness on the streets in most towns in Ontario was attributed to the laws governing shop licensing, which created a class of citizen called the “five gallon men”. The law requires that the smallest amount of alcohol that a person can buy at a store with a “shop” license is no less than five gallons of beer or whiskey, or one dozen quart bottles of ale or wine (Cotton, Volume 4, pgs. 92-93).” R. W. O'Brien's father Frederick was a general merchant on Dunlop St. in Barrie in the 1850s and research by my friend Su Murdoch has revealed that Frederick O'Brien was granted such a licence in 1852.

It appears that folks in the 19th Century drank rot-gut whiskey the way we drink coffee today. If, according to Fred Hodgson, “nearly every other building” in old Collingwood was a saloon, in more recent years it sometimes seems that nearly every other building in our towns and cities is a coffee shop. Pushback against the widespread use of rot-gut alcohol was bound to happen and the 19th Century temperance/total abstinence/teetotalism movement was linked to the itinerant Methodist circuit preachers traveling around the wilderness on horseback, who

spoke against the evils of alcohol consumption and the social ills that accompanied it. *The Journals Of Mary O'Brien 1828-1838* published in 1968 by Audrey Saunders Miller, Editor, provides some further insight into the issue of alcohol in the pioneer society of Simcoe County. Mary O'Brien and her husband Colonel Edward George O'Brien were the founders of the community of Shanty Bay, just over 6 miles from Barrie, Ontario, and E. G. O'Brien was a relation of my great-great-grandfather Frederick O'Brien who settled in Barrie. In 1834 and 1835 Mary recorded efforts "*...to establish a Temperance Society, a thing which unhappily the besetting sin of the country calls for, if it be really as effectual check as experience is said to have proved it to be*", "*Edward has been walking about to plead the cause of the Temperance Society or, as it should be termed, the Anti-Spirits Society...*" and "*...we expect a good many of our neighbours to meet here for the arrangement and formation of a temperance society*". In the notes to Chapter 27 of the book, the Editor states, "*Temperance societies, often under the auspices of the Methodist Church, were being set up at this time. Whiskey was so cheap that many pioneer families suffered as a result*".

In established communities it was quite an uphill battle to promote temperance/abstinence when many members of the Town Council were not only hotel and saloon owners, but were also brewers and distillers. They were not keen on being shut down by the temperance movement:

For many years the temperance movement suffered a serious image problem. The movement was viewed by the dominant, male, pro-whiskey group as comprising old men, maidens, widows and wives with nothing else to do (Cotton, Volume 4, pg. 126).

Despite this perception, as the temperance movement gained momentum, laws were passed in an effort to curtail both the availability and consumption of alcohol and the issuing of licences, with *some* success, although enforcement of same was frequently an issue. These laws included the Canada Temperance Act of 1864 known as the Dunkin Act, sponsored by Christopher Dunkin, and its 1878 version known as the Scott Act sponsored by Sir Richard William Scott.

The Collingwood history book *Reflections* states on pg. 48, *"The first wave of prohibition struck the town in this year [1872], and a petition presented by Miss Jessie Hamilton and 420 others was presented to the Council praying for prohibition of all kinds of intoxicating drinks. It fell flat."* Considering the presence on Town Council of at least one individual who made and sold alcohol, the defeat of the petition is not surprising. Nearly one hundred years later the debate over "wet" and "dry" continued.

In Collingwood, the Presbyterian Church's pioneer building was erected in 1856 on the south side of Ontario St. on the edge of the cedar forest at what is now 90 Ontario St. facing down Elgin St. This is where my O'Brien great-grandparents attended services before the current First Presbyterian Church was built on the corner of Maple and Third Streets in 1879. The original church building, destroyed by fire, an ever-present danger in those pioneer days, was replaced by one slightly larger and, as the congregation grew, it received an addition in 1875, the year that R. W. O'Brien brought his bride to Collingwood. That structure forms the rear portion of the two-storey white duplex that now fronts 90 Ontario St. The former church part of the building cannot be seen from Ontario St. but it can be seen from Market Lane which runs behind the property. With the Scottish heritage of the Presbyterian Church, I have to wonder what the drinking habits of that congregation were in those early days. It is not known what my great-grandmother O'Brien thought of the rough and disorderly whiskey drinking town of Collingwood on her arrival in July 1875 following her marriage, but it must have been quite a revelation after being taught the finer points of gracious living by her Scottish Presbyterian mother during her first 29 years of idyllic life at Otterfield. Larry Cotton tells us that a newspaper editorial in August 1875 stated: *"Nearly every night [in Collingwood] there is a fight of some sort and men wander through the streets making the most hideous and uncivilized disturbance..."* (Vol. 4, pg. 109).

By early March 1880, my great-grandparents had purchased a one-quarter acre lot on which to build their family home on the south-west corner of Pine St. and 4th St. West. In this house (still standing) five children would be born and several family members would die over the next 59 years. It seems safe to assume that

the family were relatively far away from the drunken carousing that plagued the downtown and harbour areas of Collingwood at that time. Harking back to the carousing of railway construction workers (called “navvies”) mentioned earlier, in April 1883 a major riot occurred in Collingwood:

In the Spring of 1883, [about a year-and-a-half after the massive downtown destruction of Collingwood’s Great Fire of Sept. 25, 1881], Collingwood experienced one of the most violent and dangerous times in its history. In late April, two hundred and forty railway navvies arrived in Town via the Northern Railway. Destined for the CPR construction project at Algoma Mills, these men were stranded for almost a week because of the lack of ship transportation. Restless and bored, they became increasingly violent toward the local citizens and amongst themselves. Several large scale fights fueled by whiskey took place...Two of the hotels where the railway workers were housed were burned to the ground. The “Railway Hotel” and the “Malakoff House” [both on Huron St. east of the railway station] fell victim to incendiary action by drunken navvies (Cotton, Vol. 4, pg. 121).

The Collingwood Town Council enacted a set of By-laws in 1884 among which can be found the following: *“No person or persons shall be in any street, highway, or public place, within the Town of Collingwood, in a state of drunkenness.”*

There were also items intended to control public morality and behaviour, perhaps with the 1883 riot by the railway navvies in mind: *“No person shall make use of any profane swearing, obscene, blasphemous or grossly insulting language, or be guilty of any other immorality or indecency in the Town of Collingwood.”*

In addition to running his business, my great-grandfather O’Brien entered municipal politics, urged on, I suspect, by my great-grandmother. He was first elected to the Town Council in 1885 when memories of the 1883 riot were still fresh in the minds of the citizens of Collingwood. Between 1885 and 1912 he served eleven terms variously as Councillor, Deputy Reeve, First Deputy Reeve and Second Deputy Reeve and represented Collingwood on the Simcoe County Council. He served his adopted hometown well and did his part to try to make it a better place.

In 1895 the Women's Christian Temperance Union ("W.C.T.U.") donated a "Temperance Fountain" to the Town of Collingwood. It was set up in front of the Town Hall and connected to the town's water supply and had various outlets at different elevations, where, depending on the stature and the number of legs one possessed, people, horses and dogs could drink for free the fine water of Georgian Bay instead of the "fire water" dispensed in the saloons (see my July 2017 story *Town Hall Monuments Of The Past*). While it is not known how effective the Temperance Fountain was in keeping men out of the saloons, it was definitely of benefit to thirsty passersby. The fountain is believed to have ended its days in a scrap metal drive during the Second World War.

Some things, however, never change despite civic bylaws or provincial liquor laws. The four downtown hotels with their smoke-filled beverage rooms and cocktail lounges of fifty years ago are long gone (although two of those buildings are still standing but long-since repurposed to other uses). One evening in the 1970's Bob Brooks and I witnessed an alcohol-fueled domestic dispute in the parking lot out back of the Tremont Hotel. The man was cursing the woman and she screamed, "Don't you use vile language to me you son of a bitch!" At least nowadays, drunken railway workers do not terrorize the town and its citizens or burn down hotels, but human nature and the negative effects of alcohol on the brain and the tongue remain the same.

They used to joke in the 1970's that the licensing laws were so strict that "you couldn't change a toilet seat without first requesting permission from the liquor inspector". Toilet seats notwithstanding, the laws do not have a firm grip on human behaviour. Just days ago here in Victoria [late November 2020], an impaired driver collided with a parked car, got out of her car, and is said to have stumbled and slurred her words, picked up her licence plate off the road, then drove off. Later, near the Oak Bay Marina, she crossed over the oncoming lane, continued across a park and drove over the seawall and proceeded to continue driving for about 75 feet on the beach at low tide. She spent the night in jail. In the 19th Century, a man leaving a saloon drunk in a small town like Collingwood could get into his buggy and, even if he passed out, his horse—a 19th Century

power unit with brains—probably knew the way home and could get its owner home without incident.

Camille Bains from *The Canadian Press* reported in a newspaper article on October 8, 2020: *“We know that the production and marketing and distribution of alcohol does create employment and generate income, but the question is, at what cost?”* said [Dr. Rupi] Brar, an addiction medicine specialist and consultant in substance use disorders at St. Paul’s and Surrey Memorial hospitals in Metro Vancouver. She said that harms related to alcohol use amount to about \$14 billion a year, including for health care.” Collingwood has grown up from its wild pioneer days but the effects of alcohol have not changed.

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.