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## **DISPOSING OF COLLINGWOOD'S WASTE—THEN AND NOW—H. David Vuckson**

*This story is a look back at how Collingwood disposed of its waste in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and for somewhat more than the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as the modern equivalent today. Since this is a history story, the emphasis is more on the “then” than on the “now”.*

### **PART I—GARBAGE**

The earliest reference to a Town Dump that I can find was one that operated from perhaps the late 1800's until about 1923 in the area bounded by Huron, Napier, Rodney, Simcoe and Niagara Streets. In Collingwood's earliest days, Huron St. originally stopped just east of Rodney St. Beyond that was all water right down to near the corner of Simcoe and Niagara St. which was then known as Wellington St. Huron St. was not a through road to Niagara St. and beyond until March 1913. On the original maps of Collingwood, Rodney St., running off of Huron St. at a 45 degree angle, more or less paralleled the shore. The wetland north of Rodney St. was used as a dump/landfill for many years and the effluent from Tobey's Tannery at Simcoe and Niagara Streets flowed out into this water. Seward Herrington reminisced about "Collingwood's Old East End" in the Collingwood history book *Reflections* (pgs. 162-3):

*The overflow from the tannery ran to the lake through a wooden cased runway. It came out on Huron Street (Parkway) a few hundred feet from Niagara Street and the inlet on the bay was known as Tea Lake, on account of the brown water from*

*the vats that held the hides. Any of the older east enders knew where the Town Dump was located. As a kid you would take junk there and bring someone else's junk home. It was off the Parkway, better known to us as Huron Street. Some old timers could tell you that Huron Street didn't go all the way through. The lake covered that part and on stormy days, the water nearly reached Simcoe and Rodney Streets. The Dump was where the low rental apartments are now, at the north end of Peel and Napier Streets. I can remember when the east north end of that property was swampy the year round and cat tails grew there quite thick.*

Barbara Arp, in *Reflections* (pg. 230), tells of her childhood adventures with her friends as they explored and “mined” this former town dump for “treasures” such as rusted bedsprings, crockery and old bottles, many of which (bottles) they sold for pennies to Ernie Thomas to fund the purchase of candy at the corner store. Ernie sold “antiques” from his home on the south-west corner of Huron and Niagara Streets—interesting to have an antique dealer located on the edge of a former dump! When this dump came to the end of its usefulness in the early 1920's (according to one account), vegetation and eventually trees and scrub bushes grew on top of it. In the mid-1970's, when the seniors residence “Napier Place” was built at the north end of Napier St., “bottle diggers” claimed to have found bottles from the 1890's in the excavation. In 2019, immediately east of Napier Place, latter day bottle diggers explored the material excavated for the site of the new Head Office building for Parkbridge Lifestyle Communities Inc., expected to be ready for occupancy in 2021. It is interesting to note that a Town of Collingwood Staff Report on the site says that it operated as a dump into the late 1930's.

Regardless of when the Huron St. landfill closed, the next location for the town dump was on the west side of town at the former site of the original 1904 buildings of the Imperial Steel & Wire Co. which is now home to the Cranberry Golf Course. This was an “open dump” at ground level, not a land fill, at least partly on the ruins of what had been the enormous nail factory which was destroyed by fire in May 1919. The dump was always on fire, this being a conveniently simple way to reduce the combustible material to ashes. Other small towns did this as well with the dump being on or near the edge of town.

There were plenty of combustibles in the garbage of the time: newspapers, cardboard, discarded mattresses, old clothing, furniture, etc. When the Collingwood Grand Opera House was demolished in the late 1940's to make way for the Community Arena, the curtains from the stage were assumed to have been taken to the dump and burned.

The Collingwood dump was accessed by a dirt road (now Harbour St. West) off the bend on Highway 26 by Kaufman's. In the 1950's close to the gate to the dump, there were two landmarks one saw when coming into town from the direction of Craighleith: the tall smokestack at Kaufman Furniture and a sign on the side of the road, possibly erected by the Chamber of Commerce or one of the service clubs, that said "Welcome To Collingwood—The Tourist Capital Of Central Ontario". If a person cast their eyes to the right, there was a landmark of a different kind to be seen, the less-than-welcoming perpetual smoke from the dump burning. Predictably, open dumps of this type were popular places for flies and rats. Like Barbara Arp and her friends checking out the former dump along Huron St., there were scavengers who frequented this dump too. I once went there in a truck with my next door neighbour, Joe Matanowitsch and his father Nick when his dad had some junk to dump, and we saw people there sorting through discarded crockery from Georgian China. It reminded me of a sketch on the Red Skelton Show of long ago when, as his character "Freddie The Freeloader", he came out on the stage with a shopping cart of junk and said, "My, it was lovely shopping at the dump today!"

The contents of our garbage cans in the 1950's were vastly different from today. In the grocery stores and butcher shops meat and fish were sold wrapped in brown paper and, in some cases, on cardboard trays, not the styrofoam trays of today. Items like milk, cream, vinegar, ketchup, mustard, pickles, cough syrup and other medicines, to name just a *very* few, were sold in glass bottles. The empty milk bottles were picked up by the dairy, sterilized and used over again (pop and beer bottles could be returned to the store as well), while the bottles for most other items were discarded and could be crushed at the dump when driven over by a bulldozer, or in some cases, they could be dug up intact decades later by bottle diggers/collectors as they did along Huron St. Since many people still

heated with wood stoves and used fireplaces, discarded wood could be cut up for kindling and firewood. The fabric in mattresses and old furniture would burn at the dump leaving just the springs to rust. Not all the junk made it to the Town Dump though—some people buried junk in their back yards and I well remember that in the 1950's when Harry Bell and his horse plowed our garden in the spring, in turning over the soil, the plow would reveal broken china buried by some previous owner of the property.

The population of Collingwood in the 1950's was around 7500 souls. Nowadays, the area landfill serves a population of around 20,000. When you factor in all the discarded plastic containers and juice and milk cartons *alone*, the volume and type of materials that we throw out every single day is vastly different from 70 years ago.

When the dump on the site of the former nail works had outlived its usefulness (or perhaps its political correctness), the next location for the Town Dump was the 25-acre Collingwood Incinerator and Ash Disposal Site located on aptly-named Incinerator Rd. which runs off of Simcoe County Rd. 34/Grey County Rd. 21, also known locally as "Osler Bluffs Road" (on the boundary between Simcoe and Grey Counties). As in Singhampton, one side of the street is in Simcoe County, the other side is in Grey County. The incinerator site can be clearly seen on Google Maps Satellite View. This site is said to have ceased operation in the late 1980's and Simcoe County had planned to cap the former incinerator site and fence it off starting in the early 2000's. In addition to this facility that was owned by the Town of Collingwood at the time (and now owned by Simcoe County), there were two private landfill sites in the same area, and all three of them are now inactive according to the Official Town Plan.

Another inactive site right in town that was used as an industrial landfill is the area north of First St. now known as Harbourview Park. As reported by Erika Engel in *COLLINGWOOD TODAY.ca* on August 17, 2018, while excavation for the foundation of the Indigenous Gathering Circle in the park was underway, the digging turned up "old tires, hoses, pipes and other debris" which had to be

hauled away to another dump site. Millennium Park behind the grain elevator is also a landfill.

The County of Simcoe is responsible for all garbage and recycling in Collingwood and other municipalities and their Landfill Site within the Town of Collingwood is at the north end of the 10<sup>th</sup> line south of the Georgian Trail. As the crow flies, this site is not very far from the location of the open, always on fire, dump of the 1950's that was on the opposite side of the trail.

Today we sort our garbage into various categories such as cans, glass, hard plastics, soft plastics, styrofoam, organic debris (kitchen waste), paper, cardboard, aluminum foil, construction debris and much of what used to be simply buried now gets recycled and vast amounts of junk are diverted from landfills which still, however, do fill up, prompting the search for more landfill sites. I read a book in my university days in which the author described modern wasteful society as "standing knee deep in garbage while throwing rockets at the moon". Perhaps someday the craters on the moon will become landfills for earth's junk. If that happens, it will distort our view of Jackie Gleason's face when the moon is full (those who remember the TV show *The Honeymooners* from 1955 will know what this means).

## **PART II—SEWAGE**

When my mother's parents (born in 1881 and 1882) were young, Collingwood and other small towns smelled of horses and stables, and chamber pots and outhouses before sewers were installed. From the time Collingwood first had sewers and up until 1958, the town's sewage flowed, untreated, out into the harbour at the foot of Birch St. where the air was very rich indeed. At that location in 1958, the sewage treatment plant was built for primary treatment. It was expanded in 1968 and secondary treatment was added in 1981. It is now known as the Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP), an appellation much gentler on the ears than "sewage treatment plant".

Sanitary sewers had existed in the old central part of Collingwood from at least the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century but it took many decades for them to service the entire

town. Even once running water had been piped into homes, not all parts of town had sewers to take the waste water away and some parts of town still smelled of chamber pots and outhouses and cess pools well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the Collingwood history book *The Chicago Of The North* (pg. 66) there is a photo of workmen excavating, by hand, a trench for a sewer on Pine St. in 1906 with a commentary in the caption by Anita Miles stating what back-breaking work it was at that time without the aid of modern machinery. This probably means that my O'Brien great-grandparents who lived on the south-west corner of Pine St. at 4<sup>th</sup> St. West did not have a sewer connection until at least 1906. In 1910-11 the basement of Victoria School on Maple St. was excavated to put in the washrooms that so many thousands of us Collingwood natives used. Prior to that, from its construction in 1884, the school had 12 ft. x 16 ft. brick outhouses in the boys and girls school yards which had been condemned as being unsanitary by a provincial health inspector in 1909. John Richards, in an interview with Christine Cowley for her book *Butchers, Bakers & Building The Lakers*, recounted the excavating and blasting for sewers on Market St. in the mid-1920's (pg. 264). When a bathroom was added to my grandmother's 19<sup>th</sup> Century house at 433 Hurontario St., the only available space was a ground floor room off the kitchen that had to have the floor raised a couple of feet in order to get a gravity flow to the street from the plumbing fixtures (the kitchen sink drained out into the yard). Some parts of town did not have sewers until into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including the south end of Ste. Marie St. where I grew up (see my story *Garden Produce, Property Taxes and Septic Tanks*).

On one occasion, raw sewage from the east end of town took a quick shortcut to Nottawasaga Bay and instead of crossing town to the WWTP where it was supposed to go, it went into the CNR creek. Just where the creek crossed under Huron St. at the Rail Yard, there was a small brick building on the east side of the creek with a sewage pumping station in it. One late Sunday afternoon about 50 or so years ago when I was out for a ride on my bike, I passed by the bridge and noticed a strange sight. Instead of the peaceful creek with minnows in it, there was raw, steaming sewage bubbling up from under the creek and flowing out into the bay along the east side of the road to the grain elevator. When I got home I

phoned Lawrence Cooper who was on the Town Council at that time and let him know that there was a broken pipe at the pumping station by the creek with raw sewage flowing out into the bay. Most of the CNR creek is now underground but it is still open where it crosses under Huron St. In place of the pumping station that was there 50 years ago, there is a 3-storey office building on the east side of the creek and a newer pumping station located to the east of that office building at the corner of Minnesota St. Six other pumping stations around town keep the wastewater flowing to the north end of Birch St.

We have come a long way from 70 years ago when many homes without sewer connections in Collingwood still had outhouses supplied with an Eaton's Catalogue—an early example of paper recycling—or bathroom and kitchen drains emptying into septic tanks and cess pools, all of which periodically required the services of Shorty Semple to clean them out and haul the contents away in his horse-drawn “honey wagon”. Also at that time, the town's sewer system emptied its contents, untreated, straight out into the harbour. Now the Wastewater Treatment Plant handles all of the town's underground waste. Likewise, in the same period of time we progressed from the unwelcoming sight and smell of the town dump, constantly on fire, to landfills and recycling to handle society's above-ground waste. Nevertheless, the challenge still remains of what to do with all the stuff we throw out.

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