



The Wiener Farm. 1843-1844. - 1973.



Typed by Joyce Anderson.  
Pictures by Clara Ingram.

## The Halfway House--An Oasis for Travellers

In 1918 an historic old building on the London and Port Stanley Gravel Road (now No. 4 highway) was destroyed by fire. It was an ancient hoster<sup>ly</sup> located in the 5th Concession of Yarmouth, a short distance south of the Ontario Hospital--on the east side of the Highway.

The old structure, at the time of the fire, was known as Wiener's Halfway House--being located about half-way between St. Thomas and Union, the next refreshment stop available to travellers enroute to or from Port Stanley by road. The building was constructed about 1859 by John Widdifield, whose family in 1824 bought the land on which the old building stood. At first it was named the Widdifield House.

It was a two-storey, rectangular brick structure with a two-storey verandah across the entire front toward the Gravel Road. The general construction conformed to what has been named the Loyalist style of Ontario architecture that was popular in Upper Canada in better buildings during the period 1800 to 1835. It had two semi-circular windows in the gable ends instead of the more usual single window found in this style of building. Its roof had a wide overhang with returned cornices in the earlier manner of the Georgian type of building that was built before the Loyalist style became popular. Its large windows in both storeys had twelve panes in each half of the

window. This style of glazing also dates the building to when glass makers were limited to this small size of sheet. Larger sizes produced too much breakage and distortion during manufacture.

The water supply also dates the structure. An old style wooden pump was located a few yards to the north of the verandah and was convenient for watering horses as well as travellers when stopping off for refreshments.

A study of the land titles to this property carries us back to the early days of Yarmouth Township in its pre-Talbot era. When Colonel Talbot arrived in Canada after service with General Simcoe, he had decided to give up a life at Court and to embark on an ambitious colonizing enterprise. Perhaps he didn't realize in his own mind the extent to which this work might develop. He carried letters from the Imperial Government Authorities represented by Lord Hobart, to the Bovernor of Upper Canada, authorizing the grant of a block of 5,000 acres at some point that Talbot might select. 5,000 acres was the customary land grant to field officers. Talbot decided that he would like to have his grant in Yarnouth Township, the finest lands on the north shore of Lake Erie. In Yarmouth, too, it would be near the mouth of the largest stream in the County, which would make a good harbour and whose stream would provide a number of good mill sites.

However, a detailed examination of the previous grant in Yarmouth revealed that large sections of the Township had been granted to the Baby Family (pronounced Baw-bee) of the

Sandwich District. Since he could not find a 5,000 acre block in Yarmouth he was forced to go west to Dunwich, where another creek entered the Lake. This location was soon given the courtesy name of Port Talbot. It was near the mouth of this creek that Talbot built his first home in the district and from which he managed his vast colonizing work that became in his mind his personal principality.

The lands on which the old Hotel was built was a part of the Baby lands, the first Crown patents having been issued on the 24th of July, 1799, and assigned to John Baptiste Baby. In 1820, Baby sold lots 4, 5, 8, 9, and 15 in the 5th Concession to Jonathon Doan of the Sparta District. Jonathon was the father of Joshua Doan of the Sparta District who met a tragic and undeserved end in the political unpleasantness of 1837. Baby's appointment of the elder Doan as his <sup>Power of</sup> Attorney is dated the 14th of October, 1820, and recorded in the Registry Office as entry No. 293. Under this power of attorney Doan sold Lot 4 to Widdifield in 1824 for seventy-five pounds.

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In 1859 a member of the Widdifield Family gave a mortgage on some 140 acres of Lot 4 to the Honourable George Goodhue. Several of the Goodhue Family had previously located in the Village of St. Thomas engaged in various enterprises. One was a local medical practitioner with an office on Centre Street West. Dr. Coyne says that George Goodhue moved to Westminster Township near London and amassed a substantial fortune in his business dealings. It was for the sum \$3185.00 and Widdifield undertook to pay to Goodhue regular instalments on principal

and to pay interest on any unpaid balance at the rate of 24% per annum. Truly, the Honourable George Goodhue was a progenitor of the modern finance company whose seemingly innocuous interest rates, it carefully worked out, will often be found to approximate 24%. Colonel Talbot once wrote to a friend about what he called "the Jews of merchants that preyed on his settlers."

Later Widdifield sold a part of these lands to Charles Wiener in 1870. The portion sold was that occupied by the roadside inn. Wiener changed the name of the place to Wiener's Halfway House and under this name he carried on business for the next forty-eight years, till its destruction by fire in 1918. Its management eventually devolved on his sons Frank and Charles.

The old institution played a ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup> unimportant part in the social activities of several St. Thomas groups during this later period. The St. Thomas Gun Club made it its headquarters and, on occasion, held international pigeon shoots on the property. Its old club house is now used as a garage by the Wiener family, still residents on the property. It was also the rendezvous for a local bicycle club whose members after peddling miles over dusty township roads required some throat relief as an urgent part of the day's programme.

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paragraph* Wiener was a lover of good horseflesh and faced a prize horse named Sister Jane, an exceptionally fine looking beast. He enjoyed a brisk drive through the countryside with his

favourite horse pulling a fine carriage that may still be seen on St. Thomas streets, driven by its owner, a horse fancier who purchased it from its former owners.

The old Hotel building was never rebuilt after the 1918 fire. The old stone family home in the rear of the property is somewhat modernized and still serves as the family residence for the Wiener son who still lives here. It may be noticed that this stone building has much quarry stone on its face toward the Highway but on the other face more fieldstone is used. The family tradition says that when the first Court House was constructed, after the separation of the Elgin from Middlesex, that the stone for its construction was hauled from Port Stanley to St. Thomas over the old road. There is no quarry stone available in the County. It is told that the teamsters, as might be expected, would stop at the old Inn for a spot of "throat relief." It was customary for them on these refreshment stops, to toss off a couple of pieces of quarry stone in part payment. When these were assembled they were used on the front of the family home when it was built. As there was not enough to complete it, fieldstone was used on the other faces.

The property is now owned and worked by Frank Wiener, a direct descendant of the original Wiener, who purchased the land a century ago and who played ~~mine~~ host to many of our older residents at the Half-Way House on their proper occasions.

Much of the material from which this story has been made was from notes submitted as a research project of Joseph Wiener,

a student of the Arthur Voaden Secondary School, a study sponsored by the Trustees of the Elgin Historical Society. He was encouraged in his researches by the head of the History Department of that School, Mr. Joseph Bannon.

W. C. Miller with Joseph Wiener.

S. M. Crossett

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Dexter Church.. 1865 - 1973..

Volume 2 Page 76.



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