



Bald Eagle.



Photos taken by Share
lyood - on April 2nd 2006
Lot 22ND Con 10 South $\frac{1}{2}$
in Dunwich Township.



photo taken by Brian Lincoln on
april 27th 2006 - Lot 22nd Con 10
South 1/2 in Denmark Township.

The Lake Erie Beacon - March 30th 2007 -

Dutton's Town Clock

by Al Kirk

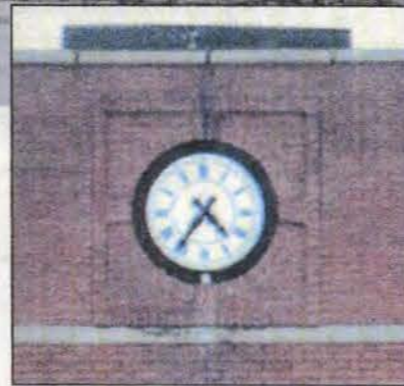
Lorraine Bolgar wanted to do Dutton a favour. And she has. But she has also changed history. A few months ago, Ms. Bolgar purchased a clock for Dutton's Town Hall. Before moving out of the community that she has called home for years, she wanted to do something for all the friends she was leaving behind. But it is what Ms. Bolgar and many other people don't know that is the reason for this story.

Built in 1927, Dutton's Town Hall has always had a space for a clock but one was never put in. That may seem like an oversight or a very bad case of procrastination but, in fact, the missing clock was part of the village's heritage.

For the last three months I have been doing extensive research on why Dutton's Town Hall has always been clockless. After extensive historical research, searching newspaper clippings, going over yellowed documents in the Town Hall's musty basement and interviewing local history buffs, a fascinating story has emerged that needs to be told. And here it is.



It is a well-known fact that the now Municipality of Dutton Dunwich was settled by Scots. It is also well known that these same Scots were, well - thrifty. Okay, that's not quite right. They were cheap. Really cheap. And I can say that because I'm related to



most of them.

My research has led me to the REAL reason why a clock was never installed on the Town Hall.

On April 1st, 1929 a special session of Dutton Town Council was called to decide on the matter of purchasing a clock. In attendance were Mayor William Campbell, Deputy Mayor Bill Campbell, Alderman Willy McKinnon and Alderman Billy McKinnon.

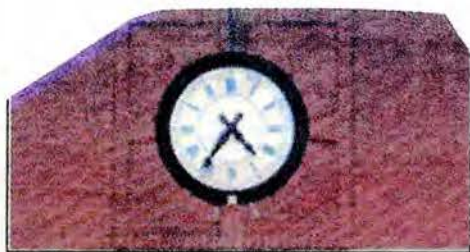
Mayor Campbell opened the meeting by pointing out that since a person could be heard as well in the dark as in the light, the Council Chambers light bulb should be turned off to save the expense. A short discussion was held to deal with the concerns of wear and tear on the light switch. A counter motion was made that the bulb should just be unscrewed a bit until the light went off.

Deputy Mayor Campbell stated that a clock was a wasteful thing. If it was not being watched, it was running for no purpose and the thought of the gears and hands turning all day just so a passerby could, on occasion, glance up at it was a foolish, wasteful expense.

Alderman McKinnon suggested that when the clock was not being watched, it could be turned off just like the light bulb. This triggered a long discussion from the other members of Council, some saying that turning the clock on and off would surely cause more wear on its parts.

Mayor Campbell pointed out that a town clock lacked any real functional purpose to the community. After all, if it was light out, people should be working and if it was dark

Continued On Page 6



Dutton's Town Clock

Continued From Page 3

out, they would be home sleeping or sitting quietly. Alderman Campbell stated that a calendar would be much more practical than a clock as the only exceptions to working, sleeping and sitting quietly were drinking at the MacIntyre Tavern on Friday night and the Saturday night bath. All were in agreement that a calendar was a much wiser investment but this did not solve the problem of what to do with the hole in the Town Hall where the clock was supposed to go.

Alderman McKinnon suggested that perhaps the sensible solution would be to simply buy the clock's face without buying the inner workings. Under his proposal, the clock would show the correct time twice a day – quite an acceptable solution given the saving that could be had. Yet that would still require the purchase of a clock face and hands causing Deputy Mayor Campbell to state that if Council was going to waste all that money why not just board up the hole instead.

So, from then till now, 81 years, the Town Hall has been without a clock. The new donated clock by Ms. Bolgar will run on electricity and presumably the Municipality will have to pay for it. So, will this extra expense cause our ancestors to turn over in their graves? Probably not. All of that movement would cause too much wear and tear on their coffins.

(Al Kirk is a freelance writer and columnist. He resides in the Hamlet of Iona Station just east of Dutton.)

100,000 fought ■ 3,598 died ■ A nation was born

BACK TO VIMY

'A guy doing his bit'



Elgin Military Museum Collector

In Elgin County, Ellis Sifton was a member of his church choir and the local gun club. In France, by age 25, he was a veteran of battle and a leader of men. "I hope that the courage will be mine at the right moment if I am called upon to stare death in the face," he wrote to his sisters less than a year before he was killed.

0.2464

Veterans Affairs Canada

the mass grave where Ellis Sifton's remains are buried near the battleground, in Lichfield Crater. The crater was created by an exploding mine.



Less than a year before he fought his final battle – at Vimy Ridge on April 9, 1917 – Ellis Wellwood Sifton, a farmer from Elgin County, wondered if he was up to fighting to the death. He needn't have worried. When his moment came, he single-handedly took out a German machine-gun nest with grenades, his rifle and, finally, his bayonet, before being shot dead by a dying German. Sifton was awarded the Victoria Cross, one of only four Canadians at Vimy Ridge so honoured. Free Press Reporter Debora Van Brenk visited Sifton's old haunts in and around Wallacetown and combed books, newspapers and museums for this report.

WALLACETOWN
April 5, 1917

This is Holy Week and the Elgin County countryside is waking, and waiting.

Red-winged blackbirds, home from their migration, alight on rushes that line a dirt road beside the neat farm owned by John James Sifton.

There is a drizzle in the air. Horses itch to put their strong limbs to work, but the fields are too heavy with mud to put harness to the plow.

Fruit trees in the front yard are poised to bloom.

A rocking chair on the broad front porch watches for Ellis Wellwood Sifton.

Soon, it seems to say, the son and eventual heir to this homestead will return.

VIMY RIDGE, France
April 5, 1917

This is Holy Week and an ungodly calm hangs over what is left of the French countryside.

Artillery fire and mines have blasted trees into slivers.

Mud everywhere. Endless, knee-deep, putrid mud.

The soldiers wait, knowing they've trained for something big, something soon. Many write letters home.

But it is cold and raining and Ellis Sifton's pen is useless.

He writes in pencil: "Dear Sisters: Just a short note to let you know that all is well with Ellis tonight..."

He tells them not to be anxious if they don't receive news from him for a while, "as it is not always convenient to write."

He writes of having recently seen his cousin, Len, and his hometown buddy and neighbour, Sydney.

Ellis doesn't tell them that two weeks earlier, he had led a trench raid that resulted in his section capturing or killing more than 20 Germans.

But he mentions, as an afterthought, the reward of his leadership.

"P.S.," he writes, "They

have promoted me to Sergeant."

WALLACETOWN
April 8, 1917

It is Easter morning, and the Siftons and Bobiers and Pearces and Backuses and Ellises — all stalwarts of the community — crowd to worship at St. Peter's Anglican Church in nearby Tyrconnell.

The church gazes out over the pioneer cemetery, where trees whistle as a northwest wind blows down to Lake Erie.

Sons of the pioneers have gone away to war and left gaps in pews that would normally be full.

Ellis Sifton would ordinarily take his place with the choir.

He is a fine singer, a cheerful man but not frivolous, and devout.

Ellis's seat on the choir bench has been empty for more than two years.

He signed up with the 18th Battalion in October 1914, as soon as he was able. It is both adventure and duty, but he believes his place, eventually, is back at the farm.

Ellis is a crack marksman, like his father, and has been a member of the Elgin Rifleman's Association since he was 18.

Older sisters Ellie and Millie dote on their little brother, even more since their mother's death in 1912.

They have written him five letters in the past two weeks, although the mails haven't



Elgin Military Museum Collection

Sifton's dog tag is among the possessions his family donated to the Elgin Military Museum.

reached him yet.

Be careful, they say, answering his lament that so many married fathers fall in battle.

As the Sifton sisters and father leave the church this cool Easter morning, the message of Christ's death on the cross and the promise of resurrection rings in their ears.

VIMY RIDGE
April 9, 1917

Less than a year ago, Ellis Sifton had wondered if he was up to his task: "I hope that the courage will be mine at the right moment if I am called upon to stare death in the face," he wrote his sisters.

But those moments of doubt have long since vanished.

He is a veteran of battle.

He is 25, and a leader of men.

They have rehearsed the battle plan on the practice fields; each knows the objective; and each has been taught to use initiative where their planning might fail. All this gives Canadian troops an advantage other Allied forces lack.

They are now in the front of the front lines and their job today is to move that line forward.

So, it is dawn and a northwest wind drives snow and sleet up the ridge.

Artillery fire signals the start of battle.

Thousands of Canadian soldiers creep forward through the mud, then halt and fire. Then they creep forward again.

But blasts from unseen machine guns — where are those damned things? soldiers shout through the cacophony — slow the advance.

Sifton is first to spot a gun barrel poking out of a bunker.

He races forward and with all his might, throws grenades towards the machine-gun emplacements.

With heart pounding and Lee-Enfield rifle cradled in his arms, he charges across open ground through a space in the

barbed wire.

He surprises the German crew in their nest, kills them all and silences their big gun.

German reinforcements rush down the trench to take their comrades' places.

For Sifton, training and adrenaline take over.

He gives an underhand thrust with his bayonet. Thrust, twist, withdraw.

And again. Thrust, twist withdraw.

Again. And again.

It is chaos.

His platoon charges through the hole Sifton has created and arrives to find this skirmish all but over.

A cheer rises in their throats.

And then a dying German plucks his rifle from the mud and takes aim.

He shoots Ellis Wellwood Sifton dead.

Vimy Ridge, from April 9 to April 12, claimed the lives of 3,598 Canadians. Twice that many again were injured.

Historians say the Vimy victory ultimately made little difference to the outcome of the Great War.

But, they note, Vimy changed us in our own eyes and in others'. Four united divisions of Canadian soldiers had advanced where professional Allied forces had been turned back.

"In those few minutes," says Brig.-Gen. Alexander Ross, who had led the 28th Battalion at Vimy, "I witnessed the birth of a nation."

No longer were we add-ons in battle. We were instead a country with an earned reputation as a tactically superb military force: skilled and smart and brave.

Three independent sources record Sifton's role in the battle. They include battalion war diaries and letters home from Lt.-Col. D.M. Ross of Stratford and Pte. Sid Keillor, Sifton's friend and neighbour in Wallacetown.

Keillor says Sifton confided just before the attack he had a hunch he wouldn't live through the battle. He asked only that Keillor let his people know.

Sifton's remains are buried with 56 others near the battlefield at Lichfield Crater. It is a hole in the ground, crudely carved by an exploded mine.

Back home in Wallacetown, events unfold quickly.

A terse telegram arrives: "Deeply regret inform you 5370 Corporal Ellis Wellwood Sifton infantry officially reported killed in action April ninth nineteen seventeen. (signed) Officer in Charge Records."

At a ceremony in Toronto in August, Sifton is posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the Commonwealth's highest award for valour.

The governor-general himself hands the bronze medalion to John J. Sifton and says, "I am honoured to do this."

In all of the Vimy conflict, with its 100,000 Canadian combatants, Sifton is one of only four Canadians to receive the VC.

In October, the mails bring a small cardboard box with Sifton's few personal effects: a Bible, given him by the Bishop of Huron before he went overseas; a military training book, the Canadian Corps' bible; and a tiny souvenir diary, unused, with an even smaller "Vimy" inscription and pencil.

And the Sifton family — the father grief-stricken, the spinster sisters bereft — sell the farm and move to Dutton.

WALLACETOWN
Spring, 2007

With its large porch and arched-brick windows, the Sifton home stands much the same as it did 90 years ago. The rocking chair and fruit trees are gone. Blackbirds still call out over the wet fields.

An Ontario Historical plaque to Ellis Sifton's memory has been erected in

Tyrconnell, at St. Peter church where the young man sang in the choir.

Up the road, in Dutton, five flat memorial stones record the family plot. They mark the last of the John Sifton line.

Two cedar trees stand as sentinels over them.

Debora Van Brenk is a Free Press Reporter.

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Sources include: E.W. Sifton letters, 1915-1917; St. Thomas Daily Times, 1917; Elgin Military Museum documents and Ian Raven, museum executive director; Vimy and More, by Arthur Bishop in Legion Magazine, November-December 2004; historian Jeff Borden, Veterans Affairs Canada, various documents; Mary Olde, archivist, Elgin Military Museum

April 9, 1917

100,000 fought
3,598 died
A nation was born

BACK TO VIMY



A young man and heir to a farm in the Elgin County hamlet of Wallacetown, Ellis Wellwood Sifton left the tranquil country life for the killing fields of France, where his bravery at Vimy Ridge in April 1917 earned him the Victoria Cross, the Commonwealth's highest award for valour. Like 3,597 other Canadians, though, Sifton didn't survive the historic battle. Free Press Reporter Debora Van Brenk tells Sifton's story on Pages A10-11.



FAR LEFT: Ellis Wellwood Sifton of Wallacetown cuts a handsome figure in full military dress. A crack marksman, he signed up with the 18th Battalion in October 1914. Two weeks before he was killed at Vimy Ridge, on April 9, 1917, Sifton led a trench raid that resulted in his section's capturing or killing more than 20 Germans. He was promoted to sergeant.

BELOW: Sifton's family notified of his death by terse telegram.

NIGHT LETTER
Great North Western Telegraph Company of Canada
CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD
TERMS AND CONDITIONS
HEAD OFFICE, TORONTO. GEO. D. PERRY, General Mgr.

31 N. L.
John J. Sifton Ottawa Ont 28
Wallacetown via Dutton
D. F. 106-Deeply regret inform
you 59730 Corporal Ellis Wellwood
Sifton infantly officially reported
killed in action April ninth
nineteen seventeen
Officer in charge Records

Photos courtesy Elgin Military Museum Collection

April 9, 1917

100,000 fought ■ 3,598 died ■ A nation was born

BACK TO VIMY



AND
CANADIAN WAR CONTINGENT
ASSOCIATION
WITH THE CANADIAN FORCES

France, 5.4.17.

191

Dear sisters,

just a few lines
to let you know that
all is well with Ellis
tonight. We are having
some fine weather and
it is drying up again.
Sydney is looking the
same as usual and I
have seen cousin Len
several times lately.
There has not been any
letters from you people
for about 10 days.
Do not be anxious if
you do not receive any
news regular as it
is not always

Sifton wrote this letter to his two sisters back in Wallacetown, only four days before he was killed. "Just a few lines to let you know that all is well with Ellis tonight," he wrote.



AND
CANADIAN WAR CONTINGENT
ASSOCIATION
WITH THE CANADIAN FORCES

191

Convenient to write
this is a very short
scribble but it is all for
this time Good night
Love to all from your
loving brother Ellis W. Sifton
P.S. They have promoted me
to sergeant.

A final letter home from the war front

BY DEBORA VAN BRENK
Sun Media

ST. THOMAS — “Just a short note to let you know that all is well with Ellis tonight . . .”

So begins 25-year-old Ellis Wellwood Sifton's last letter to his family.

Sifton earned a rare Victoria Cross for valour during the first day of fighting at Vimy Ridge, on April 9, 1917.

For years, the Elgin Military Museum has preserved the letters, bequeathed by Sifton's sisters, in a file to be touched only by white-gloved hands.

But those letters soon will be available for anyone to read.

On April 9 — on the 90th anniversary of Vimy and the 25th anniversary of the Elgin Military Museum — a spiral-bound booklet of Sifton's war-time dispatches will be made available for purchase.

The compilation includes 67 letters from Sifton and two from war buddies who saw him fall. The project was a labour of love for Jeffrey Booth, who assembled them.

“I came to realize that there's nobody left from World War One to tell the tales anymore,” Booth says.

The letters reveal a man devoted to his family; a loving brother who asks if his

sister's toothache is better and who notes how he has seen cousin Len a few times recently. They reveal a man devoted to duty and accepting of his responsibility as a newly promoted sergeant.

In one letter, he writes how senseless it seems that a single man should remain unscathed while his married buddies were being killed.

And here he was at Vimy Ridge and he alone spotted the obstacle that was keeping his unit from advancing. In the heat of the battle and with the strength of his training, rank and character, he charged the machine gun.

Sifton knew what had to be done and he did it, says Ian Raven, curator of the Elgin Military Museum.

Says Booth, “It's very clear by the end, he's at peace with himself, he's at peace with God, he's at peace with the situation.”

Sifton's story, museum archivist Mary Olde says, deserves telling because he was special — his Victoria Cross is the only one awarded in Elgin County and is one of just 94 ever awarded to a Canadian.

Sifton was undeniably a hero, Raven says. “He saw something that needed doing and he did it.”

And Sifton's story deserves telling because Sifton was not

unlike every other young man who fought in one of the seminal battles of our country's history.

“He's (also) just a guy doing his bit because everyone else was,” says Raven.

A researcher once asked Olde for a list of Elgin men killed at Vimy. She started alphabetically and, “I got as far as the Bs,” she says, before the enormity of the task made the researcher give up.

*Debora Van Brenk is a Free Press reporter.
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IN A HERO'S WORDS

► **What:** “All is Well with Ellis Tonight,” a compilation of war-time letters by Ellis W. Sifton to his sisters.

► **Where:** Unveiled at Elgin Military Museum, 30 Talbot St., St. Thomas.

► **When:** April 9, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

► **How much:** Copies cost \$10, proceeds to the Elgin Military Museum.

► **Of note:** The Victoria Cross awarded to Sifton will be on display (it is usually in a locked vault in the Elgin County Museum and a replica is on display at the military museum). It will be accompanied by an honour guard.

'I buried my buddy over there'

BY KYLE REA
TIMES-JOURNAL STAFF

More than 60 years ago, Don Monteith said goodbye to a dear friend, killed in Italy during the Second World War.

Before he dies, the St. Thomas native would like to return to the rolling hills near Monte Cassino and visit his grave.

It's why Remembrance Day means so much to Monteith, 84, who served all over Europe during the biggest conflict of the 20th century.

"I remember my buddy that I buried over there," said Monteith. "We were real close friends."

His friend, Laverne Wismer, 22, of Waterloo, Ont., was killed by a mortar blast on April 28, 1944. Both were signalmen with the Royal Canadian Signals Corps.

"The war was a necessary thing. People were dying. When you're young you do it as a thrill or an experience. When you get over there and the real thing hits you in the face, you grow up quick."

The ink on Canada's declaration of war on Germany was still fresh when Monteith volunteered.

"I joined up on Sept. 5 at the age of 16," he said.

With the recruitment age be-



Don Monteith, 84, fought across Europe during the Second World War. He marks Remembrance Day in honour of a friend killed in Italy more than 60 years ago. (T-J photo by Kyle Rea)

ing 18, some creative work on his birth certificate was needed.

"I had blue ink replacing black ink. It didn't show that bad then, but it shows up bad

now," he said with a laugh. "I keep it as a souvenir."

His father had other ideas and Monteith came back home. Undaunted, he simply went to another district with no records of him.

"So my dad said, OK, that's it. You want to go that bad, you're going," he said.

Monteith was part of the 5th Canadian armoured division and was attached to the New Westminster regiment from British Columbia. As a signalman, his job was to ensure communications between brigade headquarters and the regiment.

He fought all over Europe, serving in Italy, Holland, Belgium, France and Germany.

But that didn't mean Monteith never saw battle.

"We were about 50 yards from the front line where Mahony (John Keefer) won the Victoria Cross," said Monteith. Mahony won the Victoria Cross at the River Melfa in Italy while establishing a bridgehead under fierce enemy fire. He was twice wounded but held his post.

Monteith recalls that most of the action he saw was in the Po River Valley, Italy, in 1944.

"You've got to be lucky," Monteith said of his experience near the front lines, in-

cluding a close call that year. "I was digging a slit trench, near a hill," he said, noting the trench was long but not deep. "One morning, I got up and I bent over to tie up my shoe laces and a shell landed seven inches from me (outside the trench) and knocked me cold, the concussion of it. If I hadn't tied my shoes, I'd be dead."

Monteith's friend Wismer, however, was not so lucky.

"I wasn't there when he died," he said, noting other soldiers told him what happened.

Monteith recalled that every morning, Wismer would fetch water. The Germans were methodical about firing three mortar rounds at the Canadian position around that time.

"(That morning) they fired two and then waited. Finally, he (Wismer) said he had to get to work. He went down to get the water and just as he was walking away that's when a mortar fell. He got it in the back."

Wismer died a short while later.

Monteith said he made a cross and placed it on his friend's grave. He hasn't been back to the gravesite since. But he recalls his friend every Remembrance Day.

"It (war) is a cruel thing."

Chronicle

April 5, 2007 Established 1993 Volume 15 ~ Issue 14

Historical building demolished

Medical Clinic expansion in works



Demolition

JEFF KEMPENAAR/THE CHRONICLE

John Drummelsmith tears down the old Dutton Advance building on Main Street in Dutton to make way for the Dutton Medical Clinic expansion.

Jeff Kempenaar
Staff

One of the last buildings moved to Dutton from Wallacetown more than 100 years ago was demolished Monday, making way for a

moved from Wallacetown.

He said it was likely pulled by horses, using a cap stand, where the horses would walk in circles around the building turning

Street was only closed when the front of the building was demolished.

It's hoped construction can begin this year on the expansion.

WALLACETOWN HALL CARD PARTY CELEBRATES 50 YEARS: 1957-2007 - MONDAY, APRIL 23, 2007

Wallacetown - The first Card Party was Monday November 8, 1957 with eight tables in play. Stewart West organized the card party assisted by Bill and Ann Dietrich. Later, Clare and Doris Campbell helped then Francis and Ruth Meyers. Leonard Lunn helped until he passed away in May

1992. In 1973, Jean Van Nuland assisted Stewart by making the lunch. Later, Joe Van Nuland, Rose and Ivan Daniel pitched in and when Stewart retired in February 1999, Joe and Jean stepped in to take over and are still organizing the card parties today. Stewart moved into the Bobier Villa in

June of 2002. Ever since 1999, on his birthday, a card signed by the players was presented to him and the last card was on his 99th birthday, February 1st, 2005. Stewart passed away in March 2005 in his 100th year. The Wallacetown card party was Stewart's pride and joy. After a prize was

obtained he would "Make a Deal" by asking trivia questions or you could make a trade. Prizes were given for High and Lonehandsbut anyone was able to win with Lucky number or special prizes such as Valentines Day. Over the years profits from the card parties have been donated to several

organizations such as the Daffodil Society, Heart and Stroke, MS, Lions Club Programs, and the Wallacetown Women's Institute. 10 games - 10 wins was always a challenge. Over the years some of the lucky winners were Joe Whalls, Arnold Clarke, Mrs. Morley Gammon, Stewart West, Leonard

Lunn, Owen Hooley, Ricky Spring, Georgie Breen, Rose Daniels, George Drummelsmith, Donald Leitch, Nina Reid, Margaret Ross, Lila Sutton and Jean Van Nuland. Come out and be part of history!
Georgie Breen

WALLY TOKARZ REMEMBERED AT LOCAL GOLF TOURNAMENT

Oct 17th 2007

As we prepared for the 3rd Annual Daffodil Society "Cancer" Golf Tournament, many names came to mind of people who had passed away from cancer and should be remembered through this event. After lengthy discussions, the one selected was a man that left a lasting impression with me, although I only knew

him for a short time. To this day, when I think of the Downhill Derby I recall being at the top of the "huge" ramp running timing lights while Wally announced the drivers. *(He never could pronounce my last name right!)* He made the day fun, which is what volunteering for these events should be. Wally Tokarz was a long time resident that gave a lot to this community. I knew Wally as the "man on the Mike" and that meant volunteering his sound system to events like the Santa Claus Parade, Downhill Derby, Wallacetown Fair and many more. When this tournament began to come together, I learned other things about Wally as I talked to people around town.

He also volunteered his time with his wife Anna building parade floats with the Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT); he acted in, and worked behind the scenes in a number of WEDS productions; he held the office of President of the Wallacetown Fair Board, and much more. On a business note, Wally brought pizza to Dutton with the first Pizza Parlor and was owner/operator of Wrock Industries Insulation. All this and a family too! Wally gave so much to this community and his trademark generosity lives on in his family, whom are still active as volunteers. Helping with this tournament is a great honour for me not only as we remember

individuals like Wally that left their mark but also because the proceeds go to such a great cause. The Daffodil Society is a very unique organization that assists cancer patients and their families. This assistance includes providing equipment such as beds or wheelchairs for home use, financial assistance for needed medicines not covered by drug plans and transportation for patient visits to the Cancer Center in London. A round of applause goes out to all the deserving volunteers involved with this organization. In closing, I wish to thank all the people and businesses that helped make this year's tournament a success. We are looking forward to our community's

continued support of this event. Mark your calendars now for the 4th Annual Daffodil Society "Cancer" Golf

Tournament to be October 4th, 2008 at Dutton Mead Golf Club.
Marg Gruenbauer



WALLY TOKARZ
(Wallacetown)
2007 Honouree
October Mixed
Golf Classic

There's history in a jar

The glass jar segment had many players but one man developed a superior product in 1858 and his name became synonymous with home canning: John Landis Mason By PATTI DESJARDINS

Out-Here - Oct-Nov 2007

Napoleon

■ As his massive army marched across Europe, it fed off the land: looting gardens and granaries, chicken coops and piggens. Napoleon realized that this was an unreliable, albeit cheap, method to provision his army so he offered a reward to anyone who could advance food preservation.

Pickling and preserving is on an upswing. Mason jars are standard items at all grocery and hardware stores. This is not a new trend. The popularity of home canning has had more ups and downs than the stock market. The latest swing may be propelled by diet concerns and buy-local campaigns, but the fact that food preservation is subject to social, economic, and political influences is old history.

Humankind has preserved food, mostly through salting and drying, since time began but modern techniques can be traced to the French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte. As his massive army marched across Europe, it fed off the land: looting gardens and granaries, chicken coops and piggens. Napoleon realized that this was an unreliable, albeit cheap, method to provision his army so he offered a reward to anyone who could advance food preservation.

In 1809 Francois Appert won the competition with the concept of hermetically-sealed glass containers. Appert discovered the relation between heating glass jars filled with fruit and an air-tight seal, and the annals of science



record him as someone who got the procedure right but the theory wrong. It wasn't until Louis Pasteur developed the science of bacteriology several decades later that the elements of food spoilage could be explained. It was not the air in storage containers per se that caused food to spoil but micro-organisms such as bacteria and mould.

one side and should be snatched up if found at a flea market. Later models featured rubber rings under the cap to further improve the seal.

For over a century, home canning has used the same, basic methods but its popularity has waxed and waned, especially among urban dwellers. It peaked during both world wars when canning

and victory gardens became a patriotic duty. With naval blockades and diminished trade, food self-reliance on a national scale was critical. Also, metals and rubber were needed for the war effort so the availability of tinned goods declined and paraffin wax was promoted as a sealant for glass jars.

In the prosperous fifties and sixties, home canning suffered a serious image problem. Pantry shelves filled with homemade pickles, jams and jellies had connotations of frugality and ruralness, values not evocative of the times. Food preservation could have received a death blow from the women's movement of the seventies, with its mandate to liberate women from such domestic drudgery, if the "back to the land" movement hadn't occurred simultaneously. As many housewives cast aside their crocks and mason jars, rural newcomers sought them out and rediscovered the joys of home-grown fare.

By mid-century there was considerable commercial interest in food preservation. Manufacturers experimented with various vessels, entrepreneurs filed hundreds of patents, and the industry forked into two prongs: tinned cans and glass jars. The earliest cans were sealed with beads of lead-based solder and while customers noticed a steady improvement in the taste and quality of preserved fruits and vegetables, in fact every can contained a potentially deadly foodstuff. Just how many people were poisoned is unknown, but the number may be significant. For example, recent findings suggest that some members of the Franklin Expedition, ill-fated searchers for the Northwest Passage through the Arctic (1845-48), did not die from starvation or freezing, but botulism from lead-tainted canned food.

The glass jar segment had many players but one man developed a superior product in 1858 and his name became synonymous with home canning: John Landis Mason. The mason jar is so common now that it is difficult to imagine someone actually invented threads in a glass bottle neck and a screw cap. Early mason jars have "The Gem" embossed on

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Mason jars have their own protocol: if someone gives you something in a jar, you should never return the jar empty, but filled with something you made. This amiable custom shows that despite its illustrious history, a mason jar still stands for home, sweet home.

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