

# There Was a Grisly Secret in the Best Log House in the Talbot Settlement

It was a grisly secret in "one of the best log houses" in Elgin County. Mr. W, an official of the Talbot settlement vouched for the eerie happenings in the year 1812.

Counsel Weghrich, Ph.D., tells Mr. W's story in the first volume of *The Canadian Magazine*. With all Hallows' Eve, practically here, *The Times-Journal* reviews Elgin County's oldest ghost story.

It was a logging bee that brought Mr. W in contact with Black Dick the owner of the log house, and a "Yankee pedler." The meeting was not pleasant and Mr. W had to call on his official position to stop a whiskey brawl.

Mr. W described the encounter as: "The Yankee pedler began to talk . . . determined that I should hear him . . . I turned short round, walked straight back to where he stood and asked him in my sharpest tone what he meant. He commenced his answer in a jeering tone, and the next moment he lay flat on the ground with my foot on his prostrate body."

A well known figure in the Talbot settlement, that was the last time the Yankee pedler was seen by Mr. W. He left in the company of Black Dick in the direction of the log house.

The disappearance was credited to Mr. W, who had "scared him, or shamed him from coming his usual round."

But the Yankee pedler was also missing at his home and months later enquiries were circulated around the Talbot settlement by a stranger looking for the man's whereabouts. Much to the surprise of the area the pedler was "worth a considerable sum of money, besides other property in notes . . ."

"My near neighbor and myself were both official men and were expected to make all the necessary enquiries and conduct the examination, which it was generally conceded now was a matter of simple justice."

It was a large group that set out for Black Dick's place . . . "We went in a body, it was getting dark, and although we did not expect to see the place lit up with candle light, we did expect to see some light in the place . . . all was darkness . . ."

"In the morning . . . we went over again to Dick's house. It was closed and, with the exception of three cats about the barn, there was not a living thing on the place."

The investigation came to an abrupt halt until:

" . . . two young men . . . alarmed" rushed into Mr. W's house. They had seen the Yankee pedler go into Black Dick's house . . . but they had not heard the door open. Soon after, Black Dick and his wife drove up in their

wagon, used a key and entered the log house.

The official dismissed the incident although there were "positively asserted facts that ever since Dick's return everything he had purchased at the store had been paid for in Mexican dollars, and he had been seen with a large purse full of these coins."

Then one night . . . "when the moon was at the full, the sky cloudless . . . a party returning from a paring bee saw a man walking along among the trees, where . . . there were impassable marshes. The place where he was walking was a morass of considerable depth . . . altogether too soft to bear up the weight of a man . . . Yet there he was in the hollow, pacing slowly . . ."

"One of the young men called out to the moving figure . . . they saw it turn in their direction . . . and one of the girls fainted outright with fright, and the attention of the rest was at once directed to her, when they next looked the figure was gone."

Mr. W says the report spread throughout the area. "My next neighbor was then reeve and he called to consult with me . . . we went down to the swamp to survey the place carefully to see if the place could be drained. We found it would be a heavy job and in the absence of definite proof we did not like to assert what we both believed. That either the pedler or some other man had been murdered and thrown in there . . ."

Black Dick's wife called on Mrs. W and left the impression of illness and fear of death. "She looked at me wistfully . . . I had an impression at the time that she had come up to our place to relieve her mind of something but had not the courage to do so."

The doctor who attended her on her deathbed felt the same although he said: "Whatever Dick might be in other respects he was remarkably attentive and kind to his wife."

Suspicion grew against Dick, shunned by the community and following the death of his wife he came to Mr. W and the log house with the grisly secret became the official's property.

Reports from the first tenant "a Shropshire farm laborer . . . came within a month . . . he came one night to tell me he did not like the house saying, 'I think her's haunted.'"

The farmer stayed on however until one night when his wife was all alone in the house . . . "She was sitting on the hearth knitting . . . she felt a draught as though the door opened and she noticed that the logs brightened and the sparks flew . . . She turned round and she became conscious that some person was crossing the floor in the direction of the best bedroom . . . the door was open and as soon as the foot-

steps had entered, the door closed. She sat listening . . . and for some minutes could hear nothing—then she detected pacing, backward and forward . . . when the footsteps of her husband caught her ear and she was relieved from her terrible watch.

"He was a brave man, and when she had explained to him the cause of her alarm, for she was as pale as a spectre herself, he lit a candle and examined the parlor . . . he wanted to persuade her that she had been dreaming, when a moan, so fearful and unearthly that it fixed them to the spot in horrified surprise, sounded close behind them . . . but nothing further happened to alarm them . . . in the morning they moved . . ."

Black Dick's house stood empty for a year "when a queer customer turned up. He was a man of good education but of bad habits, as regarded morals and temperance. He was a great naturalist and taxidermist and spent most of his time during the day in the woods. I told him the house had a bad reputation—that it was haunted."

"If there's nothing worse than ghosts and hobgoblins, sprites and apparitions, elfs and spectres, he said, 'I shall be happy. A rate will do more mischief to my specimens in one night than all the bogles that ever visited Christendom.'"

There were no complaints from the taxidermist when one day Mr. W asked him if he had ever been disturbed.

"Yes, he said, 'I have heard a man pacing backwards and forwards in the front room, and one night there was a horrible row; it wakened me, and forgetting myself I jumped up and opened the door into that parlor and if I didn't give them some jaw-breakers . . . They settled down pretty quick, so did I, for my shirt felt a good deal colder than my temper . . . it did good, I have not been troubled much since . . ."

Surprised at the statement Mr. W inquired if there were two ghosts . . . "Two? Of course, there were two and a jolly row they raised in the place. Why it was as bad as two mastiffs oe'r a bone . . . I was thinking about it after, though, and wondering whether that kind of cattle can hurt a fellow or not."

A strong pair of laborers moved into the log house when the naturalist left. One night, each carrying a buffalo robe, they arrived at Mr. W's house and asked permission to sleep on the kitchen floor.

Visibly frightened they described a face "that looked into the room: 'The eyes glowed like coals of fire, the thin sharp features seemed transparent, while the long flowing beard appeared to shine like luminous threads . . . neither spoke nor moved. There came a rushing, sighting sound from the parlor . . . the commotion continued as though a violent contest was proceeding for mastery and then gradually moved outdoors and away towards the woods, where it spent itself in mournful wailings.'"

Months later a letter arrived which told of the death of Black Dick who "left a considerable sum of money, papers and other valuables . . . full restitution for the rightful heir, the sister of the Yankee pedler. The legacy closed with a hope that 'The Great Disposer of all Events would accept the peace offering so far as this world was concerned . . ."

Mr. W. sums up his story with: "Several years after, we were making great improvements on the farm and among the rest we cut the deep drain which you might notice runs through the swamp. When cutting this the skeleton of a man was found, entire, which we supposed was that of the missing pedler. . . . Did the pedler's ghost haunt the house during Dick's residence, and was it this apparition which was seen coming there, and in the marsh . . . ? Was the second ghost Dick, quarreling with the pedler?"

# Saga of Selkirk Settlers Is Magnificent Chapter in West Elgin's History

Scottish Families Made Overland Trek From Red River  
District of Manitoba, 115 Years Ago, to Join  
Earlier Settlers Along Thames

One of the greatest sagas of early settlement in Elgin County is that of the Selkirk Settlers, named for Lord Selkirk who were brought into the Red River District of what is now Manitoba by way of Hudson's Bay.

They were not the first Scottish folk to settle in Aldborough Township, but their story is one that stands out in national history as a striking example of the great privations the people who cleared the virgin forest had to endure in the New World to which they had come seeking the Four Freedoms and new opportunities.

Unable to endure the conditions they found in the Red River territory, because of the terrible hardships and the incessant warfare among rival fur companies, they started on a long trek to the Talbot Settlement.

Part of that terrible journey, through hundreds and hundreds of miles of almost unbroken wilderness, was made during the late fall and early winter. Men and women died on that trip; children were brought into the world. Finally, with many sick and weary, they finally arrived at their destinations in the year 1838, only to discover that they still had many hardships and privations to face and endure.

No history of Elgin County is complete without reference to the Selkirk Settlers. Some of them settled in Aldborough along the Thames River, others in Lobo Township and other parts of Middlesex. Their courage and fortitude provides a magnificent chapter in pioneer history.

Among the Selkirk Settlers who reached Elgin were the McKays, the Gunns, the Bannermans and the Macbeths. George Macbeth brought with him from the Red River settlement to Dunwich Township a family of five children, the eldest of whom was then only 12 years. Later George Macbeth took up residence in Euphemia Township, but his eldest son, George, the 12-year-old boy who made that long trip from the Red River, went to live with Colonel Thomas Talbot in 1839, and a year later, in 1840, his brother Donald, also went to live with Colonel Talbot. In later years, the Macbeths were to play prominent roles in the life of Colonel Talbot and the management of the Talbot Estate at Port Talbot.

## FIRST HIGHLANDERS

It was in 1816 that the first influx of Highland families reached West Elgin and acquired land grants from Colonel Talbot in Dunwich, Aldborough and other townships. In 1816 and 1817, fifteen families who had previously settled in Caledonia, in New York State, migrated to Aldborough. Among them were the families of Archibald Gillies, John Menzie, Thomas Ford, Donald McEwen, Finlay Macdiarmid and Alexander Ford—names that are still prominent in West Elgin.

Naughton, Malcolm Robinson, Angus McKay, Thomas and Samuel McColl, Dugald Campbell and three sons; John Kerr, Neil Haggert and J. Rider. They had all come in 1816 and 1817. In 1819, came Donald McGugan.

So Scottish was early settlement in many parts of West Elgin that for years Gaelic was the chief tongue spoken. Even a century ago, the Talbot Road west of Port Talbot was little better than a glorified blazed trail, but along that road many of the first comers to Elgin settled, and from their fortitude and perseverance came the picturesque paved highway of today, known officially as Queen's Highway No. 3, but often referred to as the North Shore Trail.

## PRECIOUS GRIST

For some years after the war of 1812-1814, one of the problems facing the first settlers was to find mills to grind their precious wheat and roll their oats. Colonel Talbot's mill at Port Talbot was destroyed during the war and for months entire families were without even bread, unless they were able to grind grain in the crude manner in fire hollowed logs or between field stones. Eventually, Col. Talbot's sawmill was rebuilt, but to obtain flour a journey of weeks made in small open boats along the north shore of Lake Erie often was necessary. Flour in the Talbot Settlement, if obtainable, sold at \$16 a barrel. In Buffalo, it could be bought for \$12 a barrel. Imagine starting out today in a small boat for Buffalo, N. Y., 165 miles to the east, in order to obtain a barrel

of flour! There were no out-board motors in those days to speed the boat along its way.

It has been recorded in local history how George Munro and three other men, went in November, 1818, in a small boat to Long Point for flour to be divided among 54 Scottish families, 36 of

whom had recently arrived from the Old Country or New York State. Families who had come previously in 1816 and 1817 had raised on their little acres of

cleared ground barely enough corn and potatoes for their own uses, but with the true Christian spirit so manifest in those days

they shared their precious food with the newcomers.

Finally, all the food in the Scottish settlement had been consumed with the exception of turnips. With these and chestnuts, a prolific crop that fall, the families were able to subsist for several days. The boat that had been sent out for provisions providentially returned before

actual starvation hit the little colony.

The boatmen had been storm-bound for two weeks on the return journey at the mouth of the Otter Creek, where Port Burwell now stands. Proceeding west from there about 30 miles, they ran into a fierce south-wester which drove them ashore and wrecked their boat. With peril to their lives, they managed to save half of the provisions,

pling them on the shore, out of the reach of the waves. Then those four young men carried the heavy bags of flour some 20 miles, through the virgin forest, distributing it evenly among the suffering families. Before this supply was exhausted, another party with handmade sleighs journeyed again to Long Point over the shore ice, obtaining sufficient flour to carry them through the spring into the summer.

"At the beginning of 1819, there was not a grist mill within miles of the Scotch settlement," Mr. Munro related, "but before the end of that year, there was a handmill in virtually every settler's cabin, the joint pro-

duction of Peter McKellar and John Menzie.

## MCKELLAR'S MILL

In 1820, Peter McKellar, without training or experience, built a grist mill at Sixteen Creek. He made all the wheels and gears, with the irons provided by Colonel Talbot from the ruins of his Port Talbot mill. The settlers aided in making the dam or raceway. However, the stream was not active much of the year, so during the season when the water was running in volume, from March to June, McKellar's mill operated day and night. McKellar ran it alone. He would start the mill at two o'clock on a Monday morning and never leave it until nine o'clock the following Saturday evening.

Sheriff McKellar said in an interview many years ago: "I have seen women come to the mill, each carrying a bag of grain on her back. When the grain was ground, they carried the bags of meal home again. Meantime their husbands were at home preparing the land for a spring crop."

For providing this mill, Peter McKellar received an additional 50 acres of land—but his son, Sheriff McKellar, said he did not get the land.

Flesh was not as great a problem as flour, for the forest abounded in deer and wild turkeys. By 1820, in the entire township of Aldborough, only 150 acres of land had been cleared and was under cultivation, and of this acreage, Archie Gillies owned twenty. That alone is evidence of the problem of flour for the hungry back in those parlous years of Elgin settlement.

Another problem was that of warm clothing during the bitter winter, for many of the Highland lads had no other covering below their knees but their kilts.

And yet those first settlers had their carefree moments. Bees for barn and house raisings were common, and after the work was done, the piper was installed on the table and dancing continued until the early morning hours—Highland reels and jigs.

then conveyed them safely out of danger.

"Were there really one hundred and fifty men in the party, as Western historians say?" I asked Mr. Gunn.

"I don't think there were that many," was the reply.

"Did Duncan Cameron and his friends accompany them on their journey, as asserted?"

"I never heard tell of Duncan Cameron. The Nor'-Westers guarded them safely out of danger and some French traders accompanied them, but no further than Fort William, I think."

Tradition in Elgin says Angus Gunn was appointed leader, but this his son, Donald Gunn, does not corroborate, but says he was a brave man and took a very active part among them.

So they left in June, 1815, in time to escape further trouble, for the next year saw the battle of Seven Oaks between the rival companies, where Governor Semple and twenty of his men were killed. Semple was the man who brought out the settlement of ninety from Kildonan in 1815. Among them, as said before, were some who afterwards came to Elgin. Western historians say that it was on the arrival of Lord Selkirk in 1817 that the name Kildonan was given to the settlement, but Donald Gunn asserts it was earlier known by that name.

So they set sail in bark canoes, by lake and river, by way of Lake of the Woods. The journey as far as Fort William took six weeks or more and a halt was made there for a rest of two or three days, and Angus Gunn made money by cutting hay for a British half-pay officer.

They had their little adventures thus far on the way. Andrew Macbeth quarrelled with an Irishman of the party, a little abusive fellow, who was displeasing to the company. Macbeth threatened to throw him into the river if he did not behave himself. They both fell into the water together and went down to the bottom. When all thought they were drowned, Macbeth was seen to emerge with the Irishman on his back. Going down one of the rivers William Bannerman was working from the rocks, when he was thrown into the water. He could not swim, but a man from one of the other boats was proding about with a white pole, Bannerman saw it in the water and caught hold and was saved.

Leaving Fort William they skirted Lake Superior to Sault Ste. Marie, and there coasted along the Georgian Bay. From Georgian Bay they turned south by way of Lake Simcoe until they reached Bradford. Here many of the settlers decided to locate in the township of Gwillimbury. Some of the Gunns went on to Toronto, among them Angus Gunn and his wife and child.

At Little York, as it was called then, they came up for examination for the high-handed doings on the Red River, word having been sent on before. A military officer, who happened to be there from Red River, was asked what kind of people they were, and he replied that they were honest, brave people, and you could trust your life with them.

In 1817, after working around Little York for two years, the Gunns came to the shores of Lake Erie, to the township of Dunwich. The next year Angus Mackay came down from Gwillimbury. Others followed them down to the Talbot Settlement from Georgian Bay and settled in the townships of Dunwich and Aldborough, Elgin county, among them the Bannermans, Matthewsons, and John Macpherson.

Probably about the year 1826, Benjamin Gunn came from the Red River. We have spoken of him before as being in the employ of the Hudson Bay Company. The late B. B. Gunn, Conservative M. P., Seaford, Ont., was his grandson. The descendants of the Red River colonists are now very numerous in Elgin county. I made an attempt with Donald Gunn to count them, but got hopelessly mixed among the Gunns, Mackays, Garbutts, Somerses, MacIntyres, MacFarlanes and others, and gave up the attempt when the count got too numerous. They are, and well may be, proud of their ancestry.

Macbeths

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EARLY INDUSTRIES

IN WALLACETOWN



SAW MILL on Lot  
SOUTH EAST edge of WALLACETOWN facing north



John McLEAN Sr. drawing SAWDUST  
with CART AND HORSE  
TO EMPIRE GRIST MILL  
WHERE THEY BURNED IT FOR FUEL



FACING EAST showing huge piles of LUMBER  
ON CORNER of CURRIE Rd. AND QUEEN STREET



Geo. Turville  
Proprietor  
Fred Kowitz - Engineer  
EMPIRE MILLS - WALLACETOWN

This mill was originally OWNED AND  
OPERATED by Schleiwafs of WEST HORNE in  
the 1880's. LATER, G. TOFFLEMAYER OPERATED  
FOR A FEW YEARS, THEN SOLD to Hugh [Big Mac]  
McDONNELL AND WAS OPERATED by him a  
NUMBER OF YEARS, THEN SOLD TO GEORGE OLDRIEVE  
of GLENCOE, who LATER TORE it DOWN AND MOVED  
it TO ST. THOMAS. Thus a thriving industry  
IN WALLACETOWN CAME TO AN END.

EMPIRE GRIST MILL Lot 14 & 15  
SITUATED ON QUEEN STREET FOR MANY  
YEARS, THEN MOVED TO PRESENT LOCATION  
ON CORNER of GORDON AND ROSE STREETS,  
by OWNERS GEO. TURVILLE AND SON.