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Port Lambton - The village that won't quit

Courtesy of the Sombra Museum

Port Lambton is one of the oldest communities in St. Clair Township and there are two good reasons why this came about - the presence of abundant woodland and the good business sense of the people who settled in the area.

The community was first settled in 1820, when Duncan MacDonald traveled north from Ohio to build on Lot F, Concession 7. Soon, he had erected the first frame house in what became Sombra Township. His son built a steam mill south of the house and became one of the leading businessmen in the community.

At that time, the area boasted thick forests, and this led to the area being given the name Sombra, the Spanish word for "shade". The lumber industry thrived and, at its peak, Port Lambton was known as the liveliest little river town south of Sarnia.

The area had two saw mills, a shingle mill, a planing and turning mill, and other industries, all steam-operated. A continuous 450-foot long dock extended out into the river and there was a Customs house, storehouses and warehouses handling the extensive ship traffic. The village itself had eight stores, three hotels, three liverys, and two telegraph offices. A school staffed by two teachers served the village and surrounding countryside.

One of the foremost reasons for the village's prosperity came from the sale of cordwood to the steam tugs that towed the great sailing ships north against the current of the St. Clair River to Lake Huron. But as the forests were cleared and wood became less available to support local industries and shipping, coal and bunker fuels were used for steam and the village went into a period of hibernation.

It enjoyed an impressive revival as a tourist town in the first part of the 1900s. Until the 1940s, Port Lambton's beautiful surroundings made it a prime vacation destination and many visitors came from the U.S., particularly Detroit. There were cottages for rent and rooms were available at establishments such as the Washburn Hotel. Ships like the *Tashmoo* stopped daily during its summer runs and the Dawson ferry served international traffic between Canada and the U.S.

During the Prohibition Era in the U.S., Port Lambton was a short cut to Cuba for rum runners who operated out of the area, although none of the liquor ever made it to Cuba. It was deposited along the Michigan shore less than a kilometre away. The notorious Purple Gang owned cottages and homes in the village to maintain a local base of operations for their rum running operations.

With the end of World War II and the return of a strong economy, local residents found work in factories in Wallaceburg and Sarnia. The era of the passenger steam ship ended as people began to travel to their destinations in motor vehicles. The tourists seemed to forget about the beautiful St. Clair River as a vacation destination.

Today and over the past couple of decades, a resurgence has taken place in the Village of Port Lambton. A drive through the village along the St. Clair Parkway reveals the presence of many new homes, some of which have replaced the old structures that bore witness to the area's early days. Many of the older structures that remain have been repaired or remodelled.

Most of the homes along the river have sturdy steel docks lining the river shore where boats can be secured, swimmers can enjoy the cool, refreshing waters of the St. Clair River, and leisure time can be pleasantly spent lounging out over the water with friends and family.

In the village core, Dedecker Park offers a pleasant stretch of green shoreline where visitors and passers-by can stop to enjoy the scenery. The park was named in honour of Sombra and later, St. Clair Township Mayor Joe Dedecker, a resident who served his community in municipal government for over 26 years.

Perhaps it is safe to say that Port Lambton is once again "the liveliest little town on the St. Clair River."

