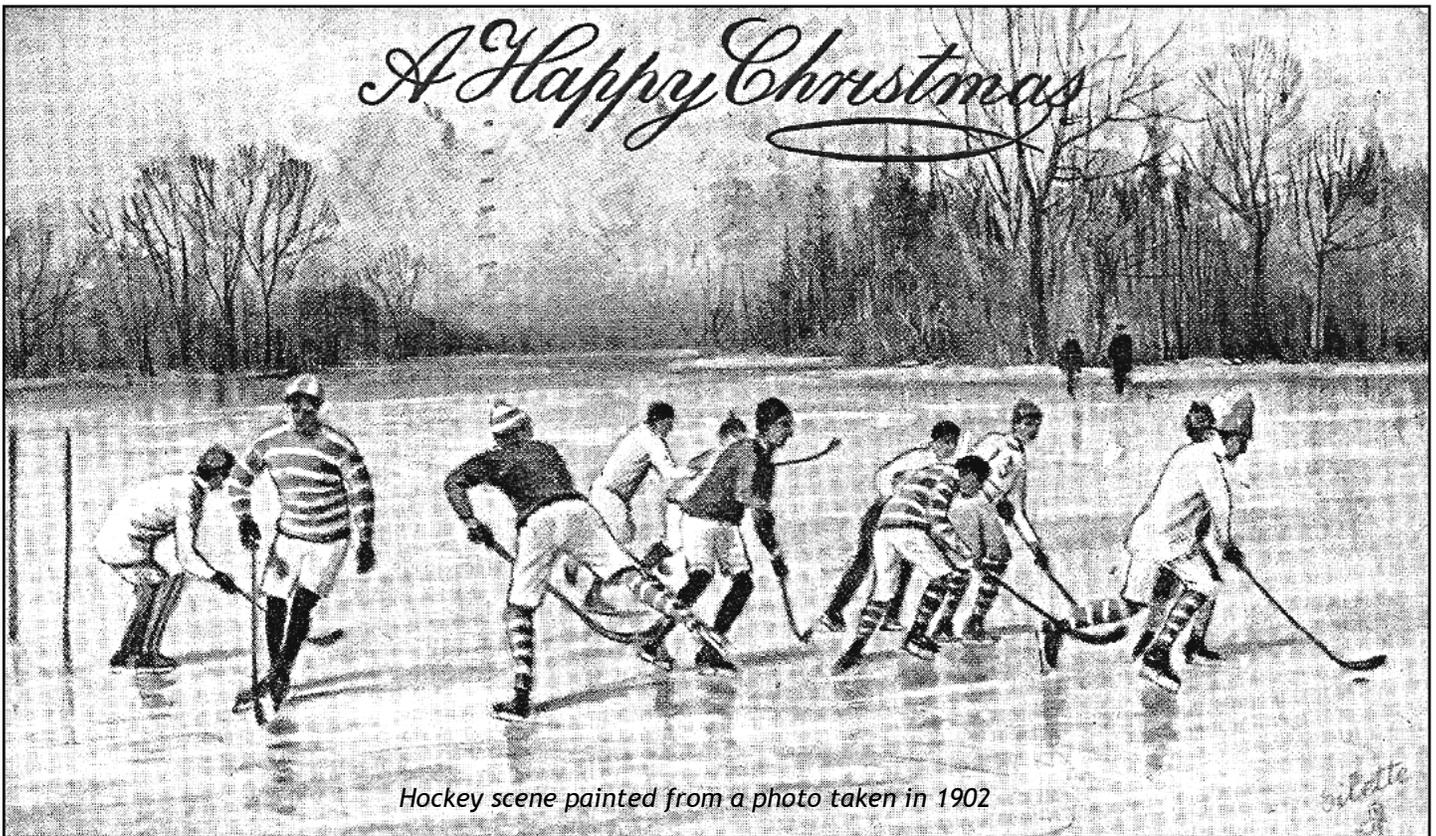


HERITAGE CORNER



Hockey scene painted from a photo taken in 1902

Memories of Skating on Talfourd Creek, Froomefield, Ont. By Alice Gibb

"Oh, I wish I had a river I could skate away on...."
- Joni Mitchell

Every winter, youngsters in Froomefield started watching their thermometers with great interest. This was still the era of Fahrenheit temperatures in the 1950s and early 60s. We wanted the numbers to fall far below the freezing point. The reason - we were waiting for Talfourd Creek to turn to ice and the skating season to begin!

Talfourd Creek, which wound through the Sarnia Chippewas reserve and apparently on to the Moore Township settlement of Logierait, spilled into the St. Clair right beside the Canadian Oil refinery (now Shell Canada). In fact, that last section of the creek rarely turned to solid ice, likely due to the chemicals - and perhaps hot emissions - from the refinery. But upstream, often by late December, we had a skating rink like no other.

My mother would bundle up my brother and myself in layers of clothing from mittens to thick scarves to double socks. We'd head back through the vacant lot, owned by a Catholic order which had once planned to build a school in Froomefield, and down to the creek behind the Ryans'. Someone would have pulled logs over to the bank of the creek, where you could change out of boots and into your skates. On good days, the ice would be cleaned off and there would be a roaring fire where you could warm your fingers and toes whenever they seemed on the verge of frostbite.

Admittedly, there was a division of sorts on the frozen creek. The boys, particularly the teenage boys, were there for a reason - to play games of pickup hockey. Numbers were never a problem: the Havers family had 11 children and the Jack and Alice Ryan family had ten offspring. Jack Ryan, the patriarch, often played hockey along with the boys and he was exceptionally handy with a hockey stick.

We girls, and the younger children, usually stayed out of the

way. We would leisurely skate down the creek, towards the St. Clair. It was a winding creek, with lots of trees overhanging the banks. It was easy to pretend you were exploring in the wild. The girls would join hands and we usually traveled as far as the back of the Froomefield United Church Cemetery. There came a point where the ice wasn't quite as firm and you started to see signs of pollution along the banks. While I can recall skaters getting wet feet, I don't remember anyone actually falling through the ice into deeper waters.

We had our section of the creek and kids from the reserve (Aamjiwnaang) had their section, and we rarely trespassed on each other's territory. We vaguely knew that Talfourd Creek had been named for the brothers - Froome and Field Talfourd - who founded our village. I'm not sure any of us really knew how far the creek wound into Moore Township. Others had heard the story of the albino turtles once discovered in Talfourd Creek, and knew that those turtles were a hoax devised by the enterprising David family.

After two or three hours of skating, noses, cheeks and toes would be frozen. We'd return to the logs, take off our skates and dash home, knowing that hot chocolate and a warm house would be waiting.

Like Joni Mitchell, I still sometimes wish I had a river (or creek) to go to.

Alice Gibb, now of London, Ontario, was born and raised in Froomefield. Several generations of her Gibb and Simpson families farmed nearby in Moore Township. Her mother, Evelyn, was Tweedsmuir curator for the Froomefield Women's Institute and this spawned Alice's interest in local history. Alice has written for and edited six township histories, including Euphemia Township's history. Over the years she has written history columns for publications in London, Seaforth, Lucan and Ailsa Craig. She still misses the St. Clair River and long ago rowboat trips to Stag Island.