

Early Pioneers of Wilkesport

It was a visit to the Wilkesport Cemetery that sparked more in-depth research of the Sturdevant family and the history of the surrounding area. In the initial visit, we didn't really know what we were looking for; we only knew that my husband's father and a great uncle spoke of a connection to the area. It did not take us long to figure out why. Not only did we find a number of gravestones for Sturdevants of various spellings, we solved a mystery about why my husband Lawrence's family had often visited Selman cousins. In the end, we discovered that we are related to many, many of those resting here and so the adventure began to piece together the relationships and lives of those who built our family and this community.

Before we begin a discussion of early Wilkesport settlers, let me set the stage and put the world at that time into perspective. Imagine a vast area of huge mature trees and swamp land mostly inaccessible for land travel; an area serving as the watershed to drain the Black and Bear Creeks which flowed, as they do today, into the North Sydenham River. The Sydenham is 12-16 feet (about 4-5 metres) deep and of far greater varying widths along its journey to the St. Clair River than it is today. The area is home to varied wildlife providing for the needs of the native aboriginals who have lived here for over 200 years. This is the area that eventually became Sombra Township, based on the Spanish "sombre" or somber meaning dark and ominous, the name being provided by then Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, Sir Peregrine Maitland. The area is the last place in what was then Upper Canada (now Ontario) to be settled in an area then called the Western District. The year is 1820.

Just to put the evolution of the area into perspective, by that time the following events had occurred just to highlight a few. The continent had been reached by Europeans over 800 years earlier. John Cabot and Jacques Cartier had claimed lands for England and France 300 years before. Samuel de Champlain had begun establishing settlements more than 200 years before. Exploration was already being undertaken to open the north and west of what was to become our Canada. Fur trade was well established and major cities were being built. The Seven Years War involving the Plains of Abraham led to the Treaty of Paris which finally placed all land in the hands of the British. Fifty years before our scene the American Revolution came to an end and many United Empire Loyalists began relocating in Canada. The north and the west were expanding but there was no development in the area of current day Sombra Township. By 1814 hostilities with the Americans were declared ended and the need to guard our borders took a lesser importance for a time.

So, by 1820, finally, time and energy could be given to this dark, damp area which had been set aside and all but forgotten. Thomas Smith had been called upon to survey the huge dank forested swamp. There was a large turnover of men due to working conditions and illness. Surveyors had to cross Bear Creek for every concession line they established. It is no wonder that this area was not developed earlier. Even the surveyor expressed little hope for the land becoming productive enough to entice settlement.

As mentioned earlier, many who had been loyal to the Crown had come to settle in parts of Canada after being given land grants. But, many of those sons and daughters of Loyalists who were granted land in the Sombra Township area you imagined earlier, did not come. They sold

their land to other interested parties. Enter Paul Sturdevant, my husband's fourth-great-grandfather, the first pioneer settler to arrive in the area. Another early arrival was Hamlet Sales.

Paul, whose family was reportedly involved in the lumber industry was born in the New England area around 1780. He eventually married Lydia Eddy whose family were staunch Quakers, much to the chagrin of her family and The Society of Friends. From about 1804, Paul and his family settled in the Willink area of the Holland Land Company holdings in Western New York near what is now Hamburg where it is believed he had contact with a number of the Loyalist descendants who held land in the Sombra area. Paul himself was not a Loyalist. He did, however, visit what is now the Wilkesport area around 1827. It would appear that he was likely investigating land granted to those he knew. He eventually requested and gained, on their behalf, agreement through Letters in Council at York (now Toronto) to change the allotment of land held by two of these Loyalist descendants as the land granted was deemed uncultivable by the surveyors. In 1830 Paul returned having purchased land from Alexander McKee and Christian Love on lots 14 and 15 of the 13th concession. It is said that Paul built a log cabin and stayed the winter and the next year returned with some members of his family – sons Jacob, Ira, Horace and Hiram – leaving his wife and youngest son Hamlet in America for the time being. Daughters were not mentioned at that time. Jacob's wife Edna Salisbury and their young son Eddy accompanied them but it appears the life here was too harsh at that time and both are seen in a plot in the Wilkesport Cemetery along with Jacob who survived until 1894 having been married later to Sarah Walker and then Mariann Walker. Paul and sons later purchased and sold land many times over the years in the area but it is their relationships with other settlers and the life of the people with whom they worked and lived on a day-to-day basis that makes the story worth the telling.

Our closest and most documented connection is to the Selmans known for their store and mill. Paul's son Hiram married Dorcas Selman, daughter of Spencer Selman and Elizabeth Trill. Unfortunately, Dorcas died shortly after the birth of her son, Ira. It is from this line that my husband descended. Hiram later married Ellen Salisbury. Susannah Sturdevant, daughter of Jacob, married William McRae who is well known for his blacksmith business at the west end of town. Paul's daughter Hannah married Abel Witherell from whom descended Charles. Son Ira married Julianne Emma Winfield and later Susan Greson. James Hamlet married Sarah Ann Henshaw. Horace married Elizabeth Clipperton. The list goes on through the generations...Sales, Grason, Brown, Ellwood, Ramsay, Jennings, Shepherd, Dawson, Tunmore, Burden, Tyrrell, Thorpe, Shaw, Lester, Best, Sexsmith and more.

The actual genealogical connections are important to me but it is the involvement and interactions of these families and others that are important to this occasion. Many were involved in the two occupations needing the most attention in the early years – logging and ditching. There were no roads except for Indian trails prior to the arrival of the Wilkes Brothers and others in the 1840s. Until much of the timber was cleared, the land remained swampy as the tree coverage was so dense and extensive, the land never saw enough sunlight to dry out. Wilkesport was really the only inland port in Lambton and the Sydenham River was at that time wide enough to allow ocean vessels of the day to come right into Wilkesport to pick up their loads of timber. And so the Wilkes, bringing their experience in the timber business with them from Brantford, thrived. Eventually the area became known as Wilkes Mills, then Wilkesburg and later East and West Wilkesport as settlement sprang up on both sides of the river and what is now Kimball Road. By the 1850s, after our Paul's death in 1846, even more mills were built to

accommodate the need for processing timber and fulfilling orders. As the land was cleared, more and more settlers turned to agriculture. Ditchers became busy building drainage ditches to gradually remove the swamp water and allow it to drain into the nearby creeks and river. Many early censuses indicate occupations related to these two industries.

One of Hiram Sturdevant's descendants through his second wife Ellen Salisbury, was Bertha Mae Sturdevant who married Jack Salisbury. According to Glenda Young, a previous curator of the Sombra Museum who resided next to Bertie, when in 1911 at age 16 Bertha married Jack, she was afraid to go into the backyard too far because it was so dense and dark she feared she would get lost. At that time, some of the area was still dense forest. She would go as far as the fruit trees in the backyard but would venture no farther.

Others made their mark on the community through their businesses. I hesitate to mention names as some will be overlooked but I think of Harvey Sipperell who built a tile yard to meet the need to drain land for agriculture; Edward Arnold, a shipbuilder; Rev. Richard Hooper and others who met the spiritual needs of the community; Dr. D. K. Stenton whose name appears on many of the records associated with births and the many deaths in our personal ancestry; William Kimball, a well-known merchant; hotelier Thomas Hayes; George Ramsay who arrived with the Wilkes brothers in the 1840s and later became a Justice of the Peace; Albert Perkins, logger; James Walker, builder; James Parkinson, milliner; Todd Hayes, undertaker; and so many others including those who worked the soil – many of whom were our Sturdevants.

The social, religious and cultural aspects of the community grew too. In the early years, Paul Sturdevant allowed a building on his land, what is now the cemetery, to be used during the day as a school and at other times by the two church groups then in the village – Baptist and Methodist. This land was later sold by Paul's descendants for a minimal sum to be used for a better school and a cemetery. The fairground was a busy spot as well in the west end. Many of our ancestors were also involved in organizing granges and lodges and institutes to meet the social needs of their neighbours.

Throughout this time, the government officials for the country and province made many changes. The citizens of the Wilkesport area, like their counter-parts across the country, involved themselves in the decision-making and care of their community. They took on the roles of clerks, councilors, assessors, wardens, fence viewers and path masters as well as farmers, businessmen and industrialists in their growing community.

Eventually many of the lumber and ditch workers became agriculturalists too as the land was cleared and the lumber business slowed down. Modes of transportation and available routes changed. World War II changed much with the loss of manpower and the introduction of more mechanization.

But the residents of that early era and the later booming community had made their mark. They had seen a place to raise their families and build their businesses to meet the needs of a community and the broader world. They worked for, with and on behalf of one another. They "had the right stuff" as the saying goes.

The obituary for one such individual comes to mind. She wasn't a town leader; she wasn't even mentioned in her husband's obituary. But she was made of what it takes to be a solid citizen and hard worker and a good neighbour.

Obituary from the Wallaceburg News, December 8, 1921 p.5.

Alexsia "Laxy" Anne Sturdevant

"One of the pioneers passed away in the person of Mrs. David RAMSAY, who died on the 14th at her daughter's home, Mrs. Bert HENRY, Wilkesport. She was the second daughter of Mr. H. STURDEVAN [Paul's son Horace], she was married to Mr. James ANDERSON who passed away about 25 years ago, there were five children: Mrs. James WARREN who has passed away; Mrs. William HARKNESS of Plato, Sask.; Mrs. Bert HENRY of Wilkesport; and two sons Horris and George ANDERSON who returned a few months ago from his sister's, the two sons are on the farm of 250 acres. She also leaves one sister in the person of Mrs. George ANDERSON [Lydia Ann] who resides on the old STURDEVAN home, Lot 18, 12th Con., Sombra which has been in the possession of the family for over 100 years. She was a woman of slender build but very active and excelled in horse raising having disposed of some valuable mated teams and had about a dozen at the time of her death, but had given them over to her two sons. She was a member of the Latter-Day-Saint Church of Kimball. A short time previous to her death, she walked to Brigden and drew \$100 and put it on the altar for the erection of a college and took it to Kimball on one of the worst days of the previous snowstorm and went to the prayer meeting that evening and walked home which makes about 20 miles. She was married to the fourth son of the late George RAMSAY, Esq., in the person of David RAMSAY, who died about four years last July."

Yes, the right stuff...for making a mark on an unforgiving land and leaving it the better for it.

If you were fortunate and insightful enough to have purchased a copy of *"Wilkesport: A Passage through Time"* compiled by Shelley Lucier, Curator of the Sombra Museum and Wilkesport Librarian, with numerous articles by various people with roots in the area and historic overviews by local historian Dean Hodgson, I highly recommend you take time to go back and review it in detail. If not, find someone with a copy and beg to borrow. I cannot do justice to the stories our forefathers, and -mothers, have to tell. Their stories deserve to be known.

I leave you with this quote by George Eliot: "What greater thing is there for human souls than to feel that they are joined for life -- to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories."

What greater way to do that, than with this memorial to their memories and their contributions to the birth of this community -- Wilkesport.

Saturday, September 17, 2016

On the occasion of the unveiling of the Wilkesport Commemoration Plaque
Shirley L. Sturdevant, BA, PLCGS