

## HERITAGE CORNER



### Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown: Part II

By G. Wayne Brown

*Editor's note: In the April Beacon, we were introduced to life in the hamlet of Duthil by author G. Wayne Brown, who spent the first 22 years of his life there. Part one of the story ended as we learned that, due to a curious twist of fate, Duthil's main street once featured a store located across from a church and a school situated across from a saloon, which led some witty individual to quip it had "...provision, religion, education, and damnation all in one place!"*

*Enjoy this second installment of Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown.*

#### Downtown Duthil

*(continued from the April issue)*

Let's start with "religion". The Duthil United Church, which was built in 1880, was a simple, white framed edifice located on the northwest corner of the intersection. The front door faced the south and, upon entering, were two very small Sunday school rooms, one on the left and one on the right. Beyond these rooms was the main sanctuary. The church closed in 1961 and stood empty for a few years until a memorial was erected in 1968.

Next we have "provision". I'm sorry to say that the store our family frequented back in the 50's and 60's is a faded, forlorn looking edifice today. It stands on the southeast corner, diagonally across from where the church once stood. I strongly suspect that this same building was the location of the Duthill Post Office (notice it was spelled with two L's at that time) which came into existence in 1880. Then, jumping many years ahead to post-WWII, a man by the name of Harold Johnston became the proprietor. This was perhaps no surprise as his father, George, ran a store in Whitebread before the Johnston family moved up to the Duthil area to farm.

A favourite time to visit "Harold's" was any evening on a hot, summer's day in order to buy frostbites at 5 cents each. There wasn't always a fast turnover of goods and items potentially sat on shelves for long periods of time. I clearly remember buying what used to be my favourite chocolate candy bar, Neilson's Burnt Almond, (the one in the dark blue and gold wrapper) getting ready to take my second bite but then noticing little, white worms poking their heads out of their chocolate tunnels. Yuk!

Harold also took his store on the road by way of an older, red Ford pick-up. He built a wooden canopy

with fold-up sides that completely covered the truck bed and this was filled with a variety of Campbell soups, canned vegetables, and pop. Nothing was refrigerated! The dry goods were usually covered by a layer of dust accumulated by the many miles driven on his grocery routes throughout the week.

Now we come to the final commodity offered at the Duthil intersection - "education". The school's designation was S.S. No. 9 Sombra and was approximately an eighth of a mile south of the main corner on the west side of Duthill Road. The school was probably erected in the late 1800's but I attended in the 1950's. The teacher for the entire eight years of my elementary education was Maxine Johnston and, if you haven't guessed already, she was the store keeper's wife. Mrs. Johnston, originally from Morrisburg, taught in Ruscom, (near Leamington) before coming to S.S. No. 9 Sombra, where she taught for most of her career.

During my eight years at S.S. No. 9, starting in 1952, children from the following families attended the school: Bray, Brouwer, Brown, Buckingham, Daniels, Dykema, Grant, Hart, Hay, Heatherington, McGee, McKnight, McMaster, McRae, Shepley, Sterling, Strangway, and Tulloch. *My apologies to families who also had relatives at the school during that time.*

I recall many noteworthy events during these formative years of education, but two really stand out. Coincidentally, both took place while I was in the junior grades 4, 5, and 6. I'll start with the incident that was most academic in nature.

Each week on Friday, it was customary for each grade to have a spelling dictation test of 20 words. A Grade 5 girl I happened to have a crush on sat at the desk in front of me and we were quite competitive with each other. As a result of this rivalry, we both had a perfect score week after week. However, one of the boys in our class never prepared and usually had a large number of spelling errors after each dictation.

Mrs. Johnston, in order to inspire this lad, decided to raise the stakes a little by declaring that, for the next week's dictation, any misspelled words would necessitate the use of strap. In other words, for each mistake, the strap would come down forcefully on the palm of one's hand.

The results weren't quite what we or our teacher expected. The boy who usually had many errors improved slightly but the girl and I made two mistakes each. It was really embarrassing to have to go up on stage in front of the rest of the school to receive our punishment.

The second event that will always stand out in my mind happened when I was in Grade 6 and it was what you would call educational, but in a different sort of way.

It was about mid-February on a bright but very cold winter school day. We were all hard at work and, at about 10 o'clock in the morning, we heard a faint but persistent call for help coming from the boys' washroom. Mrs. Johnston asked me, along with another boy, to see what the problem was.



Duthil, Scotland in days gone by.

Continued on page 13

## MORE HERITAGE CORNER

### Memory of an unhole-y mess

From page 12

Because the bathroom door had been locked from inside, we had to push hard enough to pop the hook. Once inside we could hardly believe our eyes.

But first, a bit more background would be useful for readers unfamiliar with rural school houses. Both the girls' and boys' washrooms were inside the school just as one entered from outside. A coat rack was on one wall while the other side housed an enclosed toilet. This was no flush toilet; it was only a seat attached above an open septic tank and because there were no heat ducts into the tiny room, the temperature in these washrooms was nearly as cold as it was outside.

Here's what happened. A boy in Grade 5 was given permission to use the washroom and because it was so cold, he wore his coat and rubber boots into the stall area. He also had with him a new pair of mitts his mother had recently knit for him.

Unfortunately, while he was seated, one of the mitts fell into the septic tank. Fearing that his mother would be upset with him for losing his mitt, the boy took off his coat and tried to reach down with his fingers to retrieve it but with no success.

At this point he devised a new plan to reach the mitt. He lowered himself down into the tank and tried to pinch the mitt between his boots. The longer he tried the more tired he became until he finally let go and fell in.

My classmate and I managed to pull him out but with a great deal of difficulty as he was up to his waist in purification. His boots were also chuck full.

I don't know what I had eaten for breakfast that morning but I lost it right there. We steered him outside onto the cement steps for by this time the rest of the school had dismissed for the morning recess. I have to say that I've never seen such an awful sight! From the waist down he was different shades of black, grey, yellow, and brown and his boots squished every time he took a step in the snow. It took me a long time to stop gagging!

Two years later brought me to my graduation year and my exit from S.S. No. 9 Sombra. Those who followed in the grades behind me would soon start attending the new East Sombra Central School where my teacher, Maxine Johnston, would complete her teaching career. My old, one-room school house would eventually be torn down by the mid 1960's.

In the fall of 2019 my wife and I, along with my brother Eldon, tried to find the site of the old school. It was a challenge since the area had been densely overgrown with brush and thorn trees. You would never have guessed that a school sitting in the middle of a large playground had existed in that spot. However, with a little persistence and numerous thorn pricks, we were rewarded by finding two cement front steps and the school's foundation. That was proof that I had indeed spent eight years of my life there!



**This concludes the second installment of Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown. The June installment will introduce you to new characters and guarantee a few more smiles.**

## Sombra Museum seeks information/photos of COVID era

The Sombra Museum is collecting pandemic stories, photos, videos, art work, etc. (family friendly) from St. Clair Township residents to help record and preserve memories of the COVID experience for future generations.; day-to-day memories of life in Sombra, Wilkesport, Port Lambton, Mooretown, Lambton County, Canada, and elsewhere in the world.

**Information we hope you will share includes:**

- \* Shopping conditions and how they changed over time.
- \* Adapting to working at home, and any challenges or creative solutions that were needed.
- \* Financial challenges.
- \* Feelings caused by the outbreak and thoughts about social distancing.
- \* Keeping children/adults occupied during self-isolation.
- \* New or newly rediscovered hobbies or crafts you did
- \* Stories from workers on the front lines/staffing essential services.
- \* Struggles of family/friends infected with the virus.

- \* Stories of everyday heroes, i.e. people helping neighbours/ people accepting inconveniences for the greater good.
- \* How daily life and routines have changed.
- \* For those who lived through the Depression, World War II, etc., are there similarities to those experiences?

- How social media and technology is impacting life in social isolation (using technology for the first time, using it differently).

**Submissions can be sent by email to:**

**[sombramuseum@hotmail.com](mailto:sombramuseum@hotmail.com) with the subject line "COVID-19 History Snapshot".**

Please share this request for community life memories with as many people as possible. We encourage everyone to document this time, if not to share publicly, then for yourself and your family to look back and reflect on in years to come.

Take care and be well.

*~Kailyn Shepley*

## Moore Museum seeks information about history of old Moore Township schools

Moore Museum is still accepting information for a virtual exhibit for the museum's website. It will feature brief histories and photos of the schools in the former Moore Township prior to centralization in 1963. There were 19 school sections in Moore, four of which were union schools - two shared with Sombra Township and two with Sarnia Township. To see the map that indicates where the schools' locations, see the April 2021 Beacon. It can be accessed, along with further information, by going online the St. Clair Township website home page. Click on *The Beacon*, top right of the page.

*~Laurie Mason, curator, Moore Museum*