

## HERITAGE CORNER



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

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 third installment of Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown.*

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#### The Silent Policeman

Downtown Duthil around the mid 1800's had its earliest beginnings at the intersection of the 10th Concession of Sombra (presently the Holt Line) with the Duthill Road (spelled with two Ls). This would put you beside the North Sydenham River and approximately eight miles north of Wallaceburg. Ordinarily, this intersection would not be unlike any other but, if you took a map of Sombra Township and drew a diagonal across it from each corner, you would find that this intersection is almost at the geographic center of the township! To go one even better, at the very center of this Duthil intersection stood a great elm tree which, at maturity, measured four feet in diameter at "stump height" and was about 70 feet high. (See the Duthil tree below.)

The story goes that when the district was being opened up, surveyors placed some marks on it, and when the road right-of-way was being cleared, this marked tree was left. It was then only a few inches through. The tree prospered while the traffic of generations, beginning with horses and buggies, passed to the right and left. Over time, its limb spread became immense and afforded shade for community gatherings. On the other hand, standing so squarely and firmly in the middle of these intersecting roads caused some folk to suggest that it was a traffic hazard.

In 1939, three local people, whose car windshield

was said to have frosted over, crashed into the trunk injuring two of the occupants. Not surprisingly, in 1940, a group of agitators were prepared to cut the tree down with their saws but the strong voice of the tree's champions came rushing to the rescue.

About a decade later the "silent policeman" was mortally injured when it was unfortunately struck by a lightning bolt and the tree began to die. This is when my connection with this great tree begins.

In the early fall of 1952, when I was five years old and sitting along the far-right row of desks which were designated for Grade 1 students, our teacher, Maxine Johnston, had all of her students line up in front of the three windows facing the north. This was an historic occasion for the Duthil community since this famous tree, which had graced the intersection for 100+ years, was about to be felled! The use of a chainsaw was out of the question due to the fact that there must have been about a keg of nails embedded around the tree's circumference. This was the result of about 50 years worth of people tacking posters, notices, bills, and advertisements for the community's benefit. Therefore, locals such as Ken McKnight and Billy McGee used axes to cut off as many roots as they could.

Then Ron Tulloch, operating a Caterpillar D8 bulldozer owned by my uncle, John Fraser, who was an engineer at the Wallaceburg Brass Factory, toppled the tree over with most of the root system attached. He then pulled the tree westward for several rods paralleling the river until he reached a spot where it could be pushed down the riverbank. Since this activity took up a good part of the morning, we students were more than content to watch the proceedings rather than do school work!

To conclude my coverage of the demise of this once majestic tree, I can say it became part of my life during the rest of my elementary school years. I'll explain why it became a treasure trove for me.

Around the perimeter of the lower part of the trunk were four large tinplate sheets, each covered with a diamond-shaped collage of green, amber and blue reflectors. I would periodically climb down the riverbank to the tree to remove as many reflectors as I needed for my bicycle's mud flaps. A couple of years ago, I went to the spot where the tree used to lie but it was gone. It either disintegrated completely over time or it had floated to a new resting place, carried by floodwaters held back behind the Darcy McKeough dam.

#### The Brown Ferry and the Duthil Bridge

Even though my home looked down on the Brown ferry for the first four years of my life I don't remember it at all. What I do know is that my great, great, grandfather was the ferryman for a number of years at this crossing while he also farmed acreage butting up to the Sydenham River at this spot until his death in 1905. I should mention that a ferry along the Duthill Road, actually not too far from the aforementioned elm tree, was also in operation. This was known as the Duthil ferry and Mr. McNeil operated it for a period of time. As a kid going to school, I recall an old, rotted-out scow pulled up along the very steep access road leading down to the river there.

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The stalwart "silent policeman" stands in the middle of the Duthil intersection doing traffic control.

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Up until 1951, the only means of crossing the Sydenham River for those living in the Duthil area was by ferry or by Becher or Wilkesport bridges, a distance of five miles. Therefore, Sombra Township made the decision to build a new bridge with a span of 180 feet and at a cost of \$53,000. As a small boy, I distinctly remember watching from our picture window as bulldozers, graders, and dump trucks prepared the new approach on our west side of the bridge. For me, the construction of the Duthil bridge was very timely since I would be crossing it to attend school, along with my brothers, Eldon and Jim, for the next eight years.

For the sake of simplicity we'll call my two brothers and myself the "little Brown boys", a name we were collectively given as we rode the high school bus together in the years to come. But while all of our ages were still in the single digits we made use of the bridge in a variety of ways. With gravel docks situated at the west end of the 10th Concession, along the St. Clair River dump trucks used our road extensively in moving gravel throughout the township. In order to have a little fun, we Brown boys decided to install a speed bump right at the crown of the hill just west of the bridge in front of our laneway.

We tingled with anticipation as these trucks would hit the bump with a loud bang especially when they were returning empty. Late one afternoon, after heaping a ribbon of stones about 8" high across the road, a



**Brown's ferry carries passenger across a placid Sydenham River.**

*Photo courtesy Wayne Brown*

driver hit this obstruction at full speed, not seeing it until he was upon it. We saw him bounce high in the seat as we were hiding in the ditch not too far away, hidden by a few shrubs. We heard him hit the brakes, back his truck up to the pile of stones and, while he was scattering them with his foot, we heard him say, "If I ever catch you little buggers, you'll know it!"

A couple of years after this, during the late 1950's, the Brown boys thought they would be somewhat entrepreneurial. Maybe we figured that we weren't getting enough allowance money so we dragged enough lumber down to the bridge and built a toll gate. One end of the gate was attached to the railing which allowed it to

swing out of the way after a driver paid the toll. We thought 10 cents was a fair price to collect and we did this for several days until we realized that people were getting annoyed and were no longer wanting to humour us. However, it was certainly one way of getting to know our neighbours and vice-versa!

Another escapade, and I hesitate to divulge this one, occurred when a good buddy of mine, Gerald Waring, and I decided to test our climbing abilities. We'd probably be around 14 or 15 years old at the time, old enough to know better but not smart enough to realize the risk involved. The bridge seemed to be like a magnet drawing us to it and it wasn't long before we scrambled up the south main support beam to the top of the bridge. (I measured this beam recently to find that it's a foot and half wide.) At the highest point at the top of the bridge we then sat on this narrow piece of steel enjoying the view. We actually pulled another trick like this later when we had our wives watching us but that's another story. All of a sudden, we heard somebody yelling at us from the top of the hill. It was my grandfather telling us in no uncertain terms that he had never seen such a pair of fools and that we were to get down off there pronto!

Several years later, after Gerald and I had our own cars, the bridge still became somewhat of a drawing card. We, along with our friends, would line up our cars at one end of the bridge in order to see how much rubber we could burn on the white, cement roadbed. The one who laid the longest strip, hopefully all 180 feet across, was deemed the winner.

By 2014, sixty years after the bridge's official opening on August 2, 1951, exposure to the elements was naturally the greatest reason for deterioration. Yet the steel structure and roadbed had survived these years remarkably well. The cement abutments, especially the one on the west side, gave the most concern. Also, the curbs at the base of the railings were badly deteriorated. A decision had to be made - renew the existing bridge or build a new modern one.

St. Clair Township commissioned a Cultural Heritage Value study in 2014 and an Environmental Assessment study in 2015 to arrive at a decision. Thankfully, both studies encouraged the renovation of the historic structure and the green light for the project to begin. The result would be the preservation of a rare example of a Parker truss designed bridge!

In 2020, while the work was being completed, members of the Brown family spoke with the crew of the chosen contractor, McLean Taylor Construction of St. Mary's. They were very interested when we showed them pictures of the ferry crossing prior to the building of the bridge. Also, of interest, they stated that the steel used in the bridge was still as good as some of the steel produced today. A few months later, on Thursday, November 26, at precisely 3:14 pm, it was only fitting that my buddy had the privilege of being the first to cross over the newly reconditioned Holt Line Bridge.

Way to go, Gerald!



**This concludes the third installment of Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown. The July installment will conclude these tales of Duthil's past.**