

HERITAGE CORNER



Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown: Part IV

By G. Wayne Brown

Editor's note: In the April 2021 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. We soon discovered the hamlet wasn't always the sleepy little dot on the map we expected it to be.

This fourth and final installment of Duthil Days: Memories of My Hometown offers a bittersweet farewell to life less complex and more mysterious - less hectic and more precious.

Cuckoo

I would be remiss if I didn't mention a well known Duthil resident who's nickname was "Cuckoo". He was from Belgium and, when referring to him by his real name, its spelling and pronunciation sounded very much like his nickname.

Cuckoo was a very intelligent man who spoke several languages and had studied to become a priest. However, after serving as a soldier in World War II, he suffered from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Cuckoo lived in poverty in a one-room shack located on the 100-acre farm owned by John Fraser, directly across the road from the Tulloch farm. He had no steady job aside from helping his neighbours from time to time. Cuckoo remained a bachelor all his life.

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One of the "strange things" done in Duthil

I want to include one last tidbit of information about an event that took place quite a few years ago in downtown Duthil, or at least it started out there.

Those who recall the poem *The Cremation of Sam McGee* by Robert Service will remember that the first line reads, "There are strange things done under the midnight sun by the men who toil for gold". We could paraphrase this poem to describe the "...strange things done by young teenage girls who want to drive before they earn a driver's license."

This young girl just happens to be my sister, Bonnie, who, at the time, was 14 or 15 years old. Her dad told her she could drive the old '52 International half-ton truck over to visit her cousin and good friend, Janet Tulloch, on the condition that she drive no further than the short distance over the bridge to the Tulloch driveway.

He also warned her he would check the truck's odometer when she got home. However, after arriving at Duthil, the two girls decided to drive all the way to West Becher to buy a particular kind of candy. Now, how does one resolve the odometer problem? If you're my sister, you drive the 3.5 miles to West Becher backwards so that the odometer reveals nothing!

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The Darcy McKeough Floodway Project

I had moved away from the area and by the time I came back, the Darcy McKeough Dam was built. However, I was kept informed about it due to its close proximity to the Brown farm, where construction of the diversion channel eliminated several acres of our land on north side of Holt Line.

The dam is located immediately north (upstream) of the Holt Line bridge. It was completed in 1984 at a cost in the order of \$20 million with the purpose of providing flood relief to the community of Wallaceburg. It is capable of diverting approximately 37% of the Sydenham River's water through the seven kilometre long channel.

I recall many times before the floodway project was finished when, during spring melt, the high water and accompanying ice flows missed the undergirding of the bridge by only a few feet. The dam also allows an excellent view of the Duthil bridge for those who might be interested, especially in the fall of the year.

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The Duthil Reunion

Late in 1986 a committee was struck to plan a reunion for anyone associated with the Duthil community. I was joined by Ed Hay and David Buckingham (sorry if I missed any other members) to put things in place.

During the summer of 1987 a large, enthusiastic group assembled at the Wilkesport Community Center to renew old friendships and enjoy the nostalgia of Duthil's past.

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Conclusion

There are so many more things I could have touched upon but we'll call the ones in this narrative the highlights. Several resources were used to verify historical events, including the World Wide Web, The London Free Press, and The Sombra Museum Cultural Centre.

Special thanks to Lois Tulloch and her son, Gordon, for the use of their numerous photos and newspaper clippings, as well as their verification of local history. I couldn't have put this article together without them.



Feedback from readers of The Beacon indicate they have enjoyed this candid glimpse of life in one of St. Clair Township's many early hamlet communities. Author G. Wayne Brown invites anyone who has read this series, and has comments or questions about it, to contact him by email at: brownw@sympatico.ca

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