

Brampton Reminiscences

Address to the Brampton Literary & Travel Club
On the Occasion of its 100th anniversary

September 16, 2012

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It is my great honour to join with you in celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Brampton Literary & Travel Club—an association that has met a dozen times a year for over a century to discuss topics that are of a literary or travel nature. It was well over a year ago that Kathleen Armitage first invited me to speak to you today. Since that time, I have learned much about the subjects of your meetings, both currently and historically. Given that much writing is of a *literary* nature and that *travel* can be as short or as long a distance from one's home as one's budget or inclination will allow, it appears that members of the Club may, and have, spoken about nearly any topic dear to them.

Taking broad license to do the same, I have reviewed the *literature* on Brampton in the second decade of the 20th century, including a number of histories of Brampton and back issues of the *Conservator*. In addition, I have *travelled* regularly throughout the four corners area of Brampton including its library. I hope that this positions me well to speak to you about a subject that is both of a *literary* and *travel* nature! Specifically, I wish to speak to you today about the 21 women who formed the Brampton Literary & Travel Club in 1912--or more particularly, about the Brampton in which they then lived.

The Christian names of these women--all but four of whom were married—were not recorded in the association's programmes. I have guessed at some and you may be able to identify others. They are the Mrs. or Miss: Brett, Brundell, Deeves, Fenton, Gordon, Graham, Hall, Kirkwood, Macdonald, McClelland, McFadden, McIntyre, Morton, Peacock, Pringle, Reeves, Russell, Shields, Smith, Young and Wallace. You'll hear some of these names again over the next fifteen minutes or so.

As a starting point, let's put Brampton in some context. In the year 1912, Brampton was a town of about 3,500 people situated within a province of 2.5 million people, in a country of just over seven million. The population of Canada was growing tremendously at that time, particularly in the west but Brampton was contributing to the population boom as well, having grown 24% over the prior 10 years, vastly outstripping the provincial average.

At that time, Brampton was a Conservative town, in a Conservative province, in a Conservative country – and I don't just mean conservative from a moral perspective, although it certainly was that. In 1912, Conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden was in the second year of his nine year term of office, five years away from the

formation of his war time Unionist government. Conservative Sir James Whitney, Ontario's sixth premier, was nearing the end of his nine year tenure. With three elections behind him, he was two years away from his death in office.

Representing Peel in the federal parliament was Brampton's Richard Blain, the hardware store and local hall owner, who beat four successive liberal challengers in an equal number of elections. One of the liberals he beat was my great grandfather, William Lowe. Another was my great-great uncle, William Milner.

Provincially, Peel was represented by Brampton's Sam Charters, the long-time publisher and editor of the *Conservator*. He served for two terms as an "MLA" before sitting 18 years as Peel's representative in parliament. He was challenged for his seat almost each time by my Liberal great grandfather. You can see from where my family gets its determination—although obviously not its political stripe.

The mantle of the Brampton mayoralty was worn at that time by Tommy Duggan, the tireless chief executive of the Dale Estate. Amidst his oversight of the world's largest plantation under glass, and his daily return walks from his beautiful mansion at Frederick and Main to the green houses at Vodden and Main, he somehow found the time to oversee the governance of our town for two years.

It is likely that all five of those men—the politicians at each of these levels –would take credit for the growth in the economy that Brampton was experiencing at that time. By 1912, the Haggert Foundry that fuelled so much industry in Brampton the prior century was long out of business. In its stead, new businesses were forming and older businesses were growing. Brampton was on the cusp of an industrial boom. The renowned Dale Estate employed over 200 people in 1912. The soon to be opened doors of the Hewetson and Williams shoe factories and the Pease Foundry, in addition to the dozens of smaller industrial enterprises, were swelling Brampton's workforce.

One result of this was a shortage of housing. Described as a "famine", the *Conservator* lamented the lack of housing for new families settling in the town. Umbrage was taken with land owners trying to unreasonably profit from the housing shortage by listing vacant land lots for sale at prohibitively high prices of \$500 to \$1000 per lot. Perhaps to answer that call, T. H. Shields, who may have been the spouse of your Mrs. Shields, listed lots for sale on the newly opened Fleming Avenue, running west of Elliott Street, "with desirable building lots on either side".

Brampton's industrial success in the second decade of the 20th century, at a time when rail was king, was fuelled in large part by its proximity to the two lines that intersected Brampton—the East-West Grand Trunk Railway and the North-South branch of the CPR (first known as the Credit Valley Railway). Rail however was not the only utility available to Brampton businesses at that time. By 1912, a number of businesses had

begun to use electricity as their major source of energy. Earlier that year, Brampton tax payers had voted to allow John McMurchy's generating systems (which had originally been created by John Hutton) to be taken over by the provincial Hydro Electric Commission. The \$15,000 sale price was deemed an appropriate amount to pay to avoid "needless competition".

In 1910, a Board of Water Commission had been formed of which my great uncle, Jethro "Doc" Roberts, became its chairman. It had, by 1912, authorized the drilling of its first well intended to supply the town with 5,000,000 gallons of water per day.

While it would be a long time before every home had a telephone, enough Brampton businesses and homes had them in 1912 to support a local switchboard.

In terms of waterways, the Etobicoke continued to meander through the downtown area, gently coursing through its underground caverns and above ground streams—gently that is when it wasn't absolutely flooding. In May 1912, eleven year old Archibald McKechnie, fishing for debris from its swollen depths, extended himself too far from the banks north of the Wellington Street bridge. His lifeless body was found a day later behind the large Robinson house on the east side of Main Street.

The Etobicoke was not the only cause of tragedy in Brampton at that time. The *Conservator* of the day regularly reported horse and buggy accidents—caused by startled bolting horses, as was the case in May 1912 when Stanley Riddler was thrown beneath a heavy wagon. He was pronounced dead of head injuries by Dr. Hall, the husband, I presume, of your Mrs. Hall. Soon to be of ever greater number, were the accidents caused by automobiles. The frequency of the latter led Mayor Duggan in 1912 to issue a plea to all motorists to observe the speed limit while driving through town: 15 miles per hour except when many people were on the street, at which time it was lower.

The provision of free public education to students was always a source of pride to Bramptonians. In 1912, there were 12 public school classrooms in Brampton, all operated under the principal-ship of Mr. T. M. McHugh. At that time, it was necessary for students to pass an exam in order to be admitted to high school. Each scholar under Mr. McHugh's tutelage in 1912 was successful. This was considered somewhat of a record, although it was regular outcome for his students. Those listed as having passed the exams in that year included Mary Deeves, Hugh Graham, Jennie Hall, Douglas Russell and Bert Young (possibly children of your inaugural members). Also listed was Hannah Golding, my great aunt, who I expect taught a good number of you long after she had left high school.

The school board leaders of the time were critical of the physical condition of the local high school, saying that it did not measure up to the day's requirements. The deficiencies included a shortage of rooms, the absence of a gymnasium and the need

for modern appliances and sanitary equipment. It would be five years before the ravages of the fire's flames would require those deficiencies to be addressed.

It must have been Brampton's good school system that led the women of the Brampton Literary and Travel Club to select as their topics of discussion in their inaugural year, chiefly literary subjects. Of the ten topics known at the beginning of the first year, eight fell into that category. The ladies were clearly great fans of Sir Walter Scott (the focus of three discussions). Thackeray (an English novelist) and one of Thackeray's followers, Robert Service, were also discussed. The other authors whose works were discussed in that first year of the club's meetings were the Scottish Robert Luis Stevenson, the British Thomas Ingoldsby and the American Nathaniel Hawthorne. Mrs. Graham's subject was "A Talk by Rose Rambler". In my searches, I was not able to identify any one of the name Rose Rambler although I did find a rose by that name. If her talk was actually *about the* Rose Rambler rather than a talk *by* Rose Rambler, I could conjecture that the discussion was about one of the Dale roses.

Travel agents in Brampton would have been disappointed to know that only one of the subjects of the programme that first year related to travel. Mrs. Fenton, the wife of Brampton High's long standing, well respected principal, W. J. Fenton, spoke on the Panama Canal. It is not known to me whether the Fentons had actually visited the Panama Canal. If they had, it is possible that Mrs. Fenton would have presented her fellow club members with the results the "kodaking" she did while there.

Advertisements in the *Conservator* at the time, make it clear that long before the catch phrase "Kodak moment" came into being, one referred to "Kodaking" the way people later referred to taking a picture or a "Polaroid".

It is possible that the ladies of the society did not have the means at that time to travel to exotic places. Where else could they have gone without incurring great expense? The Grand Trunk Railway presented many opportunities, including an excursion to Niagara Falls. A round trip on a Wednesday, leaving Brampton at 6:30 am and arriving in Niagara Falls at 9:20 am, cost \$1.55 per adult and 80c per child.

Of course the ladies had other things to do in addition to traveling. There were many other organizations calling for their time including the Women's Institute, the Brampton branch of which met in Huttonville in 1912, at the home of Mrs. D. McClure. The topics for discussion were such timeless issues as: "Citizens of the Future", "Democracy in the Home" and "The Art of Being Merry".

The Women's Christian Temperance Union would have claimed the time of a good many society women in 1912 but in Brampton their work was nearly done. By 1914, when Peel County was given an opportunity to vote to "Banish the Bar", Brampton had been without "public houses" and vendors of alcohol for a number of years.

Women would have shopped as well. In the downtown area they would have had their choice of at least three general stores including T.H. Shields & Co (again possibly the husband of your Mrs. Shields), Robinson & Stork and T. Thauburns. If the ladies shopped carefully they could purchase a man's Tooke shirt, "guaranteed to withstand washing", at 75 cents. For groceries, two dozen seedless oranges or four pounds of dates could be purchased for 25 cents. For \$2.75, they could have had a 20 lb pail of lard.

Brampton had many churches in 1912 and in many ways appeared to be a model of Christian tolerance and respect—but women in Brampton, like women throughout Canada, did not yet have the right to vote and Brampton, like many communities around it, continued to celebrate with great gusto William of Orange's Battle of the Boyne. In 1912, 5,000 Orangemen and their families from 50 lodges in the counties of York, Peel and Simcoe gathered in the Woodbridge fair grounds for the annual Orange Day parade.

Fortunately, it seems that most days Bramptonians were not so divided along religious lines. On Dominion Day and on many other Saturdays throughout the spring and summer of 1912, Bramptonians of every religion, age and sex gathered at Rosalie Park where they paid 25 cents to watch the Brampton Excelsiors play lacrosse. That year, both the junior and the senior teams won every game they played. Always a front page story, the *Conservator* set out in minute detail every goal and play of "the boys" under headlines like "Another Big Victory for the Excelsiors" and "Young Torontos are Vanquished" and "Weston went Down 11 to 3". It would be two years before the team headed to Vancouver to challenge the Mann Cup holders.

Finally, a word about the weather. The summer of 1912, like the summer of 2012, was particularly dry, resulting in a very poor raspberry crop. The prospects however were good for apples. I understand the same may not be said of this fall's apple crop.

I hope that over the past 15 minutes I have given you a bit of glimpse into the time of your forbearers—the women who first formed this, the Brampton Literary & Travel Club, an association dedicated to intellectual pursuit and female camaraderie that would endure longer than many of the institutions and activities of the day. In mentioning names and places of years gone by, I hope that I have reminded you of things you once knew and possibly have since forgotten.

Dare we consider what will be said of this club one hundred years from now, if people consider what made Brampton all it is to us in 2012?