

VISITORS CAN FIND THEIR GREY ROOTS

Lorraine Brown

Who were the first Europeans to settle in Grey County, what was life like for them, and how would we evoke their lives at Grey Roots? These were questions in my mind as I began a series of meetings with Wayne Landen and Joan Hyslop at the Grey County Museum around two years ago.

As Joan laid out groups of artifacts from the Museum's collection, the lives of Grey's early settlers began to come into focus. One of our favourite artifacts is an elaborate insect trap with a wooden base and a delicate glass cover. Sweet liquid would be placed in the bottom of the trap; insects could crawl in and be trapped. What had convinced a British settler to pack this delicate glass trap among the few belongings they would take with them to the New World? Perhaps they had heard that "the bugs were bad" in Canada.

Some of Grey's earliest residents were Black Americans, escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. Even before Grey County was officially opened for settlement in the early 1840s, escaped slaves who had ridden the Underground Railroad north settled here. Artemesia Township's first settlers were Black Americans. They followed the North Star to farms along the Durham Road in the townships of Artemesia, Holland and Sullivan. Many made their way to Owen Sound where they found work in the factories, quarries, mills and tanneries. Today, their descendents still live in Grey County.

There were many Germans too, settling in Hanover, Neustadt, and Holstein, but by far the majority of Grey's first residents were from Great Britain: Irish escaping the great potato famine, Scots who had lost their land in the Highland Clearances, and English fleeing the grime and poverty of England's industrial cities.

Ralph Clark, a Durham area teacher, has been studying local history for years. He edited the excellent Bentinck Township history. Recently retired from teaching, Ralph is excited about delving even deeper into the history of the region to which his own ancestors arrived in the mid-1800s. Clark is focusing his research on the first two concessions in all directions from the corner of Highway 6 and County Road 4 (i.e. downtown Durham). His amazing collection of photos of Grey county settlers will appear as a backdrop to an interactive exhibit on genealogy.

This exhibit, called "Do you have Grey Roots", illustrates our effort to integrate the functions of museum and archives. At this computer exhibit, visitors will be invited to type in their surname to find out if they might have Grey Roots. The computer will hold a huge database of names of early Grey County residents compiled by the Bruce and Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society. If your name comes up, you are invited to pursue your roots a little further. Do you know what township your great-grandfather, for example, might have settled in, or do you know their first names? For some visitors, the discovery of their surname in

the database will lead them on to a more thorough search at the archives. All they have to do is walk across the lobby to the archives at Grey Roots.

Grey County was not devoid of people when the Europeans arrived, however. At that time, Ojibway people lived on the east shore of Owen Sound bay and at Colpoy's Bay. Actually, Aboriginal people go back thousands of years in Grey County. Retired Royal Ontario Museum anthropologist Peter Storck, who now lives in Markdale, helped us develop this section of the exhibit. Storck's theories about how Palaeo-Indians might have used gaps in the Niagara Escarpment as important migration and travel routes, led him to an important Palaeo-Indian site near Redwing, on the Escarpment in the Town of the Blue Mountains.

The exhibits on early settlers at Grey Roots are designed to help visitors imagine life in Grey County 150 years ago. With a better understanding of the past, residents and visitors alike will gain a new sense of place and appreciation for this beautiful and interesting part of Ontario.

Grey Roots Museum and Archives is located on Grey Road #18, at Inglis Falls Road (just west of Rockford). For more information visit: www.greyroots.com