

# **D** daughter of “Daddy” Hall Lived on Pleasure Grounds When Wild Animals Roamed

**Mrs. Robert Hornby Recalls When the Sydenham Valley Was a Green Swamp—Theatre of Eventful Drama of Pioneer Life and Development of Present City of Owen Sound—Inherits Keen Memory and Physical Stamina of Father Who Lived to 118 Years**

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## Dorothea Deans

If you belong to a family among whose members the north-east corner of Second Avenue and Eighth Street East is forever the Coulson Corner, you get a swift and amazing picture, when Mrs. Robert Hornby, 843 Nineteenth Street East, better known for many years to Owen Sound citizens as Miss Liz. Hall says casually she remembers when the Coulson Corner stood in bullrushes. She and her brothers and sisters used to gather cattails at its doors.

Mrs. Hornby is a daughter of “Daddy” Hall, colored town crier, whose great years and remarkable physical experience and prowess long after he had passed the century mark, his vivid and picturesque personality, are part of the very life story of Owen Sound, founded 100 years ago on the marshy bank of the Sydenham River.

“Daddy” Hall [...] still is a tradition. His coming to Owen Sound was practically coincident with the founding of the present city. He picked for himself and his family a bit of land on the east hill and spent the rest of his life on it, exerting “squatter’s rights” until the end. He lived to be 118 years old and was wonderfully rejuvenated in his latter days. He gave to the town and the townspeople the best he had in humor and loyalty. With his spare frame, shock of white curls [and] his booming voice against the pealing of his bell he became one of those rare and unforgettable characters who give a town an individualistic flavor and in some peculiar way a sense of unity.

His daughter, the last of many children, at 87 years keeps his tradition in many ways. Hers is the same native shrewdness, the same razor-keen memory, the same light bearing of the years, and then something more subtle, which she shares with the memory of “Daddy” Hall, a kinship with Owen Sound—a knowledge of its homes, its buildings, its people, all its currents of living. Mrs. Hornby also has the arrogance of the pioneer. To

this day it is said she sweeps past the gatekeeper at the Fall Fair exerting the ancient tenure right of one who was born and lived the greater part of her life on the Pleasure Grounds.

### **Knows Town Like a Book**

But, peculiarly, Mrs. Hornby, who as a child (and a tomboy on her own admission) used to climb the hills, roam the valleys and explore the streams, who can describe the introduction of practically every change in the steady growth of village, town and city during over four score years, does not merely belong to the past. She knows the present, where people live today, the factories and firms. She walks and visits constantly among relatives and friends scattered all over the city. She does her own shopping. She is a subscriber to The Daily Sun Times and follows the local news with keen interest.

“I could go through the town blind-folded” was the way she summed it up when her interviewer found it impossible to keep pace with her allusions to places and people.

Yet Mrs. Hornby recalls the old days with a certain amount of nostalgia. The people, for instance, were friendlier, kinder, she claims. There were more greetings exchanged when one strolled through the streets.

If that feeling is founded in fact it has to do, we think, with the days of birth, of struggle together and of building a little community to be called home. For instance there have been times when it seemed to this writer that the members of Owen Sound’s original pioneer families could be identified solely by the hearty interest they took in the colored families who helped settle Owen Sound. Practically all have happy old tales to tell of childhood days and experiences in which the gentle colored folk figured—the redoubtable “Daddy” Hall, the good saint Father Miller and many others. In the same way they hold an abiding sympathy for the Indians of the Newash Reservation who were retired to Cape Croker.

Those deep rooted sentiments of brotherhood, which may not persist in the same sense today, surely had something to do with the common life of a new settlement, where each day was a struggle to draw together the threads which make up a civilization. There were the problems of securing food over hardly broken trails, the problem of trade, the problems of exchange of work and service, the problems of life and death in a strange new land, the problems of building the first schools, the first churches, of keeping alive the best customs of an older and surer world.

Mrs. Hornby, who belonged to that little group of colored folk who came into the valley of the Sydenham stride by stride with the white man, says:

“Folks are more stuck up today.”

She might have said: Owen Sound has forgotten the brotherhood without which men perish in the wilderness. It has forgotten the camaraderie of building with the hands and making your own fun in a place where every single person has youth and adventure.

The former Liz. Hall was born in 1853 on the present Victoria Park or Pleasure Grounds where her father, John Hall, felled the trees, cleared a bit of land and built a log shanty. The little house stood back of the present site of the McArthur Mill. When Mrs. Hornby was a child there were about ten colored families forming a tiny settlement on the hill top.

“What did it look like when you stood on the brow of the hill and looked into the valley?” we asked.

“Just swamp—all swamp” is Mrs. Hornby’s brief description.

“But it must have been beautiful” we persisted, thinking of the virgin trees, the little waterfalls on the hillsides, the curve of the river, the water fowl nestling on its banks.

“Yes, if you could have a picture of it then to put alongside a picture of it now, you would find it strange and—beautiful.”

### **Bears and Catamounts<sup>1</sup> Roamed**

Mrs. Hornby carries those two pictures with her all the time. She etched for us unforgettably in a scant half-hour many variations of the scene. For example, bears and catamounts used to roam the pleasure grounds. No, they never did any damage, but the little colored kids would “holler and hoop and yell” and scare them away. There were deer, too, and sometimes one of the men would shoot one for meat.

“Were times very hard in the early days?” we asked, “was food ever scarce?”

“Land! yes, times were hard enough. There was food alright, but you had to go so far to get it and then it was usually only potatoes and salt for long spells. You had to walk to Durham or Collingwood for anything you wanted.”

But talking the language of pioneer days Mrs. Hornby calls Durham, Rocky Saugeen, and Collingwood is Hen-and-Chickens. Both are older than Owen Sound and when she was a little child it was customary to tramp to either place for necessities.

Mrs. Hornby’s ancestry is linked with early life on this continent in three different ways. Her blood mingles that of the African slaves who were sold into service on the American continent, the proud North American Indians who were Canada’s first citizens and the early British settlers, who eventually commanded this country for themselves and the Crown.

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<sup>1</sup> wildcats

Her legendary father, John Hall, was born at Amherstburg<sup>2</sup>, near Sarnia. His father was a Negro and his mother an Indian squaw. Though born in freedom he did not enjoy his right long. When he was a lad of 13, Americans from over the river bought his mother and her 12 children and removed them to slavery near Cincinnati. There John Hall grew to manhood and cherished dreams of returning to his native Canada and liberty. But in the meantime he married the slave driver's daughter and fought in the war of 1812. When he decided to come to Canada his wife refused to accompany him.

His daughter explains the wife's timidity thus: "It was like coming out of the world to come to Canada in those days."

Mrs. Hornby has a philosophy which may have something to do with her years and then again with her inheritance. When we shook the head and demurred over the sins of the slave traffic, which bartered mother and children, she made only laconic comment: "Sure, it was wrong, but anything could happen in those days."

### **Married Five Times**

John Hall travelled first to Toronto, which was then Muddy York, later to Rocky Saugeen and eventually to Owen Sound. In Toronto where he lived for some years he took a second wife. She died and he married a third time and eventually a fourth and fifth as each wife died. His fifth wife, who accompanied him when he came to Owen Sound to settle, was a young Englishwoman. She had nursed his dying wife and cared for his children and when he was widowed again she was united in marriage to him.

The fifth wife of John Hall and mother of Mrs. Hornby, who was a familiar figure in Owen Sound for many years, was born in Manchester, a month before Queen Victoria. As a child she crossed the Atlantic with her parents and a brother and sister on a sailing boat, "Brutus." Her mother died of cholera on the long voyage and was buried at sea. Arriving in Canada the father was unable to keep his family together and the girls were adopted out to service.

Mrs. Hornby has a store of incidents of her parents' early lives as she heard them related in the home. When her mother's father died, her mother was a mischievous young girl working in a home at Whitby. Unknown to her, her sister had married a colored man down in Muddy York. When the father died the young man was delegated to go to Whitby to inform the other daughter. But the girl herself was swinging on the gate as he approached and before he could deliver his message, she had called out: "I can tell a [n---] fellow by the white of his eye."

He turned on his heel and went back to Toronto and she didn't learn until some years afterwards of the death of her father. It was later while a member of her brother-in-law's

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<sup>2</sup>Amherstburg

and sister's household that she nursed the wife of John Hall, who was living next door. When the wife died she remained to become his wife and care for his children.

It is about 100 years since John Hall and his wife came to Owen Sound. There were no houses then, just a shanty or two put up for the land agent and surveyor. They settled on the present site of Victoria Park and experienced the vicissitudes of pioneer days from a standpoint of which little is known today. Most pioneer tales come from the lips of sons and daughters of hardy Old Country pioneers who came and conquered. Few, if any, reach us from the humble folk who also endured and whose reward was not in material success but in fitting into the bright pattern of life centring in the successful white man.

The home, which John Hall and his wife left in order to pioneer at Sydenham Village, was four miles this side of the Rocky Saugeen or Durham, as it is now called. At first they found it impossible to bring all their belongings with them and so for two months, during which Hall was clearing up a place and building a shack, his wife, her baby bound to her back, walked back and forth to her former home to milk their two cows. Every third day she made this trip. She would bring back with her food stuffs procurable there, but not at Sydenham. Asked if she brought the milk back with her, Mrs. Hornby shook her head: "It would be pretty nearly sour by the time she got back."

Mr. and Mrs. John Hall reared ten children, three sons and seven daughters, in Owen Sound. With the children by his former marriage, this made a total of 21 children of John Hall. Mrs. Hornby is the last survivor. She was born the year the Court House was built. The County of Grey had been formed the year preceding and Sydenham Village had been made the county seat. She was a big girl, she recalls, when the jail was built at the rear of the Court House.

### **Crossed River on Log**

When Liz. Hall was a child a log spanned the Sydenham River where Tenth Street bridge now stands. Many a time she crossed that log. It was just a tree thrown across the stream and hewn down like a board by the Indians. Later the log was replaced by a swing bridge that used to lift to let the sail boats go through. Then there was a wooden bridge, but it kept rotting and breaking up and finally the present substantial concrete structure was erected.

Mrs. Hornby recalls when not only Second Avenue East, which might be called practically the banks of the Sydenham, but also Third Ave. East, was swamp. She and her brothers and sisters used to fish for bass and perch back of the present site of the Salvation Army Citadel. She went to the stone school, now Strathcona, and remembers when the narrow gauge railway was built. She used to help carry dinners to the men and then as they sat on a log with their attention upon their food she would fill all their wheelbarrows with dirt. In the early days of the narrow gauge, she and her sister would link hands across the track and bring the engine to a stop.

"We knew the engineer," she added.

Frequently the engine would go off the track on its own account and then John Hall as town crier and bell ringer would be summoned and he would go to the brow of the hill and peal the alarm into the valley.

“The whole town would come streaming up the hill to put the engine back on the track,” his daughter says.

“Daddy” Hall, as he was known to young and old during the many years he walked the streets of Owen Sound ringing his bell and announcing auction sales and other events of public interest, lived to be 118 years old. Long after he had passed the century mark he got his third set of teeth and though he had been shiny bald for many years he grew new hair and at the time of his death had a luxurious head of snow white curls and a thick beard. People came from all over to see his perfect double row of new white teeth.

“He could eat apples as good as any one,” Mrs. Hornby states.

Second sight was another benediction upon his great years. After being nearly blind for a considerable period, “Daddy” Hall was miraculously restored to perfect eyesight.

“He could come to his door step and look off across the tracks, a distance of a block and a half, if not two, and identify a horse pasturing along the roadway and name its owner.”

In recent years Mrs. Hornby has also been blessed with second sight.

“At one time when I went into a store and saw a death card, I had to ask who had died, now I can read them clearly and never wear glasses. I read The Sun-Times from first to last page every day without glasses.”

### **Forgot to Waken**

“He went to sleep and forgot to wake up,” is the way Mrs. Hornby describes the death of her father at the age of 118 years. He walked down town and back as usual that day, apparently in perfect health, the very day he died. He got home about 4 p.m. His wife was ill at the time and in the evening he told his daughter to get some rest and he would let her know if there were any change.

His daughter woke about midnight and going to her father’s side witnessed his last peaceful breaths. Mrs. Hall who was considerably his junior, recovered, though she did not know for [a] long [time] that her husband had died.

“She thought he was away some place.”

Seven years later she died at the age of 90 years. She had been a general favorite among the early families in Owen Sound and was long known as Granny Hall. She frequently

acted as midwife in the pioneer days. She was an accomplished needlewoman and taught her daughters to sew.

“I can sew as well today by hand as any sewing machine,” states Mrs. Hornby.

John Hall maintained a close interest in his mother’s race and could speak Indian fluently. He tried to teach his children and though they could understand the conversation of the Indians they never learned to speak the language.

“Our tongues were too thick, he said” his daughter recalls.

### **Knows Indian Tales**

The Indians populated the north west shore of the bay when Liz. Hall was a little girl. They had their own church, their own burying ground—everything fixed up nice—she remembers. She relates the story of the Indian braves, who returned from Cape Croker in the darkness of the night after the surrender of Newash to remove their bell from the church, not as an intriguing item of history, but like a bit of neighborhood gossip.

“They muffled the bell with straw so that it didn’t sound as they took it down from the belfry. Nobody missed it for some time,” she added with a chuckle.

The first little church for the colored population was a log building on the present market square, says Mrs. Hornby. It was succeeded by another log building on the site where the present Salvation Army Citadel stands. The next was on the east hill on the corner of Seventh Avenue East and Ninth Street. Then the little brick edifice was built on Second Avenue West between Seventh and Eighth Streets and finally the Westside Methodist Church building was taken over when that congregation built the present handsome and commodious edifice.

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Born in Owen Sound and observer of all that has transpired within the shadow of its cliffs for practically 87 years, Mrs. Hornby is today probably the best authority on its history. That is if you want the little intimate details of life as well as its official facts. Both are hers—all its records stored in the remarkably agile mind she inherited from her father, along with ability to walk great distances and to hear and see in age with the facility of youth. The bell, which John Hall used the many years he was town crier and whose ding dong was probably more familiar to the citizens than the chimes of the city clock are to us today, is still a prized family possession. It is owned by Mrs. Hornby’s niece, Miss Booley.