

# **B**ond of Blood – An Excerpt from *Old Sunnidale* *Revisited*

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I need to explain that I have a serious disease called, “*Historyitis*”. Simply put, *Historyitis* is an incurable and passionate disease. Those who have the affliction are commonly known as, “*History Nuts*”. Being afflicted with this disease can be simultaneously, a blessing and a curse. It is something that only someone who has been infected with the bug can understand and appreciate. Victims of this disease are easily recognized by their mode of dress, by looking in the trunk or, back seat of their vehicles. They are always prepared for any kind of weather, any kind of terrain and any situation that requires a good camera, the eagle eye and analytical mind of the researcher. Heaven help the family members and friends of a person of this ilk. They must learn to tag along, or wait for the dust to settle.

The uniqueness of the inhabitants of Old Sunnidale Township had fascinated me for more years than I could count. These simple, hardworking people moved back and forth between the concessions on a daily basis, generation after generation. They were people that chewed tobacco, smelled of the smoke from their wood stoves, sweat and mothballs. People thought that dressing up meant to wipe the mud and cow manure off their rubber boots. People who risked all, yet never asked more of life than a roof that didn't leak, a good harvest to put food in their children's bellies, and enough wood laid up to keep warm in the winter. Above all, they wanted a piece of land to call their own so they would be beholden to no man. The poor, everyday working class folks and their come day, go day existence appealed to my own need to understand and to achieve acceptance. I came to realize that a something more was needed to help the general public to understand the importance of Old Sunnidale Township in relation to the history of our County and our Province.

The immigrants that infiltrated the thick stands of pine forests of Simcoe County brought with them the hope of a new beginning and a bright future for their families. There was the catalyst that I had been searching for. It was, very simply, the bond of blood between people of different races within this very unique pioneer community. The people who lived and died in the Silver Shoe Settlement of Old Sunnidale Township through the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century and well into the early years of the twentieth century had an enormous impact on the formation of the existence, which their descendants are privileged to experience in today's modern times. That influence has not been confined to the boundaries on a map and can be felt throughout the County and beyond.

As I reviewed the numerous and varied historical documents at my disposal, I realized there was more to the story than what I had read as a child in school. Here was a story that needed to be addressed, learned from, built upon and utilized to bring forth a more intimate perspective of history as we know it. I want to present the story of Old

Sunnidale's Silver Shoe Settlement in such a way that made the people of the past come alive. I want people to close their eyes and envision the old timers as I see them. I want to move them beyond how they perceive the coldness of old grave markers in rural, out of the way cemeteries. I want to bring about true awareness, especially in our young people, that gravestones are not just inanimate objects that were placed in cemeteries many, many years ago. Our children need to be cognizant of the fact that gravestones are memorials to people who were once living, breathing human beings that came in different shapes, sizes, personalities, and ethnic backgrounds; each contributing an important part of themselves in the formation of our great nation.

There are a few things that I have learned during my years of research; one main factor being that the ancestors' essence lives on through the blood that flows in our veins. It has been stated, "*We are the very reason that they existed at all.*"<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when we disrespect the dead, we disrespect ourselves. In today's society, many believe that dead men can tell no tales. I beg to differ on that subject. Truth can never be destroyed. It will always surface, at the most unexpected times, no matter how well it is camouflaged. The dead have a lot to say, if only the living are prepared to open their eyes, ears and their minds. I have a great deal of difficulty believing there are elements in today's advanced society that are still naive enough or, obtuse enough, to believe their own propaganda. They insist on making the same assumptions, again and again, with the same negative results. Yet, they never seem to learn that approaching the problem of racism with a closed mind, just doesn't work anymore. Racism is a learned behavior that is handed down from one generation to the next. Therefore, with proper guidance and education, it can be unlearned if there is willingness and effort, on the part of both the teacher and the student.

What was the best way to present my findings to the public? I decided to start with the basics of problem solving that I had learned in grade school. Once again, I began digging into old records to find the answers. Who were these immigrants? Where did they come from? What made them decide to leave their homelands to come to this particular part of Ontario? How did they cope with the harshness and tragedies of life in such a remote area? And most of all, why was social interaction between the Caucasian settlers and the African Canadian freedom seekers, within Old Sunnidale, so unique, compared to the majority of other settlements in the Province of Ontario?

During my intense research I came to realize that the pioneers of the Silver Shoe had a handle on multiculturalism, long before the idea became politically correct. Newcomers to the area may be surprised to learn that many families have been in the vicinity for several generations, toughing it out and staying on in the Township long after industry had dwindled.<sup>2</sup> This was not news to me for my own family has been in this particular district for seven generations and even longer in other parts of the Province. I learned that reasons for coming into Sunnidale Township were as varied as the fleas on a dog's back. Additionally, because my ethnic background is so diversified, I have been able to look at the situation from a variety of different perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> John Quincy Adams, *Address to the Supreme Court of The United States of America*, in defense of the "Amistad" prisoners, 1839.

<sup>2</sup> After the decline of the lumber industry, residents sought work in surrounding communities – one example, The Collingwood Shipyards.

Prior to, and during the War of 1812, the Americans were presumptuous and drastically wrong in their estimation of the fortitude of our men at arms. The United States had been quite bold in their unfounded assumption that Upper Canada would be a pushover if it came down to a good scrap with Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> Especially so, when they mounted Queenston Heights to face Tecumseh's warriors and the Black soldiers of Runchey's Colored Corps. It was these brave young men of colour, both Black and Aboriginal, who were actually responsible for the British victory and in doing so, struck such fear in the hearts of the invaders that they scurried back to the Niagara River with their tails between their legs, shivering in terror. Needless to say, the outcome of the battle came as a huge surprise to the Americans who, as prisoners of war, spent a good long while cooling their heels at Fort George, thinking about their folly.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, it is quite understandable why Aboriginals and Blacks fought so hard . . . they had the most to lose and fought for their very existence as free men.

For some years, the towering pines of Simcoe County had been chopped down to make huge masts for the British warships. The white man had been moving in and about the area for quite some time before the Government decided to move their representatives into the district to survey the land with a view to dividing it up into lots for settlement purposes. Initially, settlement in the wilds of Simcoe County was designed as a means of protection against another American invasion.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, free Blacks and fugitive slaves had found a safe haven in the dense forests of the County, many years before the white man arrived or, even discovered that he was not the only one walking around the bush on two legs. When it was decided to open the Sunnidale Road, the government sent a surveyor named, Thomas Kelly and a crew of choppers, into the Township in 1832. While reading through, page after page, of documentation regarding this part of our history, it became evident that giving birth to our district was akin to giving birth to a child. There was a lot of pain and gnashing of teeth involved. Despite the growing list of problems, The Sunnidale Road was opened and before 1837 had faded into history, thirty-six white men and their families had made their homes in the Township. Stretching from south of what is now, the Village of Brentwood, through to the Wasaga dunes, north - east of present day Highway 124. Many of the original families remain in the district to this day, deeply rooted in the soil of Old Sunnidale and Nottawasaga Townships.

The years between 1832 and 1860 saw the arrival of a steady stream of dream weavers and freedom seekers into the remote pine forests of Simcoe County. It appears that several factors precipitated this migration; namely, the Reform Riots in Great Britain, the emancipation from slavery in the British colonies and, of course, the American Revolution and the *Fugitive Slave Law* of 1850.<sup>6</sup> It is worthy of note, that Britain had abolished the Atlantic Slave Trade in 1807 and abolished the importation of Slaves into Upper Canada, in 1833. The *Fugitive Slave Law* precipitated the greatest influx of self-

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Clay, to the United States Senate, February 22, 1810. "*The conquest of Canada is in our power. I trust I shall not be deemed presumptive when I state that the militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet.*"

<sup>4</sup> Burton, Pierre, *The Invasion of Canada, 1812-1813* (Toronto: Random House, 1980) 238-43, 246-50.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Frederick Hunter, *The History of Simcoe County* (Barrie: Simcoe County Council, 1909).

<sup>6</sup> John L. Thomas, Ed., *Slavery Attacked: The Abolitionist Crusade* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965).

emancipated Black freedom seekers<sup>7</sup>. Upwards of 40,000 formerly enslaved people flooded across the border, to safety under the gaze of the British Lion.

With respect to the government land grants, Sunnidale and Nottawasaga did not feel the impact of the Family Compact and free land grants to United Empire Loyalists and the militia, as did earlier townships in Upper Canada. For the most part, settlers in the area purchased their own land, either outright or on tick. If they had served in the militia, a settler was entitled to an additional 100 acres of land. However, upon receipt of their location tickets they were required to meet certain settlement duties before they were deemed eligible to receive their land patent. These duties involved proving, by certification, that a proper house had been erected on at least five acres of cleared and fenced land. Yet the settlers in Simcoe County felt, as citizens, they could not disregard the burning issues that came about because of variation of land prices and increases due to grasping land speculators. Also, many of the original settlers in the County had other family members wishing to emigrate from the British Isles and other parts of Europe, or that were still enslaved under the “Peculiar Institution” within the United States. This proved to be a very unsatisfactory arrangement as it was necessary for them to present themselves in York (now Toronto) before they could begin the process of settlement in Upper Canada. This held true regardless of whether the prospective settler was white or Black. As a result, local boards were set up in the province and, later, in the old country. Then, more “industrious” politicians discovered how to gain power when they came up with the brilliant idea to exchange land grants for votes. Meanwhile, an addition problem developed in the adjacent Townships of Sunnidale and Nottawasaga. Discontent arose among the owners of lumber companies revolving around the taxes levied on wild lands. Nevertheless, as the problems of government came and went, as did the Rebellion of 1837, the settlers in Simcoe County found ingenious and unique ways to beat the system.<sup>8</sup>

Of course racism was not totally unheard of, but for the most part, the acrimonious and unique geographical location of the settlement forced the settlers of different ethnic backgrounds to work out a symbiotic relationship in order to survive. Within one generation, intermarriage and interracial schools and burials soon became a normal occurrence, in a time when these practices were unheard of, being illegal and totally unacceptable in Canadian society.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Schlesinger & Fox, “*A History of American Life-The Irrepressible Conflict*,” Vol. VII.

<sup>8</sup> “*History of Simcoe County*,” Archives of Ontario.

<sup>9</sup> “*Ontario Death Registry*” 1869 – 1934,” *Ontario Marriage Registry*”

”*Ontario Census Records*” - Sunnidale & Nottawasaga Twps. 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901.