

Black Pioneers: Artefacts in the Grey County Gallery

Items of interest from Grey Roots Museum Collection

Joan Hyslop

Wm. Henry Harrison's Skinning Knife (2008.055.002)



William Henry Harrison

returned to you if mislaid or stolen.

William Henry Harrison and his brother, Sam Harrison, were listed as young butchers of African descent in Owen Sound, Ontario in the 1881 census (Wm. H. was 15, and Sam

was 17). In a newspaper article, Sam mentioned that they had apprenticed in this trade with an Owen Sound butcher by the name of William Wootten. William Henry Harrison later became a skilled quarryman. He and his wife (the former Martha Douglas) and their family resided at what is now 1769 8th Ave. East. Mr. Harrison passed away in April of 1951. He had passed this knife down to his son, Sam Harrison, who in turn, passed it down to his son, the donor, Mr. Ron Harrison of Orillia, Ontario.



Store Ledger from John Frost's Store



John Frost

In the 1845-1846 time period, John Frost, his wife and two sons arrived in the new village of Sydenham. They had previously lived at Bytown (now Ottawa). Mr. Frost brought along merchandise in order to open a general store. In the June 27, 1862 edition of *The Owen Sound Times* (p. 3) there was an advertisement for a "new" drygoods and grocery store, called "J. Frost & Sons". The 1863 *Poetical Directory of Owen Sound* (p. 17) mentions J. Frost & Sons as a general store near the Market Square, and lists some of the items they sold. In the 1990s I was told that there was a good-sized collection of Frost store ledgers at "Sheldon Place", the former residence of the Frost family. However, I have only seen one example which was luckily donated to the County of Grey-Owen Sound Museum and that is now at the Grey County Archives. It has entries from the late 1860s. What I found very interesting about it was that the clerk (presumably Mr. Frost) recorded "Col'd" [Coloured] behind the names of some of his customers. Some of the Black individuals/families who purchased items from his store were: William Price (1868) p. 148, Benjamin Adah (p. 3), Caleb Eady (1868, p. 149) Philip Roy (1869, p. 260), William Henderson (1869, p. 284), William Porter (p. 480), and Eli Smoot (1866, p. 551).

Unfortunately, the ledger only records the accounting and doesn't list exactly what the purchases involved merchandise-wise. Melba Croft mentioned in one of her books or articles that a customer, Benjamin Adah (Adey) used to dance and entertain people at the market square area to earn coppers. In the 1871 census, Benjamin "Eddy", age 56, is listed as a Labourer. A Caleb Eddy household is listed as well. William Price, age 44, is listed in 1871 as United States-born, and a Teamster. Phillip Roy (age 25 in 1871) was born in the United States and a Labourer. Eli Smoot is not listed in the 1871 census, but there is a Betsy (Elizabeth) Smoot, age 39, as the head of a household and her children are listed. John Frost passed away in 1869, and his business interests were taken over by his sons. One of them, John W. Frost, would later write *Broken Shackles*, a book based on the life history of a former slave, James Henson.

J. FROST & SONS keeps General Store, a good and great assortment, near Market square;

Our wholesale bill their store does fill,
Dry goods and groceries all;
Clothes ready made, boots, shoes to trade,
Keeps Crockery great and small; ,
Goods, fancy class, oils, nails and glass
Molasses, pork and cheese,
Shelf hardware, and soap in bar,
Tobacco, rice and Teas.

1863 Poetical Directory of Owen Sound

Seafarers International Union Card

Elizabeth Anne Harrison was born at Owen Sound, Ontario, on July 14, 1895. "Eliza" was one of the daughters of William Henry & Martha Harrison. She eventually worked "on the boats" on the Great Lakes, as did other members of her family. This Seafarers' International Union card was issued to her in 1955. At that time, she was Mrs. Elizabeth McClure, and her residence was at 835 18th St. E., Owen Sound. She did stewardess work aboard different vessels, so her job title was that of "Steward". It is interesting that her date of birth is erroneously typed on the back of the card as July 14, 1927. We wonder if perhaps 1927 was actually the year when she began working on the boats? Eliza McClure later married James Edward Burns. She died at the age of 103. This S.I.U. membership card was donated to the Grey Roots archival collection by her son, Alonzo McClure.



The Seafarers' International Union (S.I.U.) was founded in the United States on October 14, 1938, during the tough times of the Great Depression, as a maritime labour organization. Robert Laxer's book, *Canada's Unions*, mentions that prior to 1936, the year that the Canadian Seamen's Union (C.S.U.) was formed, Canadian mariners working on the Great Lakes or St. Lawrence River had no union at all. There were problems of long hours of work, low pay, poor ventilation in the ships, and a great need for better safety inspections for the new union to work towards. However, in 1949, the 9,000 member C.S.U. was displaced by the S.I.U. By June, 1961, all but one of the Canadian shipping companies had signed with the S.I.U. Laxer's book mentions how the S.I.U. was thought to be an intimidating organization, and it sounds like some Canadian mariners resented having an American union.¹

¹ Laxer, Robert et. al. *Canada's Unions*. James Lorimer & Co., 1976, pp. 98, 101.