

# **F**ormer Slave's Daughter, **Elizabeth (Hall) Hornby, 96, Born in Owen Sound**

**Recalls Days of American Civil War and Fenian Raids – Still Alert and Active and Reads Without Glasses**

This article is as it appeared in the *Owen Sound Daily Sun Times*, April 2, 1949. Republished with kind permission of the *Sun Times*.

## **Author Unknown**

Among Owen Sound's senior citizens is a dark, birdlike, quick-witted little woman in whose veins flows the blood of two great nations of warriors - the Mohawk Indians of North America and the Zulus of South Africa. Her name is Mrs. Robert Hornby, but she was born Elizabeth Hall in a tiny cabin which sat in a clearing laboriously hewed from the surrounding bush. The site of the clearing is now Owen Sound's Victoria Park, and the year of Elizabeth Hall's birth was 1853.

This was only a year after Grey County had been created, and the new community of Sydenham Village made its capital. It was to be three years before this village on the outskirts of which Elizabeth Hall was born, was to be incorporated as a town by the special act of Parliament and renamed Owen Sound.

In the more than 96 years of her life Mrs. Hornby has been away from Owen Sound only once - and that occasion was a four-day visit to Killarney "thirty or forty" years ago.

Her father, John Hall, she told a Sun-Times interviewer, was a runaway slave from Kentucky. The circumstances of the enslavement were unusual, for he was of Canadian birth, having been born near what is now Amherstburg, a few miles south of Windsor. His father was a full-blooded Mohawk Indian and his mother had been brought to North America in the hull of a "blackbirder's" slave ship while only a girl.<sup>1</sup>

### **Father A Slave**

While he was still a child and at a time away when his Indian father was away on a hunting expedition, a boatload of South American planters descended upon the settlement and carried away every person of colored blood they could discover. Among those were

---

<sup>1</sup> "Blackbirding" is a term for the "recruitment" of plantation workers by force, trickery or kidnapping. Its etymology comes from derogatory slang for Australian Aboriginal peoples who were also taken into slavery to work on sugar plantations in Australia and Fiji. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackbirding>

John Hall, his mother (who had herself escaped from slavery in the Southern United States), and his eleven young brothers and sisters. It seems incredible that such a mass kidnapping could take place on Canadian soil without Canadian intervention but it must be considered that this raid took place probably some time in the 1820s, and at that time slavery was still technically legal in Canada. It was not abolished until as late as 1830<sup>2</sup> here, and until 1838 in some other British Colonies.

At any rate, the entire family was carried off to Kentucky where, along with other Amherstburg captives, they were sold to various cotton-planters and farmers throughout the state at a slave auction. No attempts were made to keep family groups intact - the twelve children, some were toddlers, were sold on the block singly or in pairs. John Hall never saw his mother or any of his brothers or sisters again.

### **Escape From Slavery**

His purchaser was a planter named Catlett, and Mrs. Hornby recalls that her father often told her and her brothers and sisters (there were 10 children) about his experiences as a slave on Catlett's plantation. As a slave-owner he was a reasonably humane man – a far cry from brutes of the Simon Legree type, but not as idealistic as slaveholders like the gentle and paternalistic St Clair of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." But at any rate, Catlett did not whip his slaves, although he worked them incessantly and fed them poorly. Somewhere in John Hall's memories of his childhood in Amherstburg there must have been a nostalgic recollection of Canada, and as soon as he reached manhood he escaped from Catlett. Shortly before he escaped however, he had been married to a young slave girl from an adjoining plantation.

With his bride, he struck northward, keeping to back-country trails, sleeping in fields and barns by night and avoiding all towns where citizens were eager to capture runaway slaves for a reward. As a lusty young field hand was worth as much as \$1,000 and a young Negro woman was worth even more for slave markets in those days, the risk was considerable. However, luck was with them. The young couple crossed the Ohio River near the exact point where Eliza was reputed to have crossed the ice a jump ahead of the bloodhounds in "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and reached the comparative safety of Ohio State. Here slavery was illegal, but John Hall felt it was too close to Kentucky for his peace of mind. The couple continued travelling until they crossed the Canadian border near John Hall's old home at Amherstburg. Mrs. Hornby does not recall whether her parents' journey to Canada was aided by the famous "Underground Railway" for escaping slaves or not.

### **Settles In Owen Sound**

Her father and mother first went to Toronto in search for employment and remained there for a short time. They then journeyed to a point near Durham where they spent several

---

<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: actually 1834.

years before coming to Owen Sound. The privations of slavery and escape did not apparently have any adverse effect on John Hall, for he lived to be well over 100 years old. Well-known in Owen Sound, he will be remembered by old-timers as the “town crier.” His Kentucky bride, however, died comparatively early in life, and was succeeded in the course of time by a series of four more wives. Elizabeth Hornby was a child of his last wife. Her memories of her early days in Owen Sound are clear-cut and colourful and her reminiscences are studded with the names of many prominent old-time citizens. Life was not easy for the ten children of the Hall family, and she says that she had only four months of formal schooling before going out to work. However, in that short time she learned enough of the rudiments of reading to teach herself the rest of the way.

During the interviewer’s visit, the day’s Sun-Times (which she has taken for 40 years) was delivered by a small boy, and she had no difficulty in reading the fine print of a cut-line below a photograph – without glasses!

Not long ago, she told the reporter, she had occasion to accompany a niece of hers to a local oculist. As is her custom, she wore sun glasses when outside, but when she was in the office she took them off and began to read a magazine. “You know, that eye doctor, he just laughed and laughed,” she chuckled. “He said I was the first lady over ninety he ever saw take off her glasses to read.” But she reads a lot these days – the Bible sometimes, (she is a Baptist), magazines occasionally, and the paper everyday. She also knits and sews in her spare time, and makes most of her own clothes.

Up until a few years ago she kept up a thriving kitchen garden at her little home on Nineteenth Street near Ninth Avenue East, and claims proudly that she used to grow potatoes “so big that four of them weighed eight pounds.”

### **Remembers Civil War**

Mrs. Hornby’s memories of historical events are surprising for one of her advanced years. Her interest in the American Civil War (which she calls the War Between the States) is keen, because some of its bloodiest battles were fought in the district where her father was a slave. He followed reports of the war as they were received and told his children about its progress. “I can remember when Abraham Lincoln was shot in the theatre,” she said sadly, “It happened in April the year I was twelve years old, but we didn’t hear about it up here until late in the summer. I remember it made my father very sad. He always said President Lincoln was one of God’s good men.”

She has an anecdote about Owen Sound during the excitement of the Fenian Raids a year later. Apparently, a group of citizens banded together here to guard the community against a Fenian invasion by water. They established a camp at Squaw Point on one particular night when rumors were rife that an attack was imminent. After several hours of fruitless waiting, the militia got impatient, lit a huge bonfire on the shore and began to bolster up their warlike enthusiasm by absorbing frequent and sizable draughts of Leith whiskey. This worked fine for a while, but later the gallant defenders of Owen Sound all fell asleep. In the meantime, the flames of the bonfire had attracted considerable attention

from town, and a crowd of townsmen visited the scene. Sizing up the situation, some practical jokers among them gathered up the militia's stacked rifles and took them away. "That was sure a fine bunch of soldiers." Mrs. Hornby concluded scornfully, "letting a bunch of civilians steal their guns. Those Fenians could have taken the whole town and they wouldn't have known a thing about it."

The Boer War and the siege of Mafeking are fresh in her memory. "I was a middle-aged married woman then," she pointed out. Her recollections of World War I are sad. "When I think of all the fine boys from the homes where I worked that went away so young and eager, and then never came back. I could just cry," she said with true feeling.

### **Life of Hard Work**

Although she was married twice, first to Joseph Carr and after his death to Robert Hornsby, who died two years ago. Mrs. Hornby has worked all her life as a domestic helper. Her work took her into a great number of Owen Sound homes, and there is little about the ins and outs of the community life in its earlier days with which she is unfamiliar. Despite hard work from childhood to old age, she feels that life in Owen Sound has been reasonably good to her. She had no children of her own, but has always taken a keen interest in her nephews and nieces and their families.

Her formula for good health and longevity is simple – "Just keep busy." And we can't think of anyone who is a much better example of the success of that formula than Mrs. Hornby. She might have added that it helps to come from a long-lived family. Her father, as has been mentioned, lived well past the century mark and a half-sister, Maria, who she says was born in 1837, died in Markdale only a few years ago.