

A Colored and Colourful Pioneer of Grey



CHRISTOPHER JAMES JOHNSON¹ was his real name but he very seldom got more than “Chris,” if the speaker were polite, and more frequently he was called “Copperhead,” “Christopher Corncake” or any of a dozen inelegant names. He earned a living doing odd jobs around Owen Sound, sawing wood, splitting wood, white washing or manicuring the back yards. He was possessed of a keen humor and nimble tongue, was always ready with a response courteous or otherwise as the occasion demanded and in spite of the amount of teasing that he was subjected to, had the happy faculty of keeping out of trouble. The gift of a coin made his righteous auger (sic) melt, no matter how badly he had been provoked. He would stand for hours and permit boys and even elders throw copper coins at him. If he caught them in his mouth they were his, if he missed catching them, the thrower had another try. He had a contagious chuckling laugh when pleased and a flow of unprintable epithets when roused. To the youth of the town, who teased him unmercifully he would recite a verse which he must have repeated thousands of times:

¹ Christopher James Johnson died September 3, 1900 in Owen Sound. A transcription of his obituary can be found on pages 31-32 in Vol. 9 of the *Northern Terminus Journal*. Johnson’s death registration states that he was born 1816 in the United States. His occupation is listed as gentleman.

“There are schools for education,
There are churches for salvation,
But the children are going to damnation
And the parents are following along.”

Chris had remarkable memory and could quote scripture for almost any occasion. He was never quarrelsome in spite of being made the butt of innumerable jokes, and was of a generally happy disposition. He had not an enemy, except himself, and his falls from grace were comparatively infrequent. He was probably the most photographed person in the county and would always pose, at a price, for anyone with a camera. There were many worse citizens in Owen Sound than this man often called in the press “Christopher James Hannibal Johnson,” joker, orator, and whitewasher extraordinary.

Source: *Owen Sound Daily Sun-Times*, June 14, 1934