

John W. Birdsall Looks Back To Pioneer Days

(written about 1938, copied from old newspaper clipping)

Some 70 years ago a lad lay threshing through a sleepless night on his straw tick in a forest slashing in South Middleton, says A. S. Paragus in The St. Thomas Times-Journal.

Young John Birdsall (now retired farmer of Tillsonburg, 88 years old) had expected a rough life when he left settled Canboro (East Haldimand) and struck out with the first oxen he had ever handled - only horses in Canboro - to "batch" it on the Norfolk frontier, where barefooted youths went "double" horseback with sunbonneted maidens to "meetings", which the former whistled through on the fence outside; where girls performed brazenly at the raw country dances forbidden in cultured Quaker-Methodist-protected Canboro.

John had been prepared for crudity, horsesickness, hardship. But not for whippoorwills! They perched in his half-naked rafters, and abetted by hoot owls, continued a mournful dirge hour after hour through velvety black night. Why couldn't birds be normal and perform during the day? Why should they want to wail like lost souls at a wake? And on his roof? Work wasn't anything, if a fellow could only sleep!

There was a limit. Come morning, he'd write home. If they didn't come for him, he'd walk home, every step of the way.

And that soft, back-and-forth-something in the cellar-hole around 4 am. There was a story of the pedlar the local hotel-keeper had killed for his wares. Folks said he walked by the creek o' nights looking for the head not buried with him. All nonsense! Yet young John, bounding from his bed, felt his hair raise at an evanescent whiteness disappearing in the

trees. Next day the neighbours told him of a certain white dog. Still ?

Andrew Birdsall came for his boy. The new farm oxen were let. John, in the old Birdsall democrat, departed with a strong sense of relief, mingled with humiliation.

What would Mother and the girls think? Ham would have the laugh on him. Sam would put in his word when he came for holidays. The neighbors would have their say.

The home folks all had sacrificed for years to save money to buy that new land for his younger brother, Hamilton, and himself. A shilling here, a penny there, hoarded - sometimes buried - in the wooden money-pail. Two thousand, two hundred dollars (\$11 an acre) had been paid in cash to Duncan Campbell, the lumber king of Simcoe.

It was lighter loam than the rich, fifty-bushel-of -wheat-an-acre clay of Canboro. But already in the semi-cleared stage. There was a funny story about the land. Perkins, the Middleton hotelkeeper who had taken it up from the Crown, had traded it to Campbell one day for three barrels of whisky! A barrel to a hundred acres!

Campbell's men had gone in, built two 60-foot cabins, one the teams, one for the men, cleared out the heavy timber. The man to whom the property then passed defaulted payment. Sam (the future Dr. Sam Birdsall) who was teaching near Delhi, had sent word with the father of James Fisher, of Burlington, that the lots were for sale. And were a bargain. American money, with which the country was flooded, was usually discounted 80 percent in a deal. But this man Campbell would take it at par. The buying value of the savings in the wooden pail leaped ahead.

Andrew Birdsall had at once hurried west, secured 200 acres of the land for his boys. Each year someone, last year it was John himself, had gone up, sown and harvested the eight cleared acres—until John should be old enough to take over. And here he had flunked! Routed by a bunch of doggone night-birds! He wished he didn't have to go home after all. And he didn't.

At Cayuga they ran into a crew of 13 roystering men, overflowing an ancient market wagon. One of them, a former hired man, came over to the Birdsalls. He guffawed when he learned of John's retreat. "But say, a boy's just what we want! We're surveying for the new railroad (Airline). Drive a stake for every 100 yards we chain off. Need a boy to carry the sticks."

Young John hopped from the democrat to the wagon. Twenty-eight days he spent with the always half-drunk outfit as they chained, staked and rollicked their course to Welland. One entire day was wasted hoaxing an indignant woman (who was off the line) into believing that they were going to chain right through her cabin. Another, when, the leader having purposely withheld his papers, an irate farmer arrested the whole 13 for tramping his wheat. But who cared. Working or pranking, each man got \$2 a day.

Carefully John saved his earnings. Luckily, being a boy, he was expected to take lemonade at the bars. Still he must stand the treats in his turn. It was during this process that his purse vanished in Welland. "Give that boy his wallet", roared a big Irishman in the gang to the bartender, "afore I get over that bar. Or you're a dead man !" The return of the purse was instantaneous. But young John had learned for life never to lay down a purse in public.

Canboro was a fine place to which to come homing. A family township. Everybody related. Every latch-string out. Rich stores in cellar and pantry. And all the cooks good.

There was Grandfather Scott's, a preacher with a circuit from Caistor to Niagara. And Grand father Samuel Birdsall's large house, which stands to this day, with its fire-places and its 20-foot kitchen, made for his family of 22 children. One day when they were all there eating, the floor gave way and the sizeable family with the hired help, numbering 28, descended to the cellar.

It took traveling shoe and dressmakers six weeks each, fall and spring, to outfit Grandfather's family. It was as a seamstress, indeed, that John's mother, Elizabeth Scott, had first met Andrew Birdsall.

Grandfather received 5,200 acres by Great-Uncle Canby's will. He gave 600 apiece to the 11 boys and one girl of his first wife (who was one of the pioneer Mellicks). To the two children by his second wife, Mrs. Parks, also went 600 acres each. And to the step-sons belonging to Mrs. Parks' first family of eight, he willed 100 acres apiece.

The arithmetic here doesn't work out ! unless the first sentence was meant to say "15200 acres" Very odd, but facts sometimes get twisted in the telling over several generations. However, later, there's some note to the effect that the Canby family once owned the entire Township of Canborough and that would have beene somewhere around 15000 acres.

Grandfather Birdsall was a man of some parts -- not only Uncle Canby's secretary and bookkeeper, but a merchant, the operator of Canboro's first mill, and a land-owner in his own right. As a small boy after the death of his father, he had been sent back from Niagara to the maternal home in Buck's County, Penn., where his uncle, Thomas Canby, then a bachelor, semi-adopted him and undertook his education.

The latter proved of a doubtful character, including stolen reading of Tom Paine and gambling. But the boy's Quaker background won the day eventually.

Grandfather settled in Canboro a safe sound religious citizen. The entire township of Canboro had been purchased by the ancestor of Benjamin Canby from the Six Nation Indians for a \$100,000 note, running for 100 years. Outside of sums of interest, this note was never really paid, it being claimed there was none at the close of the time period to receive the money. And nothing was registered against the land.

It was not until John Birdsall was 28 that he took over in earnest his farm in Middleton, now prospering fast. And, you never know when you'll run across kin - a cattlebuyer named Davis, of Aylmer, came through one day, and who should it transpire he had married but a daughter of Grandfather Birdsall's older brother Jacob.

The first time John visited the Aylmer cousins, Dr. McLay, Sr., and a Davis daughter, just married, were home for the day. New relatives made John feel quite at home.

And then came Miss Annie Powers, near the Airline station at Tillsonburg. Her father "walked" the wooden railway bridge.

The Powers' hailed from Bedford, England (via St. Thomas, Ont.). The pretty Annie had been born and brought up a Moravian, a stricter sect, if that could be, than the Quakers. No blacking of your shoes of a Sunday among Annie's people. Her Grandfather Robb (Robe they called it) walked four miles to church with horses left in the stable. It was *wrong* to work your beasts on the Sabbath.

On April 12, 1883, John Birdsall and Annie Powers were united in marriage by the Rev. J. A. Ferguson of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mrs. Birdsall, although emigrating at seven, has various memories of her Moravian childhood: of going with her mother to the Easter morning service in the cemetery; of the "mission fire" into which all Moravian children seem to be born. When a missionary on the foreign field grew old enough to marry and sent home for a wife, one was chosen, by lot, from the "Sisters' House." No, there was nothing compulsory about it. The Sister could refuse. And sometimes did.

The Powers came over on the Midway, one of the early steam-boats, on the only safe passage this doomed boat ever made. Even then they stopped in mid-ocean to tinker the engine. Which is a far cry from the blue ribboned Queen Mary.

Mr. and Mrs. Birdsall have three children: Charles Birdsall on the old Middleton homestead, Mrs. Lee Garnham, Guysboro, and Mrs. Matt Dean, Tillsonburg. There are five grandchildren. Dalton Dean, who obtained a Rhodes scholarship, is a grandson, and there are two great-grandchildren.