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## THE STREETS OF COLLINGWOOD— FROM DUST AND MUD TO ASPHALT

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The road surfaces we take for granted today are a far cry from Collingwood’s earliest days in the mid- 1800’s. Originally, the land in the downtown area was described as a dismal and impenetrable cedar swamp and we have the eye witness account of those early days from John Nettleton:

*“In answer to an advertisement in a Toronto paper for a cutter and tailor wanted in Collingwood, by Mr. Quinn, I wrote that gentleman and received the appointment. Previous to this, I had attended the auction rooms of Wakefield and Coutts in Toronto, where they were selling Collingwood lots every evening. They had a large map of the town, which was very attractive, and they described the town as the “Buffalo”*

*of Canada. I thought that was just the place for me, and I arrived here on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 1857, on the night train...My employer took me round the next morning, and introduced me to many of the people. I was very much disappointed at the appearance of the town, and could see no traces of the fine streets that were shown on the map. The only streets cleared were Huron and Front Streets. Hurontario Street was dotted with stumps, and the houses seemed to be located in a swamp, and though it was the dry season of the year, I could see traces where water had run across the streets. The houses were all built on cedar posts, and raised a little above the ground, with a small platform in front of the door. There were no sidewalks and you had to take the road and around the stumps.”*

The 1887 *Jubilee History of the Town of Collingwood*, also speaking of those early days, states that:

*“The Railroad arrived in Collingwood in the Fall of 1854 [officially opened on Monday, January 1, 1855 when the first revenue train arrived from Toronto], and certainly at that time there could not have been a more unpromising site for a town. The whole place was one impenetrable mass of cedar swamp with no roads into or out of it. The surrounding country was very sparsely settled, and in the now wealthy Township of Nottawasaga there were not half a dozen teams of horses. Indeed, in those days, Collingwood had no existence except on paper and in the prophetic visions of the determined pioneers who came to displace the swamp and forest. Primeval and somewhat ugly Nature held undisputed sway; the Indian was in the majority, and the permanent and floating population was outnumbered by wild animals and snakes.”*

The decision by the movers and shakers of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Union Railway to make this site the terminus of their portage railway between Toronto and the upper Great Lakes changed everything. The trees on the town site literally stood in the way of progress. After sufficient trees were cleared away to create streets and building lots (but not the ones John Nettleton read about in Toronto), there was still the problem of the stumps which had to be burned and/or hauled out by horses, stump-grinding machines being a future invention. Now at least the residents had dirt roads and that created a second problem for the hardy pioneers: at different times of the year, the dirt roads became a sea of mud and ruts or, alternately, were choked with swirling dust. Immense amounts of mud and dust must have found their way into the homes of that era making housekeeping a real challenge for the ladies, and a real bonanza for people like the Telfer Brothers who, in addition to their wholesale grocery and biscuit-making business, manufactured brooms, brushes and whisks. Those who made rug beaters also had a ready market for their product because the only way to get dirt out of rugs was to take them outside in good weather, hang them on a line, and beat them with a sturdy tool of wood or metal. The world would have to wait until 1876 when Melville R. Bissell invented and patented his “carpet sweeper” and another seven years before he started to manufacture them on a commercial scale. Now, with this ingenious invention, carpets could be cleaned indoors any time of year even if it were snowing, raining or blowing a gale outside. Sturdy footwear was required in those pioneer days if one wanted to go outside and numerous were the boot and shoemakers in town to supply that need.

Photos of Hurontario St. in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century still show a dirt road. One solution to make the intersections passable because of cross ruts in the mud from wagon wheels and the new-fangled horseless carriages was the use of bricks. I clearly remember the intersections of Hurontario St. at Second/Simcoe and Third/Ontario having a surface of red brick in the 1950's left over from those days. To keep the dust to a tolerable level in the dirt road days, the firemen used a horse-drawn water wagon to wet down the dry roads at least in the downtown area much to the delight and relief of the merchants, especially those who displayed some of their merchandise out on the sidewalk in front of their stores. The water was drawn from a tank in the ground at the foot of Hurontario St., the water being fed by gravity through a pipe from the harbour. Having stump-free dirt roads and a water wagon must have, at the time, been considered the height of progress and modernity. In the 1950's there was an old, abandoned, very weathered and grey, wooden water wagon languishing in a corner of the Exhibition (Central) Park just inside the fence at the corner of Paterson and Hume Streets. This antique may have been used to wet down the race track that used to circle the perimeter of the park long after it was retired from its duties in the business district.

The downtown also progressed from no sidewalks to wooden sidewalks. These were enacted by a bylaw in 1860 regarding the building of wooden sidewalks on Huron and Hurontario Streets. While these were a considerable improvement and convenience, they had an unforeseen consequence, helping to spread the flames from building to building in the Great Fire of 1881. The wooden sidewalk on the east side of Hurontario St. provided the kindling that started the fire in the first place when someone discarded a cigar butt into the rubbish under

the wooden planks. In the rebuilding after the fire, wooden sidewalks appeared again, but this time they fronted brick buildings without wooden verandahs (now banned in the aftermath of the fire) which had also helped spread the flames in 1881.

Eventually, long-lasting concrete sidewalks took the place of the wooden ones and were soon taken for granted. A number of residential sidewalks in town had a symbol pressed into the concrete that read, "Maple Leaf Paving Co. Simcoe, Ontario, 1936". This may have been a federal or provincial government Depression-era make-work project considering the lack of money in the town treasury at that time when many people did not have money to pay their property taxes. A section of Hurontario St. from Cameron St. to the town limits was still in concrete up to the early 1960's. I remember on a visit to Midland in the 1950's when I observed the well-paved streets of that town and asked my father why they looked like that when many of the residential streets of Collingwood were mostly tar and gravel and, in some severe cases as on Huron St. down near Sunset Point and on Mountain Rd., they were full of potholes and constituted a life-threatening challenge to the springs and shock absorbers of motor vehicles. He replied that it was during the Depression (i.e. 1930's) when the streets in the core of Midland were paved in, I assume, another governmental make-work project.

A major addition to the streets of Collingwood came during World War II. A large empty area that had once been referred to as "The Commons" in the general area encompassing 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, Fair, Cameron, Maple and Birch Streets west of Hurontario St., Victory Drive on the east side, as well as a few other locations in town became known as "Victory Village". The small homes that were constructed came to be

known as “Wartime Houses”. This was a Federal Government project to create rental housing for the influx of wartime workers who came to Collingwood to work in the Shipyard and at Clyde Aircraft.

Wartime Housing Limited, formed in 1941, planned to build around one hundred of these houses in Collingwood. This required a major undertaking to construct water mains, sewers, roads and sidewalks by Road Builders Limited of Toronto. My father worked on the building of these houses during the winter months. Because he was an officer on a Great Lakes freighter, his job was an essential service because the officers were needed to run the boats during the navigation season between March or April and December, when the ships tied up for the winter, so these men could not enlist for war service.

A very informative National Film Board of Canada documentary shows how the prefabricated wartime rental houses were, in their time, basic, utilitarian homes built to a formula. Resting on wooden cedar posts or concrete posts depending on ground conditions (the post holes were dug by hand with an auger), a house could be assembled from floor joists to chimney in less than 36 hours. The floors, walls and roof sections were bolted together so that they could be easily dismantled after the war, the original concept being that these homes were only temporary for the duration of the war. My father told me that during construction one of them actually blew over onto its side during a winter storm. The foregoing notwithstanding, a trip today down these streets on Google Maps reveals that the wartime houses are still standing almost 80 years after they were built. Most of them have been renovated and many have had enclosed porches, verandahs, two-storey additions and basements added. If the original intention of dismantling these houses after the war had been followed through,

numerous blocks of Collingwood streets would look very different today. However, the Wartime Housing Limited agency morphed into the Canadian Mortgage And Housing Corporation after the war and the wartime houses were sold to either their tenants (rent was \$20-\$30 a month) or to returning veterans.

“Hey Mom, they’re tarring the road!” went the voice-over in the TV commercial for Johnson’s Wax, as the boy walks in on his mother’s freshly waxed kitchen floor with tar on his shoes. Every summer for a number of years, the Municipal Spraying & Oiling Co. (now MSO Construction of Etobicoke) would come to town to put a fresh layer of tar and gravel chips (much cheaper than paving) on many of the residential streets. Before applying the tar, a tractor with a huge revolving wire brush was used to clean the edges of the street, causing panic as women rushed to close windows and doors and get the laundry off the clothesline while dust and loose gravel flew everywhere, harkening back to the earlier days of dirt roads and swirling dust. It was hazardous to enter the house without first checking the bottom of your shoes when these guys were in town. A man named Ray drove the tar truck and I’m sure many people shook their fist at him or muttered curses as he sprayed fresh tar on their street. After the tar spray, dump trucks filled with gravel chips would slowly reverse along the fresh tar to cover it with the gravel poured evenly from a spreader behind the truck. This operation was then followed by a heavy motorized roller to pack it all down. In between the yearly resurfacing of those streets, if there were potholes, sometimes the Public Works Department would come along with a dump truck with some cold asphalt in the back and they would shovel some into the hole and then back the truck’s rear wheels over it to pack it down. If the street had

more potholes than road, the only short term solution was to fill the holes with gravel and hope that the suspension of cars wouldn't pack it in as the tires of motor vehicles caused the gravel to fly out of the holes. Potholes are not extinct today and are ever with us.

The problem of gravel not staying in the potholes was not unique to the paved or tar and gravel roads of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the very first issue of an early daily (and very short-lived) Collingwood newspaper *The Daily Review*, Saturday, August 22, 1863, the following appeared:

***NOTICE!*** *Several complaints having [sic] been made against persons digging dangerous holes in several of the streets in the East Ward. Parties are hereby notified that if found leaving those streets in a dangerous or impassable manner, by the removal of gravel, they will be prosecuted according to law. JOHN HOGG, Chairman Board of Works. Collingwood, July 23, 1863.*

One Collingwood street sorely tested the patience of residents and visitors alike and made life miserable for the Town Council with complaints some sixty years ago when Hurontario St. from the corner of Hume to Cameron St. was reconstructed. It was dug up and filled back in several times for renewing water mains and sanitary sewers, and for the installation of storm sewers and for whatever else was buried under the road as well as for surface gutters, catch basins and paved shoulders. This created frustration for everyone since this section of the street was part of Provincial King's Highway 24 as well as a local street right through the centre of town. This was at a time when Highway 401, with twelve lanes through Toronto had been designated as "The Macdonald-Cartier Freeway", named after two of the Fathers of Confederation, Sir John A. Macdonald and Jacques Cartier.



Once Hurontario St. was finally finished (all two lanes of it), a certain resident who had a used car lot at the corner of Hurontario and Hume Streets and also had a sense of humour, in expressing his relief made up a sign and attached it to an existing sign post at that corner. The sign read: **“THE MCDONALD-ZUBEK FREEWAY—SIX BLOCKS LONG AND TOOK ONLY ONE YEAR TO COMPLETE”**. It was named after two of the “Town Fathers”, Alick McDonald who was Mayor from 1961 to 1969 and George Zubek who was a Surveyor and member of Town Council in the 1960’s. Many people laughed but the Town Council was not amused. Life went on nevertheless.

Today, Collingwood has expanded greatly from its origins in the 1850’s and has many more roads than it used to. The cedar swamp is just a memory in the history books. If the pioneers who hacked the town site of Collingwood out of that swamp in the 1850’s could see the various stages of improvement over the past 166 years in the infrastructure of sidewalks, curbs, gutters, storm drains and paved roads as well as the water mains, sewers, gas lines and electrical wires under them so commonplace today, they would be truly amazed and envious, not to mention perhaps a little incredulous as well.

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