



GARDEN PRODUCE, PROPERTY TAXES AND SEPTIC TANKS - H. David Vuckson

In the first half of the 20th Century there were areas in Collingwood that seemed semi-rural although they were right in the built-up part of town. The portion of Ste. Marie St. between George and Collins Streets where I grew up is a case in point. We had municipal water and hydro but no sewer connection. Street lights consisted of a light bulb below a large, round, corrugated metal disc that reflected the light of the dim bulb toward the ground. In some ways, Collingwood was a time warp compared to “the City” as Toronto was called in those days. We still had manual telephones in Collingwood until the mid-1960’s. When you lifted the receiver, a female voice we called “Central” would say “Number Please” and, given the number of the party you wanted to call, Central would try to connect you. Telephone infrastructure was dated and party lines were numerous at the time in both town and on the country roads and frequently this resulted in the operator saying, “I’m sorry, that line is busy”.

This era into which I was born after the war still had many connections to the way life had been for decades. Milk was delivered door-to-door in glass bottles by Potts Bros. Dairy using horse-drawn wagons (until the mid-1960’s) as was bread by Canada Bread (until 1953). Bill Rich, who lived behind us on Robinson St., kept a horse in a backyard barn and delivered for Canada Bread. It is a well-known saying that the delivery horses knew their route. The driver would stop the horse and get out and walk to a house to deliver milk or bread and the horse would continue on its own and stop at the next house, the horse’s brain serving as a kind

of combined automatic transmission and braking system. With a horse it was safe to leave “the engine” running and the “transmission” in gear.

This was a very trusting era when the empty milk bottles to be replaced were washed out the night before and the money in coins was dropped into the bottom of one of the bottles which were then placed on the doorstep before bedtime. In the morning, the delivery man would replace the bottles with fresh ones, take the empties and the money, and, from a coin counter on his waist, would leave the change on the cardboard bottle cap. Jack Pearce, who delivered for Canada Bread on Ste. Marie St., would open our screen door and call out “BAKER!” Not everyone had an electric refrigerator and Seiggel’s ice man was often seen on the streets to replenish the still-in-use ice boxes in many homes. The deprivations of the Great Depression (1929-39) and the shortages of the Second World War (1939-45) ensured that many things would remain as they had been in the early 20th Century for a few years until the expected and anticipated post-war prosperity manifested. After so many years of doing without, there was a growing pent-up demand for new things including cars and home appliances.

My parents were married on December 14th, 1941 exactly one week after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. At the time, my father was a sailor on the Great Lakes as a Mate on the ship *Algosteel* of the Algoma Central Railway (ACR) fleet. Up until the end of the war when my father quit sailing, my parents lived in a small apartment in the home of Maisie Northcott on Maple St. In 1946 they bought the house at 639 Ste. Marie St. for about \$3000.00. Most of the lots in this area are one-quarter of an acre. On a lot this size one could have a very large vegetable garden. Two doors south of here the lots are even larger extending much farther back toward Robinson St. Our house on the east side of Ste. Marie St. backed onto a vacant lot on Robinson St. on which Bill Rich grew a huge vegetable garden in addition to the garden on his own adjacent lot to the south. Until it was replaced with a truck, his bread wagon delivery horse was used to plow and harrow the garden on the vacant lot every spring and it also provided plenty of fertilizer. At least two adjacent homes to the north of that vacant lot had barns in the back yard. One of those neighbours, Ethel Fry, kept chickens and would send me home with an egg when I went over to see her chickens. Four

doors south of us on Ste. Marie St. at 669 was the old Woolner home. In bygone years, Woolners had a butcher shop downtown and behind their house on Ste. Marie St. was a barn/stable where, in the past, horses, delivery wagons and sleighs and other equipment had been kept for their business. A road allowance adjacent to 91 Collins St., used to provide access to the rear portion of Woolner's lot and the barn.

The municipal sanitary sewer on Ste. Marie St. stopped at George St. The houses on the remaining two blocks south of there had a mix of septic tanks, cesspools, and, in some cases, where the house did not have a bathroom, there was an outhouse and the requisite chamber pots (also known as "thunder jugs") that were kept under the beds. At the house immediately north of ours at 627, Margaret Wellman regularly opened the kitchen door and threw the water from the dishpan out into the yard. The house immediately next door to the south of ours at 643 was the home of Jack and Maud Morrison. They were the parents of well-known Collingwood artist Nick Hodson's wife, Flora. Their "facility" was an outhouse attached at the very back of the house, in a portion of the structure far-removed from the main living area. On the outside wall of the outhouse was a door that could be lifted up and held open so that a large wooden box with the contents could be pulled out to be emptied with a shovel. Two doors south of there at 661, a large two-storey brick house had a cesspool (seepage pit). Ironically, the owner's name was Les Poole. Poole's cesspool, covered with planks, and Morrison's outhouse, and others along the street had to be cleaned out by hand periodically by Albert "Shorty" Semple (died October 18, 1975) with a shovel and his horse-drawn "honey wagon" (in the winter it was a sleigh). Today, the modern versions of such conveyances are called septic tank pumping trucks. Shorty was also one of the men who plowed the town's sidewalks with a horse-drawn "V" plow in the winter.

Our house at 639 did not require Shorty Semple's exertions because our bathroom and kitchen drains emptied into a septic tank. It was buried in the ground immediately behind the house opposite my bedroom window and two runs of tile radiated out from the round steel tank into the back yard contributing to the fertility of the soil for the large vegetable garden. For about the first five

years they owned the house, my parents were able to sell sufficient produce from their vast garden to cover the cost of their annual property tax which amounted to the grand sum of \$33.00 and no, that amount is not a typo. Thirty-Three Dollars was all it took to keep the Town of Collingwood happy in those days, that is, until 1950 when the sanitary sewer was extended up Ste. Marie St. to its southern extremity. Not everyone hooked up to the sewer when it was finished. Morrison's house next door still had an outhouse in the mid 50's because it still did not have a bathroom and never would have one until it was demolished and replaced with the house that is there now by Nick Matanowitsch. My parents did connect to the sewer and this required an excavator to dig a trench from the front of the house to the sewer main in the street. This trench went right through where my sand box was located in the front yard. Our house and Morrison's house were very close together and as we found out years later, our property line went through the corner of their living room and, at the back of the lot, their property line went through our compost bin, but life went on nevertheless. Because of the proximity of the two houses, my father had to dig the trench for the pipe by hand the rest of the way from the front of the house and then, underneath our house (no basement) he dug out a path for it with a small coal shovel in the cramped space. Now that we were on the municipal sewer, our septic tank was dug out and from my bedroom window I watched it being lifted out of the ground by a tractor, hoisted with chains by the tractor's bucket. For the next twenty years my parents paid their share of the cost of the sewer extension on our street on their property tax bill which was no longer \$33.00. My mother wrote on a Christmas card in 1950, *"Well we've passed our 9th wedding anniversary—we didn't throw a party this year as we had a big crack at our pocket book putting in the sewers"*.

At this time, Collingwood's untreated sewage flowed out into the harbour at the north end of Birch St. Fortunately for Seiggels, the winter ice they harvested up until 1951 came from the White's Bay area beyond the Hen & Chickens Islands, far removed from the pollution of the inner harbour. The ice they cut always tested pure. After ice harvesting in the bay came to an end, Seiggels operated an ice factory at Beech and 3rd Streets. This brings to mind a conversation I

witnessed many years ago in a hotel where I worked. The ice cube machine stopped working on a hot summer's day, refusing to make a single ice cube. Greg, one of the bartenders, asked his colleague Ernie, "What did we do for ice before we had this ice machine?" Ernie replied, "We got ice from an ice factory". Greg said, "An ice factory! What do you mean an 'ice factory'? How do you manufacture ice?" Ernie replied, "You freeze water!"

These were the days when people of my parents' generation remembered well the hard times of the 1930's when jobs, money and food were scarce.

Collingwood author Ruth Carmichael Bryan (1923-1975) grew up during those years in the six-gabled house at the corner of Hurontario and George Streets on a one acre lot. In her book *Tales of Collingwood* she recounts the hard times of the 1930's Depression when unemployed men would come to their house seeking food in exchange for some work:

"Rarely a day passed without one of the depression's wandering unemployed knocking on our door to offer work in exchange for food. Sometimes, they cut a few sticks of wood. Then my mother would grow fearful lest they faint from hunger and they were brought in and given a place at the kitchen table, where mother fed them until they could eat no more and sent them on their way with enough food wrapped in parcels to last a day or two. My mother was a great believer in the power of food. There came a time in the depths of the depression when we wondered if we could see the winter through ourselves, but my mother was determined to go down sharing the last crust. Our survival was mainly dependent on the great store of food that came from our acre and was jammed, jellied, pickled and canned; on eggs...packed in salt; on a side of pork cured by my dad..."

My father was from a family of twelve and knew the value and importance of growing one's own food. During the 1930's his family in Sault Ste. Marie struggled to survive. His mother would make a bowl of food and it would be passed around first to the ten children (their ages in 1935 ranging from twenty-two down to a baby) for each to take a small amount and then, if there was any left, to the parents. Our backyard in the 1940's and 50's had an asparagus patch,

a strawberry patch, a rhubarb patch, and a raspberry patch (I used to deliver pint boxes of raspberries, 5 cents each, to my great aunt Vetta O'Brien on my bike). We grew rows and rows of corn, potatoes, squash, cucumbers, onions, leaf lettuce, cabbages, radishes, carrots, beets, peas, beans and tomato plants. Every spring public school teacher (and future Mayor of Collingwood) Harry Bell would put a plough and a harrow on his horse-drawn wagon and go around ploughing the backyard gardens, ours included, for spring planting. The traditional time of year to plant was the 24th of May weekend. Throughout the summer the produce from the garden was eaten or taken to the cold storage locker to be frozen for future use and in the fall it was time for "putting up food for the winter" by making jams and "canning" vegetables in glass jars. In the case of raspberry jam, the berries to be preserved were boiled in a big open kettle and then ladled into waiting jars which were then sealed with melted canning wax and a tight lid. The jars were labelled with the date and we enjoyed raspberry jam throughout the coming winter. A trap door in the floor of my bedroom opened onto a "root cellar" in the soil underneath the house and here items like squash, onions and potatoes could be kept from freezing and preserved during the long winter months.

My parents rented a locker in the cold storage area of the Collingwood Dairy building at 25-27 Hurontario St. In an era when electric refrigerators had a small freezer compartment for little more than ice cubes, and chest freezers were not yet commonplace, people could rent a locker at this location to freeze and store surplus food. There was also a cold storage facility at the rear of 207 Hurontario St. in a building that was home to Knuff Motors, a General Motors Chevrolet/Oldsmobile dealership, later occupied by Rumble Motors (their slogan, "Ramble on in To Rumble") and even later by Foley's Furniture & Appliances. The building is now known as Leeway Lane. As the years went by and the availability and convenience of fresh and frozen food in modern supermarkets coupled with the availability of chest freezers increased, there was less incentive to plant and care for a vegetable garden in the spring, and my father started reducing the area of vegetable plantings and planted more grass until there was nothing but grass in the backyard, although we did keep the raspberry patch.

Gradually, most people living on those quarter acre lots lost contact with the survival techniques learned from previous generations or rather, in extreme cases, they simply turned that survival technique in a different direction and bought huge chest freezers and then filled them to the lid without keeping an inventory of what was underneath the top layer. Then along came the “back to the land” movement in the 1970’s as people became concerned with the rising cost of food and the use of pesticides. During this time the magazine *Organic Gardening* became a sort of bible of the movement. One day my father bought the “Rolls-Royce” of rototillers—a “Troy-Bilt”, then made in Troy, New York—and ploughed up most of the backyard and reverted to growing vegetables again in his sixties. The trap door in the floor of my bedroom having been long since carpeted over, my dad created a new root cellar under the floor of the utility room accessed via a new trap door in the floor.

Times have changed, and nowadays, many backyards in Collingwood are just as likely to have an in-ground swimming pool instead of a vegetable garden as evidenced by a “fly over” of the town on Google Maps Satellite View. Well into the 1950’s, the watchword for many people was basic survival based on the experiences of earlier decades and now it is more about “lifestyle” than preserving vegetables and fruit for the winter months. Seventy years ago my parents could sell produce from their garden to earn enough money to pay their \$33.00 property tax bill. We will never see such a time again.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O’Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.