COLLINGWOOD'S "BIG BEN"

H. David Vuckson

Special thanks for help in creating this story go out to Carole Stuart at the Collingwood Public Library for supplying me with the front page story about the inauguration of the Collingwood Town Clock in the August 9th, 1951 edition of the Enterprise-Bulletin and to Su Murdoch of Su Murdoch Historical Consulting in Barrie for detailed history of the original 1889 construction of the Town Hall and the rebuilding after the disastrous fire of 1890.

The iconic clock tower on the Collingwood Town Hall is known far and wide, the tower and the building that holds it up having stood in that spot since being constructed in 1889-90. The clock and bell *in* the tower, however, are of much more recent vintage from the mid-point of the 20th Century and thereby hangs a story. However, our story concerning a "town clock" goes back about thirty years from 1889 to the time when Collingwood separated itself from Nottawasaga Township and became an incorporated town in 1858.

County Sheriff Benjamin W. Smith donated land on the east side of Pine Street between Second and Third Streets for a wooden 2-storey

schoolhouse that was known as the Centre Ward Public School. The bell at that location, cast in 1857, mounted in a small tower on the roof is said to have also served as a "Town Clock" and was to be rung every day at 7:00 a.m. perhaps to signify the start of the day. The booklet *The Story Of Collingwood* published in 1958 at the time of the town's Centennial, in its review of education in Collingwood from the writings of David Williams stated:

The accommodation for the public schools provided by a few rented rooms in the home of Rev. Edward Sallows…soon proved inadequate and new premises had to be secured. At the time the community which was about to be incorporated as a town, was not in a position to assume a large expenditure on even so worthy a cause as assuring their younger folks the benefits of education. The trustees were in a quandary, when Sheriff B. W. Smith came to their assistance by donating a half-acre, two lots on east Pine Street, between Second and Third Streets…and early in 1858 the first public school building was opened and the old bell with its fine tone, yet on Victoria School, began its long life of usefulness, for many years as the "town clock" and at present a signalling note for pupils.

A modern variation of this concept of rousing people to the beginning of a new day one hundred years later was Stu Kenney, the morning man (6-9 a.m.) on CKEY Toronto in the late 1950's when he announced, "Wake up Ontario!", but I digress. John Nettleton the tailor, in his reminiscences of Collingwood in the 1850's, stated that, in addition to Mr. Lockerbie's large steel triangle, the Centre Ward School bell was also used as a fire alarm, so it appears the bell had multiple uses. The 1858 wooden school received a later (1879-80) 2-storey brick addition at its east end and this still stands on Pine St. and is now known as Schoolhouse Lane. There is today an attached 2-storey frame building where the original wooden schoolhouse stood. The

former school building was occupied by Brown's Lumber and Building Supplies from 1946 to 1976 when renovations to the building began.

When the new "Centre Ward School" (renamed Victoria School in 1911) was built on Maple St. in 1884, the Pine St. bell was transferred to an ornate 25-foot tall bell tower at the newer school where it called uncountable thousands of children to school (including three generations of my Collingwood family) until 1969 when Victoria School was demolished. The bell now lives on the grounds of the Collingwood Museum on St. Paul St., the casting date of 1857 being clearly visible on the bell. When visiting Collingwood, I like to strike the bell with my knuckles and the sound it produces takes me back seventy years to when I started Kindergarten.

The cornerstone for Collingwood's new Town Hall (and attached Grand Opera House at the rear) was laid on Wednesday, August 21, 1889, a Civic Holiday. Constructed of pressed red brick and Duntroon sandstone and opened in June 1890, the building was constructed with optimism and great civic pride and very likely it was expected that a clock and hour-striking bell would "soon" be placed in the tower because the building looked unfinished. The Town Hall was also referred to as "The Market Building" because of the Market Square out behind the Opera House portion of the building stretching out to Ste. Marie St. (the Arena occupies the spot since 1948) and the market stalls at ground level below the Opera House. The seat of municipal administration in a place referred to as "The Chicago of the North" certainly deserved a finished look. However, that "soon" turned into a long wait while the tower stood embarrassingly empty and boarded up with louvers for just over 60 years and even then, it was through the generosity of a private citizen that Collingwood acquired its iconic clock and bell. According to David Williams in the *Huron Institute Papers & Records Vol. 3*, the Town Hall/Grand Opera House opened for business on June 13th, 1890. Two months later to the day, it was totally gutted by fire on

Wednesday, August 13, 1890, leaving only the exterior walls and the tower standing. Other accounts place the grand opening on June 10 and 11.

The fire had spread from the old, very dry wooden Town Hall/Market Building at the rear and could not be stopped. As frequently happened during fires in Collingwood, there was a high wind blowing, in this case from the east, and it blew the flames and sparks directly toward the new Town Hall as well as other nearby buildings. Quite a number of other buildings and sheds in the area of the back lane between Hurontario and Ste. Marie Streets caught fire as well, including my great-grandfather O'Brien's hide house (since he moved to Collingwood in the 1870's he had been buying raw furs, hides and skins as a part of his career as a general merchant). The Grand Central Hotel stables were destroyed and the hotel itself had a narrow escape. In the days immediately following, the cause of the fire was suspected to be arson. The issue of inadequate water volume and pressure which would, at times, plague the fire department for many decades right up to the mid-1960's, greatly hindered the efforts of the firefighters; fire hoses that burst when the pressure was increased didn't help either.

The loss on the Town Hall and the furniture was estimated at $25,000. Insurance coverage amounted to $14,500 spread over five different insurance companies according to a report three days later in the *Enterprise-Messenger.* The Barrie *Examiner* reported the insurance coverage in the amount of $12,000 while the Barrie *Northern Advance* claimed the insurance coverage was $15,800. Whatever the amount, it was insufficient. Considering the extent of the devastation caused nine years earlier in the Great Fire of September 25, 1881, when both wooden and brick buildings were destroyed, it is remarkable that such a significant building, the "Pride of Collingwood", was not fully insured. There may have been false confidence in the fact that the town's waterworks and fire hydrants had been inaugurated in 1889 and would protect, but it was not to be.

Ironically, the fire occurred on Civic Holiday when most of the populace were at Central Park. There were visiting firemen in town from Meaford and Orillia for the holiday celebrations and, ironically, a large banner had been erected across Hurontario St. near the Town Hall announcing "a grand demonstration by the fire brigade"! Despite the huge loss, the structure was rebuilt with some modifications to the original plans of the Toronto architects, Charles Gibson and Henry Simpson, this time using local architects Fred T. Hodgson and Thomas Kieswetter, but still without a clock and bell, the rebuilding being completed in 1891. And since there was no money for a clock and bell, the tower "remained a gutted mass of ruins", freshly boarded up again with louvers which, unless they were screened off on the inside, were an open invitation for roosting pigeons to decorate the charred timbers inside the tower which were left as they were until they were newly discovered 60 years later in 1950.

The town was in debt for having borrowed money to put in the waterworks and the electric light plant a year earlier. David Williams stated:

Electric lights and waterworks came together, the "juice" [electricity] *being turned on in the fall of 1889.*

The General and Marine Hospital was also opened in 1889, having received its charter in 1887, so it can be seen that plenty of money was being spent in Collingwood in 1889 on three major improvements, the new Town Hall being a fourth project. This was too much for one local resident and if his sentiments had prevailed in the aftermath of the fire, we would not have had a tower to put the clock in. This man said, among other things, in a Letter to the Editor of the *Enterprise-Messenger* on September 4, 1890,

Considering that the Town is heavily involved in debt, could not some better use be made of the Insurance money (about $13,000) than rebuilding? My suggestion is to use this money in taking down the tower, making the walls secure, and completing the two stores on the Front street, and apply the

balance in a more profitable manner than in restoring this useless and unsightly building, by paying our debts…We don't want gilded palaces for the officials.

We now fast forward to the year 1910 when a British post card company gave the Town of Collingwood a cardboard town clock. Onto a photo of the Town Hall clock tower they pasted a fake clock face and labelled the building "City Hall". This must have disappointed those who bought the card and then, when visiting Collingwood, saw no clock at all, just a lot of lumber enclosing the tower.

Frank E. Courtice (1876-1957), the clock's donor in 1950, came to Collingwood as a young man of 26 in 1902 to join the Engineering Department of the Collingwood Shipbuilding Co. as it was then styled. One of his first jobs was to design the machinery for pumping out the newly expanded drydock. The stationary steam engine he designed for the drydock pump is on display along Heritage Drive (I watched that steam engine in operation many times during my summers as an Office Boy/Messenger in the Shipyard). By the time of the First World War he was the Chief Engineer of the firm. In 1950, Frank Courtice and his wife Ellen donated funds for the town clock and bell. The order was placed in the summer of 1950 with Gillett & Johnston, clock makers and bell founders, of Croydon, England, established in 1844. One year later the parts arrived from England and were installed in late July. To accomplish this, the tower had to be repaired and renovated. Famed Collingwood architect John Wilson, at age 87, was brought in to supervise the renovations and preparations and this included him climbing the tower two or three times a day. Charred timbers in the tower, hidden away since the disastrous fire 60 years earlier had to be dealt with and the space needed to be cleaned out and redesigned to accommodate the four clock faces and to support the enormous weight of the bell. This work included the straightening and

strengthening of the tower and was to be paid for by the Town as a condition of the gift.

The *Enterprise-Bulletin* of Thursday, August 9th, 1951 tells the story of how Mr. & Mrs. Frank Courtice came to donate this treasure to the Town of Collingwood. The Courtices were "dismayed" that, after all these years, Collingwood still had no town clock, the lack of spare cash being a likely candidate responsible for this situation. Frank had provided funds in his Will for a clock but later, with his wife's urging, decided he would like to hear the bell sounding while he was still alive. He visited the tower clocks and bells in the Owen Sound City Hall, the Midland Federal Building (now the Public Library) and the bells in Orillia's Fire Hall (long since relocated to a newer Fire Station No. 1) and Presbyterian Church to measure their bells in order to ensure that Collingwood's bell would be larger and heavier. Frank also measured the three church bells in Collingwood—All Saints Anglican, St. Mary's Catholic and Trinity United—as well as the Barrie Post Office. All the bells he visited and measured for their diameter came in at between 29 and 38 ¾ inches. The Collingwood bell measures 48 ½ inches and he could rightly claim that it was "the largest and heaviest of any in this vicinity" weighing 2,478 pounds.

The Owen Sound City Hall burned in February 1961 and their 1921 clock and five bells (Westminster Chimes and hour strike) that Frank had been so fascinated with (also made by Gillett & Johnston) were dismantled and put into storage where they remain.

On Sunday, August 5, 1951, with the Kiltie Band in attendance to liven things up and Art Bull there with his sound truck to broadcast the speeches to the hundreds in attendance, Frank Courtice, 13 days into his 76th year, saw his dream fulfilled when his wife Ellen started up the machinery to set the clock ticking toward the hour of 1 p.m.

The dedication ceremony was also recorded by CKBB Barrie for broadcast at 1:30 p. m. the following day. Since its installation, the clock's bell has been as much a part of the town's daily soundscape as the former Shipyard whistle was in its day. The inscription on the bell reads,

TOWN CLOCK AND HOUR STRIKING BELL DONATED 1950 TO TOWN OF COLLINGWOOD BY MR. AND MRS. FRANK COURTICE

A plaque on the exterior of the Town Hall below the clock at street level proclaims,

TOWER CLOCK AND HOUR STRIKING BELL DONATED TO THE TOWN of COLLINGWOOD 1950 BY MR. AND MRS. FRANK COURTICE. FRANK COURTICE TRUSTED EMPLOYEE OF THE COLLINGWOOD SHIPYARDS, LIMITED 1902 TO 1950. CHIEF ENGINEER 1917 TO 1950

Because Frank Courtice was so taken with the Owen Sound City Hall Clock with its extra four bells to play the Westminster Chimes as well as the hour striking bell, provision was made at the Collingwood Town Hall for a possible future installation of the extra bells and mechanism to strike the quarter hours:

If at any future time it was thought wise to add the Quarter Hour Chimes, provision has been made for this. A space has been provided for the Chime Unit in the clock room, the conduits are in the cement floor, the openings are in the belfry floor and cables to operate the bells and the steel supports for the bells are embedded in the walls of the belfry, so it is just a matter of hanging the bells in their place and coupling to the Chime Unit.

However, an article by Joan Hyslop, Registrar of the Grey Roots Museum and Archives, Owen Sound, indicates that after the 1921 installation of the Owen Sound City Hall Clock, people living in or near the downtown area disliked hearing it strike every 15 minutes especially at night when they were trying to sleep. Collingwood never had the chance to test that

possibility. With this in mind, Frank Courtice specified that the Collingwood clock was to strike up to and including 10:00 p.m. and then be silent until 7:00 a.m. the next morning.

At one time the Collingwood Chamber of Commerce had their office in the Town Hall, accessed by the door (now a window) in the small archway to the right of the then-Arena entrance. Their column in the weekly *Enterprise-Bulletin* was called *Under the Clock*. They were indeed located directly "under the clock".

There was another functioning clock on the main street, across from and down the same block as the Town Hall. Unknown to, or forgotten by many, it was high on the façade of the Regent Theatre. The Regent building had this clock from early days when the Bull Brothers operated the Collingwood Garage at that location and had the old style gas pumps out front on the sidewalk—thus it predated the Town Clock by many years. The original with a white face appears to have been replaced with an electric clock with a dark face and white numbers and at some point in its later years the glass in front of it was simply painted over when it couldn't compete with its huge new cousin across the street.

Yet one more time piece in public view adorned the main street but this one was non-functioning. Nettleton Jewellers occupied the retail location in the south-west corner of the Town Hall for very many years. Hanging out over the sidewalk on a metal bar was a large wooden pocket watch advertising Nettleton's business: Diamonds-Jewelry-Watches. Here, time stood still. Like the wooden watch held by Father Time at The Museum, this one had the correct time only twice a day.

1967 was Canada's Centennial Year and many people took on one or more centennial projects. I approached C.C.I. teacher and Chairman of the Collingwood Centennial Committee Benjamin Vande Weerdhof about an idea I had for announcing July 1, 1967 in grand style and he put me in charge

of this project. My idea was to have the Ste. Marie St. Fire Hall sound the fire siren at midnight June 30th and that would be the signal for the church bells (Trinity United, All Saints Anglican and St. Mary's Catholic) and industry whistles (Kaufman's Furniture, Smart's Cannery and the Shipyard) to sound. The icing on the cake was to manually ring the bell at the Town Hall one hundred times. To do this, I first got permission from the Town Hall and then I signed out a huge long-handled wooden mallet from my summer job at the Shipyard (think of a croquet mallet on steroids). Don Mason, David Towns, Bob Hammond and I made our way up to the bell shortly before midnight on June 30th while a crowd gathered on the sidewalk below. From down at street level Herb Homuth, the Town Clerk, called up to me, "Be careful with my bell!" When the fire siren sounded at midnight I and my three assistants took turns striking the bell twenty-five times each with the wooden mallet to ring in Canada's second Century.

At some point in the 1970's, the mechanism that operates the hands on the four clock faces was renewed. Traditional clock faces and watches with Roman numerals have been around for a very long time. Oldtimers like me were taught Roman numerals in public school but, unfortunately, today, children who grow up knowing only digital time find the faces of these traditional timepieces mysterious and have no idea what time it is when looking at the Town Clock unless it happens to be striking the hour. Even a clock or watch with traditional "Arabic" numerals can be a mystery to a young person who knows only digital time. As the older generations pass away, there are fewer people who can appreciate the charm of such a clock face because they cannot "read" it.

The same goes for the wooden "Father Time" statue at the Collingwood Museum. Groups of school children must be puzzled when they look at the face of the "old fashioned" wooden watch he is holding. Like Nettleton

Jewelers' wooden watch, Father Time's watch keeps accurate time—twice a day.

A few years ago when Pam and I were in Collingwood, we were dining one evening at Tesoro in Schoolhouse Lane at one of the outdoor tables. At an adjacent table there were two couples. The Town Clock struck the hour of 8 P. M. and one of the men at the other table exclaimed, "That's Collingwood's Big Ben!" They were clearly visitors and so I engaged them in conversation. I asked the man how old he thought the tower clock and bell were. Most people, looking at the vintage of the Town Hall would automatically assume that the clock and bell had been there since the Victorian era and this man was no exception. So, being a Collingwood native and historian, descended from one of the pioneer families, and one of the few people to have ever rung the bell by hand, I told them that I am actually older than the clock and bell and related the story of how the tower stood empty for over 60 years until a generous donation from a private citizen resulted in Collingwood's "Big Ben". They also enjoyed hearing about the midnight June 30th, 1967 Centennial bell ringing adventure.

The term "Big Ben" properly refers to the enormous hour bell at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London, England. However, the entire tower, clock and bell together are popularly referred to as "Big Ben".

Frank Courtice enjoyed hearing the sound of his gift announcing the hours until the first week of January 1957 when he died in his 81st year. His obituary said he was the oldest professional engineer in the Canadian shipbuilding industry and helped to build about 160 lake vessels. Most, if not all, of those lake vessels lived out their usefulness and were scrapped or, in some cases, ended their days prematurely by sinking. However, Collingwood's "Big Ben", weighing 2,478 pounds, continues to sound over Collingwood, a permanent legacy of the generosity of Frank and Ellen

Courtice who made their home in Collingwood for over half a century and gave back to the town in a significant way.

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