

Fighting For—and Against—the Land in Buchanan Township

By Elizabeth Bond

During the 1830's, as the square timber business was being drawn further up the Ottawa River in search for large white pines to ship to Europe, timbermen began settling on plots of land along the river's shores. These men and their families would come from New England or New France, and were for the most part wholly unprepared for the rough conditions that they would face.

The settlers would come with the spring thaw and begin by building a basic shelter and barn to have shelter for the upcoming winter, and perhaps clearing a small area of forest for a garden.

The men, and often young boys, would leave their farms in late fall and labour in the lumber camps until the spring when the logs were ready to be driven down the Ottawa River to Quebec City. Fortunate men would be asked to stay on for the spring drive which paid quite well because it was dangerous work. At the end of their work term, the men would be paid for their season's work and would return to their small farms with supplies.

The early settlers soon learned that the agricultural conditions in Buchanan were far from ideal. Much of their acreage was either swampy or sandy; the arable soil that they did possess was incredibly rocky and contained old growth forest that needed to be painstakingly cleared at a rate of about an acre a year. Large stone piles scattered densely across Buchanan today attest to the backbreaking work that went in to turning forest into fields. Still, it was a worthwhile exercise for the early settlers to attempt to farm their land in order to support their families. Supplemental cash income could be made after 1854 by selling firewood to the passing steamboats carrying freight and passengers up the Ottawa River between Pembroke and Des Joachims (da Swisha). In many cases, this small extra income made a great difference to the struggling families.

Also, for those lucky enough to get ahead, the logging camps would purchase surplus stores of food and hay from nearby farmers and this would provide an extra income. The original Law farm, located on the rise above the lighthouse, was one such depot farm.

The early settlers and the area First Nations seemed to have gotten along quite well. The white settlers respected the Natives who had the knowledge and skills to survive in their shared harsh surroundings. Both groups of people were anxious to learn from each other, and within a generation white settlers and Native inhabitants were living as neighbours.

As Buchanan turned into a growing community during the mid-nineteenth century, centralized government administration in Upper Canada had a hard time keeping up. Plots of land were not formally surveyed until many years after it was settled, and land disputes had to be settled in informal ways. Gerald retells a story passed on to him about a boxing match that took place between Joseph Nadeau and Baptiste Leduke with a

referee and in front of a crowd of people, so that the results of the contest would be binding as witnessed by the community in lieu of legal papers.

Gerald recalls another account of unofficial justice in the early days of settlement. An unintentional manslaughter took place in the mid-1800's at Foran's Stopping Place, one of 2 hotels located in Buchanan Township. Innkeeper Patty Foran's wife subdued a rowdy patron with a candlestick over the head. The troublemaker was put outside, where he was forgotten about and froze to death. It was decided that Pat would take responsibility for the death. The next time a traveling judge came up the river, Pat presented himself at a place referred to as Court Island. He was sentenced to two years of prison in Ottawa. Pat paddled the judge back to Ottawa on his way to serve his sentence. An account of this happening was recorded in *The Ottawa Journal* in April 1925 in an article entitled "Old Time Stuff."

Suggested Reading: David Lee's "Lumber Kings and Shantymen," 2005. A history of the lumber business in the Ottawa Valley. David Lee is a retired Parks Canada historian.

Jennifer Mercer's "Staying The Run: A History of the United Townships of Rolph, Buchanan, Wylie and McKay" published by the Rolph, Buchanan, Wylie and McKay Historical Society, 1998.