

The Lost Community, and What Was Left To Lose

By Elizabeth Bond

Life for the second generation of settlers in Buchanan was perhaps even more difficult—though less isolated—than it was for the first settlers. In the 1850's and 1860's, as the lumber trade began to require more unskilled labourers and winter supply routes, the construction of a major transportation artery from Pembroke to Mattawa was begun. Overseen by civil engineer A.H. Sims, the 150-kilometre route winded around swamps and rocky outcroppings. In 1867, the new Pembroke-Mattawa Road was deemed passable during all seasons. Once this colonisation route was available, flocks of labourers began to settle on homesteads in Buchanan Township adjacent to the road.

During its first years, over a dozen families established homesteads along the Mattawa Road in Buchanan, including the Labines, Beauchamps and Renauds. Their parcels of land were often less than desirable, consisting mostly of swampy, rocky, and sandy soil. However, their proximity to the lumber camps drew settlers nonetheless. Some earlier inhabitants, like the Kelly and Nadeau families, moved their homesteads away from the river and up to the road for convenience. Buchanan was now populated with more farmers than the conditions could provide for.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the lucrative square timber trade was long over, but some settlers were able to make a living in sawmills for the lumber industry. As the decades passed, only firewood and pulpwood seemed to generate any income for the residents of the Upper Ottawa Valley—and it was a meagre income at best. The farms in Buchanan were overworked and the soil could yield few crops. By the 1930's, conditions were grim for the settlers of Buchanan Township. As Gerald Nadeau aptly put it, "I don't think any of us ever even knew that the Depression was on, because things carried on the same as ever for us. Maybe we had just always been in a Depression. Well, good thing we didn't know that, then."

Although farming conditions were poor, the farmers of Buchanan were led to believe that expensive machinery would yield more crops. Many families lost the deeds to their land to W.A Gust, who was a farm machinery merchant. Farm equipment wasn't able to yield the residents any surplus crops, but certainly did manage to put them in debt. Today, large pieces of broken-down farm machinery are scattered across the former fields of Buchanan.

Then, in September 1944, some Government representatives arrived in Buchanan and rented a motorboat from John Robert's wharf in Balmer's Bay. For two weeks, these scientists studied the depths and currents of the Ottawa River at that point. Soon after, the Government began giving notice to the residents that their land would be expropriated for a secret wartime project. Confusion abounded in the Township as the residents prepared to leave. The younger Buchananites were optimistic about the much-needed economic opportunities that development would bring. The older residents, who had known Buchanan as their only home, were despondent to leave.

The landowners in Buchanan were compensated for their acreage, with one price per cleared acre and a lesser sum per uncleared acre. Some of the inhabitants along the river in Balmer's Bay and up towards Deep River did not own the deed to the land they had settled on. They received compensation for only the materials their homes were constructed of—the low sum of approximately \$75.00.

As the residents prepared to leave Buchanan, most took with them every material possession they had—and this included the lumber and nails that their buildings were made with. Although most had been relatively satisfied with their compensation, the people of Buchanan Township knew that starting over would be a struggle. They were relocated to forest plots in the surrounding areas, and their sense of community was lost forever.

Today, Gerald Nadeau looks back on expropriation with a mixture of sadness and gratitude. “It was the River they were gonna miss,” he explained. “Because some knew that they'd never get back to that River again. It's not a big thing but it's an important thing when that's all a person has. It was sadness, really.” Now, in his seventies, Gerald has a new perspective on having to leave his former home. “The trade-off was worth it. For the good they've done, I would say it was worth it.”

Further Reading: North Renfrew Times, Township Supplement. March 22, 1967.

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

