

The Vagabonds of Buchanan Township

More than most places, Buchanan Township had a hard time easing into an economy based on regular employment. Since the 1830s, the people of Buchanan had been surviving on seasonal logging, subsistence farming, and the occasional paid job. A century later, many men of Buchanan seemed to have difficulty settling down to a regular workday routine. Perhaps that is why Buchanan Township had a seemingly heavy proportion of bachelors.

The Depression hit Buchanan Township hard. Some fortunate men attained regular employment at a local lumber mill or the Chalk River Railroad. A very few men, like hardworking Matthew Howard, managed to run a successful farm and could make a living off their land. Some, like Sam Abraham from Syria, survived as a peddler, carting his trinkets in a satchel along the old Mattawa Road. By any measure, there certainly was a lack of employment in Buchanan that left many of the inhabitants scrambling after jobs wherever they could find them.

Matthew Howard's father and seven brothers left Buchanan in hopes of making a success of land in Alberta. Once there, they were overcome by dustbowl conditions lost everything, surviving only on odd jobs once again.

Amidst such economic hardship, it is not surprising that many men turned away from money and material possessions. Bill Ladoucer was one of these men. He was raised on a farm at Oiseau Bay across the Ottawa River from Buchanan. As an adult in the 1910's, he squatted on a farm owned by P.K. Smith, a wealthy hobby farmer from Ohio. He lived off the land and made whiskey, earning Smith's description of him as "a lazy, lovable, aggravating child of nature." Bill's brother Pete followed much the same philosophy as Bill, living off the land in a small cabin in the Buchanan wilderness, close to the Petawawa border.

Louis Oreille (the spelling is uncertain) was an Algonquin native who came to Buchanan from Maniwaki around 1930. Along the way, he settled in Chapeau, about 20 miles downriver from Buchanan. However, once there he had his cabin burnt to the ground—probably for no other reason than because the inhabitants feared that the land could not support even one more hunter. He came up the river with only a cow, a grindstone and an axe, and lived a quiet bachelor life along the Northern shore of Maskinonge Lake in Buchanan. He survived by making deer skin mittens, moccasins, and snowshoes and selling them to the settlers, and when he chose to work for pay, he would do it in his own time.

Further Reading: See P.K. Smith's diary entries about Bill Ladoucer on-line at http://oiseaubayresort.com/oiseau_bay_about.htm