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A Famous Fighting Ground

Recollections of Old Fort Malden on the Detroit River

By JAMES HEDLEY

TWENTY miles of blue river, emptying the waters of three great lakes into another which pours them over Niagara Falls, picturesque banks and wooded islands. This great stream was the scene of many sights and sounds of boyhood days. As children we could not analyze the extent and landscape beauty of the stream—it was half a mile wide at Detroit and four miles wide at the mouth near Amherstburg—nor did we understand its relation to the Great Lakes of North America or its importance as an artery of marine commerce. But it was the floating home of our skiffs and dug-out canoes; we bathed in its waters and played pirates on its banks; and we ventured miles—two or three—to its enchanted islands to scare ducks and find wild flowers and take possession of the quarters of former pic-nic-ers.

"The River" was ours, especially and intimately, from Fort Malden to the mouth, a whole mile, summer and winter, for its frozen surface gave us a huge skating-rink from December to April and afforded space for many a trotting race for the ponies of the neighbouring French-Canadians, the stake usually a bag of oats.

It never occurred to us children to ask why so many people of French descent surrounded us. In later days we learned how, from the days of Champlain forward there were always French settlements at le Detroit, on both sides of the river. At one time, half the population of the present county of Essex were of French descent, and used that language while maintaining much of the *patois* and the peculiar habits of the Brittany and Normandy peasantry whence they sprang. We boys were early scared by legends such as that of the loup garou or were-wolf; and according to our knowledge of their wording we were pleased or puzzled by the fascinating French *chansons*, of which no collection had then been made in Canada.

Seen through the haze of sixty years, the townsfolk of those days seem more than ever quaint and picturesque. In town and along the Canadian shore had settled retired army and navy officers—Fort Malden, half a mile above the town, had held a garrison since the 1812-14 war with the Americans, and at various times between 1830 and 1850 different British regiments of the line had been stationed there. I have heard that a Highland regiment was at Fort Malden in the early thirties; and it is certain that during the Rebellion of 1837-38 the 32nd Regiment occupied the barracks. In 1839 came the 34th Regiment; in 1842 the 43rd, and in a year or two afterward the 89th. The last only I can remember. All these had excellent bands; and the pomp and circumstance of parades, the stirring tones of the instruments, the solemn spectacle of an occasional military funeral, where the reversed arms and the toe-pointed slow march (to our young eyes fantastic as well as impressive), held us spellbound, awed and curiously thrilled.

Some little time before 1850 the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment, or a detachment of it, succeeded the Eighty-ninth. The non-commissioned officers and men who left the British service, their term having expired, to the number of some scores, were given by government, in addition to pensions, an acre or more each of ground around the fort and a wooden dwelling, on the military reserve around the fort. Almost all these old veterans are dead, but some of their white-washed dwellings remain to this hour.

At a later day, the fort was converted into an asylum for insane, and still later became private

TO preserve old Fort Malden, on the Detroit River, as a national museum and public park was the mission of a deputation to Ottawa a few days ago, headed by John Auld, of the Amherstburg "Echo," and Dr. Park, Mayor of Amherstburg, Ont. The claims set forth were that the old Fort, which in the War of 1812 was the headquarters of Gen. Proctor and the base of operations for Gen. Brock when he took Detroit from Gen. Hull, ought to be worth more to this country than merely being a collection of deserted buildings and a cow pasture. Many of the old fort buildings still stand. Part of the ground belongs to the town of Amherstburg. The land adjoining belongs to the Government and is being negotiated for by an American industrial concern. The historic pride of the citizens of Amherstburg on behalf of so important an historical site may be appreciated from the accompanying article written by one who spent his boyhood round old Fort Malden.

property. Except here and there, the ramparts have been reduced or levelled, the palisades in the moat have disappeared, the barrack buildings, even the officers' quarters, are made use of for farm or factory purposes, if indeed they remain. For, as Stedman has it:

On this honoured site
Modern trade will build—
What unseemly fright
Heaven only knows.
Let us heave a sigh—
Down the old house goes!

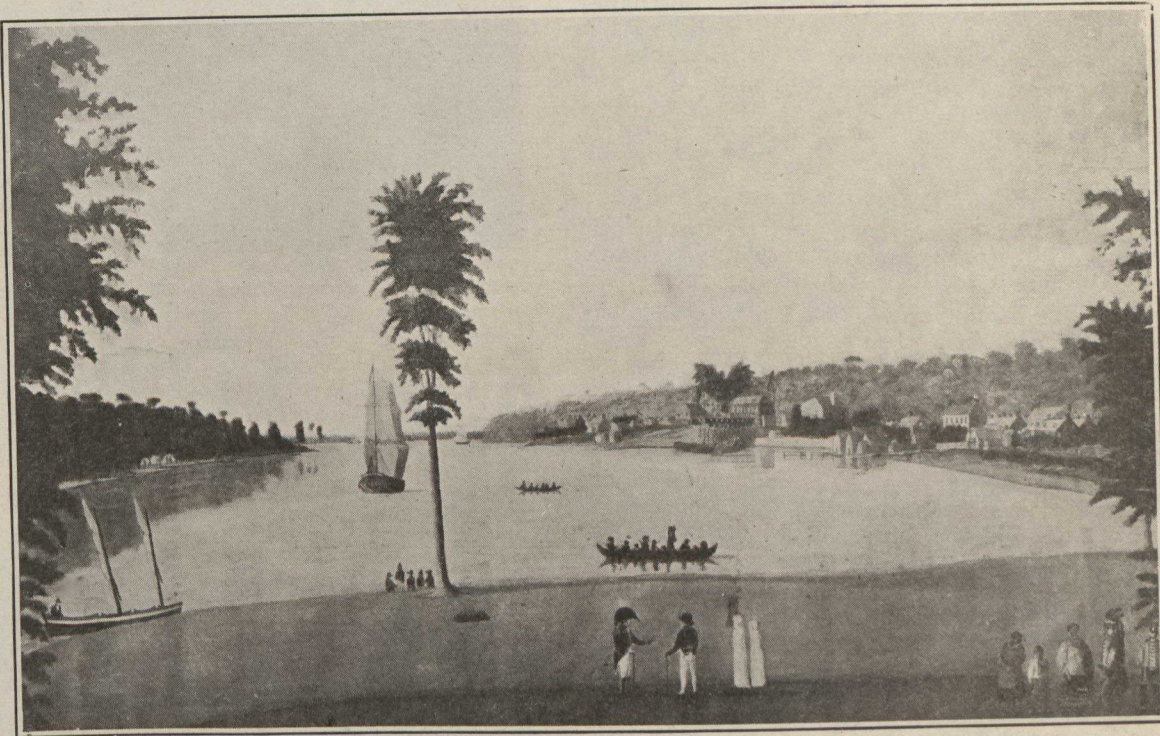
Efforts are being made, in which the Governor-General, Lord Grey, was an active sympathizer, to

have some portion of this former military reserve, the site of so much historical interest, kept as one of the national places of public enjoyment.

But we are a long time coming to the townsfolk, who indeed gave this country-side the charm that never leaves one's memory. As was to be expected, the military folk who settled nearby after leaving the army had a flavour of their own; bluff for the most part, dignified and leisurely, simple in their habits, the officers held some state in the place; they were fond of sport, too, and enjoyed to the full the duck and partridge shooting to be had close by, but going miles inland for deer and wild turkeys. The privates among these retired soldiers had among them many droll fish, often drollest when drunk, as some of them were apt to be on pension day. They had been in many parts of the world, and the recital of adventures by a member of one of these famous British corps "whose morning drum-beat circled the globe," would have delighted Kipling.

Those who have heard it have never forgotten the sweet tones of the English Church bell, at Amherstburg. It was cast in England, early in the last century, and has hung in the belfry of the little brick structure for close upon a hundred years. Many clergymen have conducted services successively within the walls of Christ Church; and between 1830 and 1850 detachments of seven or eight British regiments in succession attended it to worship. Repeatedly altered and enlarged, it still stands. For thirty years and more the incumbent was Rev. Frederick Mack, senior scholar, Trinity College, Dublin.

The Roman Catholic Church, at the back of the town, was an imposing structure of stone, holding 600 of a congregation, an enormous number for those days, mostly French and Irish. And its grand old cure, Father Daudet, dignified but benignant. Every one seemed instinctively to do him reverence. His name was a sweet savor in



Photograph from a Very Old Painting of the Enchanted Haunts of Old Fort Malden (Amherstburg) on the Detroit River, With its Indians, Military Officers and Old Sailing Craft. Fort Malden Lies Well Up-stream. The Oldest House in Amherstburg May be Seen With its Two Big Chimneys to the Right.