

Happenings in London as a Village, Town and City

Events of Interest Covering a Space of Nearly Eighty Years—Erection of the First House, Visits of Royalty, the Big Fires, the Rebellion and Disasters.

In these bustling times but few people care to wade through a very lengthy history of any place even though it happens to be one's own town. Consequently in preparing this history of the city of London for the special edition of the visiting Old Boys, The Advertiser is actuated by a desire to give all the facts it is possible to glean in few words.

The city of London was laid out in 1826 on lands reserved in 1796 by Governor Simcoe. It was surveyed by Col. Burwell, who lived on the Talbot road, near Port Talbot. At that time its limits were as follows: On the north by North street, now known as Queen's avenue; on the east by Wellington street, and on the south and west by the two branches of the River Thames. The late Col. Talbot was appointed by the Government to grant the lots.

Up to 1826, according to one historian, there was only one shanty in London. It was maintained by a Scotchman who sold whisky to all who happened to come this way. As the present brick street, or more properly speaking, the first street, was laid out, the street was the highway to Detroit and the west, not many people came into London proper. The second house is said to have been put up by a man named Abe Carroll, of Oxford County.

While he was building it, it was destroyed by fire. Like a good Londoner, and also a good soldier, he tried again and built another.

The first bridge built here was the Westminster, at the foot of Ridout street. Its construction saw the first crime committed here, when one of the workmen stole an axe. The community was horrified and pursued the criminal. He was overtaken by Levi Merrick, the bridge architect, and was

chained to a stump all night. When he was tried in the morning he was given his choice of a number of lashes or to clear out. He wisely selected the latter. The present courthouse and jail is one of the oldest buildings in this part of the country. It was built by an act of the Legislature, 7 George III, cap. 14, 1826. It cost originally about \$50,000. A Mr. Howard, of Toronto, was the contractor; Thomas Parke, of St. Catharines, the architect, and William Hale, of London Township, made the frame building and it was later turned into a grammar school, in which Mr. Bayly, father of the present Mr. Richard Bayly, K.C., taught the young idea how to shoot. The old building, which is somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 years of age, is used by the city as a tool house for the board of works, and it stands on King street west, on a part of the courthouse property.

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Just east of the Liberal Club of today. Though the people of London took no part in the rebellion of 1837, they saw much of the after effects of the agitation. At the court house here many hangings took place in the open as was the custom at the time. Among those who were executed were Hiram E. Lynd, an American who had come over to assist the followers of McKenzie; Daniel Davis Bedford, a Mr. Cunningham, of Beachville, a Mr. Purley, a Nova Scotian, and Joshua Doan, a Quaker of great respectability and a resident of Yarmouth. Scores of other prisoners were transported. Not a citizen of London was hanged or banished, however, though the city appears to have sided somewhat with the rebellion, and at one time a rising was planned to take place on the ground back of the present Tecumseh House, on York street. The arrival of Lord Durham stopped the slaughter of the prisoners.

The Wesleyan Methodists established the first church in London in 1839, on the site now occupied by the Bank of Montreal. They were followed in the same year by the English Church, which was built upon the site of the present St. Paul's Cathedral. The next church was established by the Roman Catholics in 1854. The two latter were destroyed in the big fire of 1854. Both were re-erected. St. Paul's stands today—St. Peter's was torn down in 1881 to make way for the present magnificent cathedral.

In 1832 London was visited by the cholera and the two medical practitioners who were in the village at the time are said to have fled. There were many deaths.

In 1828, because of the rebellion, soldiers were permanently stationed in London. The Thirty-second Regiment was the first to arrive. It was commanded by Col. Maitland, hence Maitland street. The military remained until the outbreak of the Crimean war in 1854. After the Fenian raid the troops were again quartered here for a time.

On Oct. 16, 1844, fire almost wiped London from the map. It commenced on Queen's avenue, west of Richmond. On Sunday, April 13, 1845, fire again visited the place. It broke out in the old Robinson Hall, corner of Dundas and Ridout streets, and before it burned itself out 150 houses and business places had been destroyed.

From 1852 to 1853 London enjoyed a land boom. In 1853 the assessed value of real estate in London was \$146,020; in 1854 it had reached \$228,160, and by 1855 it had jumped to \$428,906. Then the boom collapsed and hundreds of people were ruined. After the crash the assessed value of London stood at \$254,975.

The first railway train pulled into London on the 15th of December in 1853. This was when the Great Western Railway, afterwards absorbed by the G. T. R., entered London.

In 1860 the present King of England, then known as the Prince of Wales, visited the city. He was met by the mayor of the city at the time, Two thousand school children sang the National Anthem as the prince arrived. With him were the Duke of Newcastle and Sir Edmund Head. The city was in a festive mood. After the first day's festivities the prince went to Sarnia for the day.

He was met by a number of ladies or to clear out. He wisely selected the latter. The present courthouse and jail is one of the oldest buildings in this part of the country. It was built by an act of the Legislature, 7 George III, cap. 14, 1826. It cost originally about \$50,000. A Mr. Howard, of Toronto, was the contractor; Thomas Parke, of St. Catharines, the architect, and William Hale, of London Township, made the frame building and it was later turned into a grammar school, in which Mr. Bayly, father of the present Mr. Richard Bayly, K.C., taught the young idea how to shoot. The old building, which is somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 years of age, is used by the city as a tool house for the board of works, and it stands on King street west, on a part of the courthouse property.

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SAW LONDON'S SITE BEFORE A HOUSE WAS BUILT ON IT

Mr. Wm. Percival Has Spent Seventy-Nine Years Here—The Stormy Times of the Rebellion—The Days of the Soldiers—Many Interesting Reminiscences.

The distinction of being the only man living who saw London before a house was built on it—when what is now the site of a busy city of well on to 50,000 people was but a patch of woods, with nothing but a trail leading through it, running north and south—belongs to Mr. William Percival, who has lived here for 79 years, and whose home is now located at 26 Grosvenor street.

To all citizens Mr. Percival's story of London is one of great interest, but to the Old Boys who have gone away and have occasionally allowed their minds to run over the history of their home town the story will be found little short of fascinating. As the years roll on the men who are able to talk of the early days in London grow steadily less in number, and as the wedding process continues for a few years more all that will be left to the present generation will be the stories they have left behind them.

Born in 1828, and being consequently in his 83rd year, Mr. Percival appears to be a wonderful man both mentally and physically. Never very robust, he is nevertheless well preserved in mind and body, and he can tell of the events of London's infancy in the misty past as though they happened but a few years ago. He was born near Rome, Canada County, New York, and at the age of three years was taken by his parents to London Township, his father, Joseph Percival, being a settler, and settled near Rome in 1832.

When the war of 1812 broke out the older Percival objected to fighting against the Empire, and things were consequently made very uncomfortable for him. He put up with the Americans, however, in 1826, when he resolved to emigrate to Canada, and he left in June of that year with his family for a home under the British flag. They went by the Erie canal to Buffalo. There they took passage on a schooner and came to Port Stanley, and from that point they came by wagon through what is now St. Thomas and Lambeth to London. At that time the road which led through from the east to Detroit was what is now known as Brick street, and the city, there was known as the first Con. of Westminster. Not a house—not so much as a shanty—stood in London at the time.

The first man who conducted a store in London afterwards became known as the Hon. George Goodhue, having been made a member of what was then known as the Upper House. His place of business was a small shop on Brick street.

London had been surveyed as a town site some time before 1830 by Col. Simcoe, and as a consequence while there were quite a number of people settled, on farms around what is now known as the city, there were no settlers within the limits of the town site survey. On their way to the farm which they had secured—the second side road just north of the asylum, the Percival family

passed through the town site. It was a virgin woods. The hand of man had not yet put its mark upon the place, except to blaze the ox path, which Percival arrived they found a small log shanty erected on the farm, having been built by the man from whom they purchased the land.

In 1826 quite a stir was raised by the announcement that a building was to be put up on the town site. It was a log shanty, and was built by the man who had purchased the land, and made a sort of picnic of the event, and the first tree was felled in the presence of the gathered settlers. The man who built the shanty was named Mr. Percival, and he built also the first dwelling house ever put up in London.

It was a huge shanty used for boarding the men who worked on the jail, and it stood on the southwest corner of King and Ridout streets. Little William was taken to see the tree-felling and the ceremony of naming London as the country town, and today he remembers the incidents in connection with the event.

There was a jail at Longue Point, but it was overcrowded, making the new jail a necessity. St. Thomas put up a hard fight for the county seat, but London won out.

As he grew into boyhood, Mr. Percival went to school to the neighbors at different times. The first school was a chine in the neighborhood was purchased by the Percivals and young children were sent there for their education. He remembers doing his work for the Cartrages, whose farm was situated in South London, and ran west of the town site. The residence of the father, Joseph Percival, was in the vicinity of the cove, kept also a store and distillery and was very well to do.

The first person drowned in this district was Archibald Owey, brother of the late Squire Owey. Owey was killed at the forks at the foot of Dundas street, where the water was very shallow. He met there overcame him and he lost his life. The event caused a panic. There were but few people in the district at the time, and the death of Owey made an impression on the people almost equal to that of the Victoria disaster, many years later.

Mr. Percival remembers well the rebellion of 1837-38. For two or three years before hostilities broke out the people of the district had been very discontented. Political arguments were pure and there was much ill-feeling and distrust of one another by the settlers. At last the rebellion broke out, and London should rise in rebellion at the same time as the rebels in Toronto, or York, as it was then known.

In secret meeting it had been agreed that a mustering place for London should be in the district of a little Presbyterian Church which stood on York street, a few yards west of where the Tecumseh house now stands. But things did not go as planned, and they called off the proposed rising. In the meantime a traitor had told the Loyalists that the signal for the rising was to be a bugle call. At the appointed time they sounded the three bugle calls, but the rebels did not put in an appearance, as they had previously decided to call off the meeting. Thus the trap failed. Excitement ran high in London at the time. The Upper Canada Bank, situated at the corner of Ridout and King streets, had its funds removed to a rival of a company of Loyalists, made up for the most part of retired British officers and soldiers, put an end to all of London's hopes in London. The company which boasted of two pieces of

artillery fired two rounds down the river from the court house hill for the purpose of aweing the people. The present court house and jail is one of the very oldest of London's old buildings. Mr. Percival thinks the first of it was built about 1828. At all events, he remembers a man named Sovereign, of Yarmouth, being hanged over the entrance on Dundas street before 1830. Sovereign killed his wife and seven children and the people turned out in masses to see him executed, all the executions being then conducted in public.

The first man hanged in London was named Burleigh, who shot a constable in St. Thomas. The hanging of seven rebels at the jail is also fresh in the mind of Mr. Percival.

The first hotel in London was known as the Mansion House. It stood on the site of the office now occupied by City Solicitor Meredith, on Dundas street west. Later the Robinson Hall was built in 1837 and it was the pride of the town. Its logical successor was the present Tecumseh House, built in 1854.

Speaking of the old days, Mr. Percival says that for the most part the people placed implicit confidence in each other. Hardly a scrap of paper passed between them in business. There were no locks on the doors of the houses. The simple life and good will walked hand in hand.

Before the rebellion there were no soldiers in this part of Canada west of Toronto, but at the close of the rebellion the Thirty-second Regiment was quartered here. From that time on until after the Fenian Raid, soldiers were stationed in this city. Mr. Percival recalls the fact that a scandal in which an officer and the wife of a well known London citizen were the principals had much to do with the recalling of the troops from this city.

The entrance of the Great Western Railway into London on Dec. 15, 1853, proved a red letter day, and the people celebrated the event in a royal manner. Previous to that time stage coaches were the only means of traveling out of London, and the people had with delight the advent of the steam road.

Of the sports of long ago, Mr. Percival points out that at one time there was a large race track in what is now known as East London. It ran from Dundas street, near Lytle, down to the Hamilton road, and the people had on this track around 1832. The Merix brothers owned a very fine thoroughbred name Nimrod, which for some years beat all competitors here. Then a circus came through London and purchased the racer. For some time afterward local sports were disconsolate.

In the early days there were no bears to speak of in this district. The country did not appear suited to their tastes and they generally gave the London district a wide berth. When one did put in an appearance he was pursued in haste by the settlers, who could never take kindly to him.

Wolves were, however, very plentiful. At night they could be heard howling in the swamps north of the asylum, and not infrequently they attacked the sheep of the settlers. Deer were also plentiful.

Mr. Percival was for many years engaged in the flour and feed business on Dundas street and he also owned the Medway mill, a fine stone mill. Now he is spending the closing days of a well spent life in his handsome and commodious home on Grosvenor street, with his sister. He has never married. He takes a great interest in books, pictures and flowers and the like, and is a very pleasing conversationalist.

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