

Bates' Corners flourishes

Founders of Winchester persevere through trials of fire

WINCHESTER — Last October, Reid's General Store in Winchester was levelled by fire, a century-old building reduced to rubble.

Within a week there was already talk of plans to rebuild on the site.

The history of Winchester is the history of a community that has survived trial by fire. The village has lost shops, hotels, farms and a school to flames. And it has rebuilt them.

It is a hardiness and resilience that was established in the early 1800s when settlers carved out small plots of land in the unbroken forests of Winchester Township.

The township was surveyed in 1798 and opened for settlement two years later, taking its name from the city of Winchester in Hampshire, England.

The village itself, which began as four farm lots owned by George, John and William Dixon, Wilson Forth, Caleb Henderson and Benjamin Bates, was originally known as Bates' Corners.

The name was changed to West Winchester in 1855, when the first postal service to the village was established. Prior to that, villagers relied on the post office in Matilda, 12 miles away. A few families hired an elderly man known as Old Brocleau to make the trip twice weekly, bringing back any letters and papers along with tea, tobacco or a few yards of cotton.

While it was the post office that gave the hamlet its identity, it was the Canadian Pacific Railroad that gave it its final name. When the CPR built a line between Montreal and Toronto in 1887, a station in West Winchester was simply called Winchester.

The name had previously been used by Chesterville.

During the early years of settlement, industries developed to take advantage of the abundant timber in the area. Mahlon F. Beach, who built a saw mill in 1856, established a sash and door industry in 1870. Destroyed by fire three times, the plant had a troubled history but rose from the ashes each time to become bigger and more modern than ever.

Today the original Beach Lumber Company is known as Lannin Lumber Company, since it was taken over by H.S. Lannin in 1945.

During the nineteenth century, the region developed its agricultural base as the land was cleared and local merchants soon included blacksmiths, shoemakers, builders and carriage and wagon makers.

In 1857, the Winchester Township Agricultural Fair Society was organized. The fairs were alternately held at Winchester and Chesterville for several years, but Winchester was chosen as the permanent location in 1876. The fairgrounds were equipped with a race track, exhibition building, grandstand and cattle barns.

Farmers gradually lost interest in the fair because the money available for prizes gradually dwindled over the years. The last fair was held in 1926 and many years later the grounds were sold to the 100 Club for a community park.

Winchester was incorporated as a village in 1888, the same year the Winchester Press

was founded. The village's first council consisted of Reeve Aaron Sweet, clerk Norman W. Beach, and councillors Dr. Robert Reddick, Hugh Christie, Henry Marcill and James Alexander.

The incorporation became a catalyst for new expansion. There was a tanning factory run by Ed Morris, the Winchester Electric Light Plant, a woolen mill owned and operated by Hugh Christie and Sons and the Winchester Cement and Tile Factory.

The first street lights in Winchester were switched on in 1899, run between 5pm and 11pm nightly on steam-generated electricity. The cost was \$3 a year for 25 lights.

In 1909, the cost had jumped to \$800 for 34 street lights and lights in the town hall. In 1917, 117 Hydro Electric street lights were installed.

In the spring of 1890, a delegation of officials from Bell Telephone came to Winchester to look over the village and the prospect of locating an exchange there. That year 15 telephones were installed. When the dial system was installed in 1963, there were 777 residential and 132 business telephones.

As an educational centre, Winchester was a leader. The first school in the village, a log building, was built in 1848 near the present site of the Baptist Church.

As the village grew, the building was replaced by a stone structure in 1876 and replaced again in 1890 by a brick structure on the west side of St. Lawrence St. South. Considered to be one of the finest school buildings in Eastern Ontario, it contained seven rooms and a Domestic Science Room.

In 1927, the school was destroyed by fire. Temporary classrooms were set up in the library, Town Hall, Orange Hall and church and the following year the school was rebuilt. A gymnasium and assembly hall were added to the building in 1966.

Fire, and public opinion, took a greater toll on what had been a thriving hotel business at the turn of the century.

Although two hotels were doing well in the village during the late 1800s, public opinion cooled and forced the closure of bars of both hotels shortly before a devastating fire destroyed the buildings in 1907.

The town's temperance people built the Hotel Winchester in 1908, but after years as an apartment building it was boarded up. It is now occupied by the Bank of Montreal.

Ault Foods Ltd., now the major industry in Winchester, began in 1922 when J.W. Ault, who has operated a cheese plant at Cass Bridge since 1980, bought the Lemeul Ellis Cheese Factory in Winchester.

Over the years the plant expanded as milk production in the district increased and smaller factories closes.

By 1963, the plant had augmented its manufacturing of butter with the production of milk powder, condensed milk, whey, powdered whey and cheddar cheese.

The factory set an all-time production record on June 5, 1968 when 1,040,000 pounds of milk was poured into the milk products plant.

By the end of the second world war, Winchester had developed a wide base of

industries and community groups. But it needed a hospital.

Spurred on by an active community campaign, Winchester District Memorial Hospital was opened on Dec. 8, 1948 with 24 medical and surgical beds and 10 maternity. The hospital was expanded in 1961 and again in 1964 and is currently seeing the construction of a new lab.

Winchester marked a new era in its history in 1979 when the new municipal complex was opened, replacing the old town hall and fire station.

Today, Winchester has a population of 1,800 and more than 40 businesses. There is a theatre — the last independent in Eastern Ontario — a community hall, an OPP detachment, a hospital and a medical clinic.

And there is still a spirit of resilience and growth.

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WINCHESTER — The Winchester Women's Institute has forged a link in a nation-wide chain of local history.

In a 20-year labor of love, the Institute has compiled one complete volume of a Tweedsmuir History covering the village and the surrounding farming district.

Packed with gems of long-ago events and personalities, the history is a complete record of the community's growth and development from the earliest days to the present.

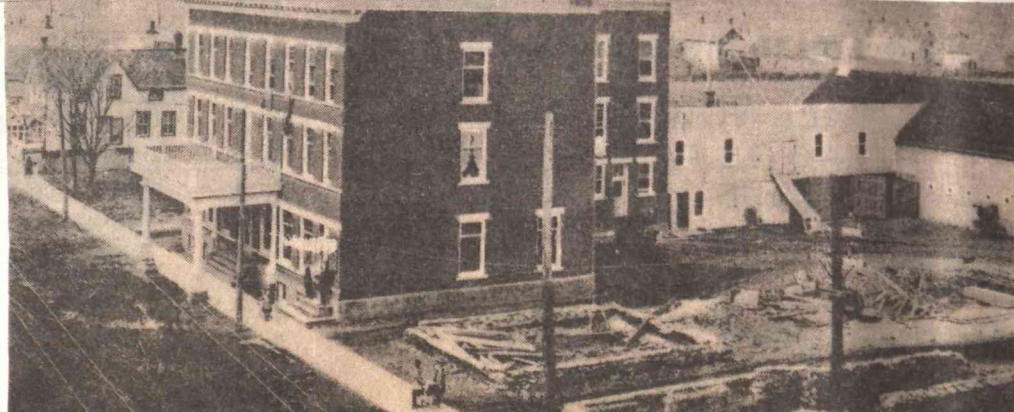
According to Margaret Johnstone, the present Tweedsmuir curator, the book has been the work of many hands since the project began in 1964.

Research was begun by the late Emma Gardner, and has been continued through the years by Mrs. Wilfred McKercher, Mrs. Floyd Armstrong, Mrs. Johnstone, and assistant curator Pearl Carkner.

Mrs. Johnstone, who has been curator of the history for about 10 years, says the memories of the area's oldest residents have been an invaluable source in compiling the information.



This postcard shows Main Street, facing west, before the fire of July 20, 1907.



After the fire, which destroyed both of the village's two hotels, The Hotel Winchester, now occupied by the Bank of Montreal, was constructed at a cost of \$25,000.

Public School
Winchester, Ont.



Winchester Public School, destroyed by fire in 1927.