

THE MUSKOKA FREE GRANTS.

The modern system of free grants to every actual settler,—the happy system inaugurated by the Province of Ontario immediately after Confederation,—had in fact its beginning in Simcoe, which was the mother county of Muskoka where the system was first put into practice. And, accordingly, it would be unfair to omit an account of so important a measure.

As early as June, 1865, when a single representative at the County Council Board, viz., for Morrison and Muskoka, was the only mouthpiece for the territory from the Severn River to the North Pole, a definite step was taken in this desirable direction. The Council sent a memorial to the Governor-in-Council asking that all Crown Lands at the disposal of the Crown, suitable for farming purposes, and not above the actual value of \$4 an acre, should be offered either as free grants to actual settlers, or offered for sale at a nominal price, sufficient to cover the expenses of survey, accompanied by the most stringent regulations as to actual settlement. They began their memorial by stating that the manner in which the farming lands in this Province had been disposed of by the Crown, had been injurious to the best interests of the country, and had materially retarded its progress and settlement. They then urged the giving of free grants of land as the true policy which the Government should follow. Perhaps no county had suffered more than Simcoe from speculators holding the wild lands to the great injury of the farming interests. They also asked, in behalf of the new townships of Morrison and Muskoka, then just organized and represented for the first time by a Reeve in the Council, and in behalf of other such townships, that the settlers be relieved from the payment of arrears on their lands.

In November of the same year, the Council again urged the Governor-in-Council in a memorial to adopt the system of free grants in the future. This memorial was prepared at the instance of T. D. McConkey, M.P., who was urging on the Government the adoption of the free grant system.

The Act to secure free grants and homesteads to actual settlers on the Public Lands was finally passed, February 28, 1868, and became law. While it was passing through the Legislature, viz., in January, 1868, the Council again memorialized the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council to re-sell lands forfeited for non-payment of arrears, and to forfeit in less than nine or ten years lands in arrears.