



"Deeds Speak"

WOMENS'
CANADIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
of **TORONTO**

Recollections of
Mary Warren Breckenridge

... BY ...

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TRANSACTION NO. 3

PRINTED BY
THE ONTARIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Recollections of Mary Warren Breckenridge,

OF CLARKE TOWNSHIP.*

BY CATHERINE F. LEFROY.

*(Reprinted from the "Papers and Records of the Ontario Historical Society,"
Vol. III., 1901.*

My paper consists of a few extracts taken from the recollections of Mary Warren Breckenridge. These recollections were written from her dictation by her daughter, Maria Murney, about the year 1859. They are interesting, as showing the contrast between those early days in the settlement of Canada and our own more comfortable times.

Mary Warren Breckenridge was the youngest of sixteen children, and was only seven years old when her father, Robert Baldwin, emigrated to America in 1798, bringing with him six children. After meeting with many adventures and being more than once in danger of shipwreck they finally arrived safely on this side of the ocean.

The first extract describes their journey from New York to Toronto :

"My grandfather and his family," she says, "reached New York in June, 1798. About a fortnight was taken up in going up the Hudson in a sloop. The weather was very hot, and they frequently stopped to buy milk, bread, etc., suffering very much from the heat. They took fully another fortnight coming up the Mohawk, where they found the mosquitoes a terrible infliction. From Oswego they crossed lake Ontario to the island—then the peninsula—opposite Toronto, which was then a carrying place of the Indians, and at night they crossed the bay of Toronto, then York, arriving at the celebrated town and finding it composed of about a dozen or so of houses, a dreary, dismal place, not even possessing the characteristics of a village. There was no church, schoolhouse or any of the ordinary signs of civilization, but it was, in fact, a mere settlement. There was not even a Methodist chapel, nor does my mother remember more than one shop. There was no inn, and those travellers who had no friend to go to pitched a tent and lived in that as long as they remained. My grandfather and his family had done so during their journey. The Government House and the Garrison lay about a mile from York, with a thick wood between.

* Read before the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Toronto.

“After remaining a few days in York the family proceeded to take possession of a farm my grandfather purchased in the township of Clarke, about fifty miles below York. They travelled in open bateaux, when night came on pitching their tent on the shores of Lake Ontario. The journey generally occupied two days, sometimes much longer. They found on the land a small log hut with a bark roof and a chimney made of sticks and clay, the chinks between the logs stuffed with moss, and only a ladder to go to the loft above.”

After living about eighteen months at Clarke, Mary Breckenridge was taken by her father and an elder sister to New York, in order that the latter might be married to a gentleman she had become engaged to on the voyage out. The journey in those days was one of difficulties and adventures.

“About October, 1799, the trio set out. They crossed Lake Ontario to Niagara, which took a day and a half. They had been detained three weeks at York before they found a schooner crossing the lake, and they were detained three weeks more at Niagara before they found a party going on, for people had to wait then for a party to go through the forest, as a caravan does over the desert.

“While detained at Niagara a dark day occurred, which was very extraordinary, and during which strange noises like cannon were heard, which alarmed them very much. They visited the falls, which one came upon through the dense forest, and which were infinitely grander then, in their primeval state, than they are now, when laid bare by civilization.

“After returning they proceeded to Canandaigua, where they found they had not sufficient money to get on, and they had to wait a whole month until a remittance came to them, meanwhile suffering great privations and even hardships.

“Another party having been found, and money having come, they set out once more. They crossed Cayuga Lake over a long bridge, two miles long, and after that, by some means, lost their way—their sleigh first being overset and their money nearly lost in the snow. It was, of course, in those days gold and silver, and carried in a bag.

“After wandering about and quite losing their path they at length, by the moonlight, saw smoke, and proceeding towards it, dogs began to bark, and presently an Indian came towards them, to whom they explained their distress. He proved to be a chief, and very politely invited them into his wigwam. They gladly accepted the invitation, and my mother often speaks of that, to her, delightful night in the bark wigwam, with the blazing logs on one side and the hole at the top, where, as she lay on her bed of hemlock boughs and bear skins, she saw the stars twinkling down on them. The Indians were very hospitable, giving up with great politeness the half of their wigwam to the strangers. My mother does not remember any of the incidents of their sleigh journey for the rest of the way down the Hudson, except my aunt getting a dress made at Albany, where, to her amazement, the dressmaker told her that the open gown with the long train that was in vogue when she left Ireland was done away with, and round gowns were now the fashion.”

They finally arrived safely at New York, and the marriage—on account of which the journey had been undertaken—took place Feb. 12th, 1800. Mary Breckenridge did not return to Canada until 1807.

The changes which had taken place during that time, and other matters are described in her recollections, thus :

“The country had, of course, improved somewhat during the seven years since they went down, still where cities now stand there was then only woods, woods, woods, with here and there a few scattered houses. For instance, at Buffalo, where they passed a night, was a solitary roadside inn, with a swinging sign. No other house, and the beautiful Lake Erie spread out before it.

“My uncle drove his own carriage all the way from Albany. Ten miles he and my mother had to walk through the woods where the road was very bad. My mother found York had vastly changed in those years. There were a church, a gaol, a light-house building and many nice houses, and the woods between the garrison and town fast disappearing.

“My mother went down to the farm after her sisters had returned to New York, and then her experience of ‘roughing it in the bush’ began. The hardships were bearable until the winter came on, which proved to be one of the most severe ever known in Canada.

“In the end of the previous summer and the fall, the field mice were a perfect plague. They were found in myriads, and destroyed everything they could find. Everything that was turned up proved to be a homestead destroyed, and the cat loathed mice as the Israelites did quails. The winter made an end of the mice, which lay dead by hundreds of thousands on the ground. But a new trouble arose, very trying to the women and those unable to work. White oak staves were found to be marketable and to bring a large price. Therefore a mania arose for cutting and preparing these staves. Consequently every man in the country set to work at this new employment, leaving the women and old people to get on as they could on their wild lands. My grandfather’s man followed the universal example, and they could get no other man for the highest wages that could be offered.

“My mother, a young and delicate girl of sixteen, was obliged to drag hay up a hill to feed all the cattle and a flock of sheep, though terrified by the animals, as my grandfather was too infirm to do it himself. There was also a pack of hounds to feed, and water to draw, and logs to draw into the outhouse, at which three worked, that is, aunt Alice, my grandfather and mother, and my grandfather chopped the logs in the house to supply the great fireplace, which held what we would call a load of wood almost now.

“During the following summer flights of pigeons were remarkable. My mother says they used to darken the air.”

They were much terrified on one occasion by a visit from a party of Indians :

“One Sunday he (my grandfather) had gone to see his neighbor, Mr. Cozens (?), when soon after he had gone several Indians came, bringing furs and asking for whiskey. My mother and aunt refused them. The Indians became so urgent and insolent and so constantly increasing in number that they became terrified and sent the French girl to beg my grandfather to return. She came back in a few minutes more frightened than ever, saying that as she passed the camp she saw the squaws hiding away all the knives, as they always do when the Indians are drunken, and that they chased her back. Some of the Indians were intoxicated before they came to the house, and their threats were awful. They had collected to the number of forty, and

those poor girls still held out stoutly in refusing the whiskey, which was kept beneath a trapdoor in the kitchen, in a sort of little cellar. At length my aunt thought of the large, handsome family Bible, in two volumes, in which they had been reading, and opened them and pointed out the pictures to try and attract their attention, while my mother knelt down at the other end of the table and prayed to God loudly and earnestly.

“In this position my grandfather found them, and fearful was the shock to him. He brought Cozens with him. No sooner did the Indians see him than one man drew his knife and showed it to my mother, saying, ‘Cozens kill my brother, I kill Cozens.’ Then my grandfather, to divert that idea, was obliged to get them the whiskey. Nothing else probably saved their lives.

“Cozens slipped away and called the Lovekins and some other neighbors, and my aunt and mother went into a little room inside my grandfather’s, while he and his friends kept watch, and those horrid creatures set to for a regular orgie. There was a great kettle of food for the hounds on the fire, made of bran and potato peelings and all sorts of refuse. This they eat up clean and clever; then they drank, danced and sang all night long, and in the morning off they went, to the relief and joy of the family.

“One great misery of life at Clarke was the unpleasantness of being obliged to sit at table with one’s servants, a black one sometimes being amongst them. My grandfather used to sit at the upper end of the table, with his family at each side of him, while lower down sat the servants and laborers—somewhat in the old feudal style—the nearness of the view decidedly divesting the arrangement of all enchantment.

“Another was the being obliged to receive every passer up and down who wished to stay. Sometimes, of course, there would be an agreeable guest or party of guests, but as there was no sort of inn, it was not quite so agreeable to have fifteen or twenty coachmen come and take possession of your kitchen, and perhaps be storm-bound and have to remain several days. There were also parties constantly coming to Squire Baldwin’s to be married.

“The mode of travelling was wonderful to hear of. There was a great stopping place called Pike’s, somewhere about Whitby. Here men, women and children had to occupy one room, all lying on the floor, with their feet towards the fire and some bundle under their heads.

“In December, 1810, the family moved up in sleighs to York.”

Where, after experiencing so many hardships, they enjoyed the comforts of comparative civilization.