

Local history

by BRIAN LOCKHART

For a country that is only 153 years old, our nation has accomplished a lot.

Born out of 3.5 million square miles of wilderness, plains, and arctic tundra, what has been accomplished in a century and a half is remarkable.

However the path that brought us to where we are has countless untold stories that should be studied on the local level.

I grew up a stone's throw away from the spot where General Isaac Brock fell during the Battle of Queenston Heights.

He uttered his last words, "Push on brave York Volunteers!" while mortally wounded and being tended to by one of his aides.

At least that's how his death was recorded in the history books. Most likely his real last words were more of a gurgle considering he took an American musket ball through the heart at close range.

One of the most impressive memorial monuments in the country stands near the spot with a statue of Brock raising his sword to lead the charge.

The history of that region is well documented and rather storied with several important battles from the War of 1812 having taken place.

There are several forts along the Niagara River including Fort Erie, Fort George, Fort Mississauga, and Fort Niagara on the other side of the river. Numerous cairns and cannon mark important historical places where an event occurred.

When I was in elementary school a classmate of mine and his father were exploring the upper river banks during a time when the water level was unusually low. He found a strange round object in the mud and dug it out.

It was confirmed by the local museum to be a six pound cannon ball from the 1812 era at the time when the British and Americans lobbed daily shots across the river at each other just to let the other side know they were still there.

While the events of that period are well documented and well known, there were a lot more things happening across the country that aren't as well known.

The local region around Dufferin County has its own fascinating history.

The region started receiving settlers in the 1820's who were hoping to prosper on new land in a new area.

By the 1850's, there were several well established towns as more people moved into the area. Some of those towns were real "Little House on the Prairie" type settlements with farmers on the rural land and local businesses in town.

Stage coaches provided travel along the routes between villages. Most settlements had a mill, blacksmith, cabinet maker, post office, general store, and all the business that made a town function.

There was also an unusually high number of hotels and taverns along major routes. It seems the early settlers really, really enjoyed a drink.

By the time the 20th century rolled around, many of those small towns had all but vanished. People moved on to better opportunities. In some cases the railroad bypassed a town which pretty much meant its future was in jeopardy.

There are remnants of these early towns. In some cases an old church is still standing or the school house is still there, but converted into a home. There are quite a few cemeteries that dot the area and probably many more grave sites that were forgotten and reclaimed by the land.

Some towns are remembered only by a simple sign that states the former name of the four corners. Other towns have completely vanished and are now reclaimed as farmland.

In some areas, the names of local families reflect the bloodline of the early pioneers.

The early years of the region have been documented by historical societies and the Museum of Dufferin is dedicated to keeping local history alive, but it seems schools don't teach anything to do with local history.

I'm sure some teachers do have kids complete projects on local past events, but after asking the children of friends who who are in school, not one kid recalled learning anything about local history.

I'm sure there are plenty of fascinating tales like someone's great-great-great grandfather who rode shotgun on the stage route through Amaranth between Brampton and Owen Sound.

It's important to keep local history alive.

It tells the story of how the area became what it is now and it also serves to remember a lot of brave people who ventured into unknown territory armed only with a couple of horses, a wagon, and a lot of determination.