

PIONEER LIFE -

Interesting Letter by One of the Early Settlers of McNab.

[This is transcribed from a clipping, found in a scrapbook at the Champlain Trail Museum Archives, from an undated Arnprior newspaper]

A Description of the Township in 1833

The following letter, written by one of the pioneers of McNab township and published in "Chamber's Edinburgh Journal" in the year 1833, will be found interesting reading to many of our subscribers, as it gives a graphic description of the trials which the early settlers endured during the *regime* of the "Old Chief." We are indebted to James Macdiarmid, Esq., of this village, for the loan of the volume of "Chamber's Journal" from which we make the extract:--

G---Brule, Township of McNab, Upper Canada, Jan. 13, 1833.

MY DEAR MOTHER—You'll no doubt have passed many an anxious hour about us since we left you, and I am sure it will afford you the greatest pleasure and consolation to hear that we are all in the very best of health, and in all likelihood, in a short time, to have in this country every comfort we could desire.

I might have written to you sooner, but could not have done it so satisfactorily, for it is little more than a month since we were finally on our own land, and in our own house. We had about eight weeks passage from Leith to Quebec; but, upon the whole, as comfortable a one as we could expect in so crowded a vessel. We left Quebec, the same day we arrived, by the steamer for Montreal, where we remained five days, waiting the sailing of the track boats through the Lachine Canal. Mr. S---, to whom, you know, I had a letter of introduction, received me very

kindly, and offered me the grant of 100 ares of land, in the lower province, free, if I chose to remain; or, if I had preferred going to Niagara, he would recommend me to the situation of a book-keeper to a gentleman from that place, who was then at Montreal.

We had steam navigation to Bytown, a distance of 120 miles from Montreal, and then, partly by land, but mostly by canoes, a farther distance of 50 miles, to this township, where we arrived in the middle of August.

I met with a warm and hospitable reception from M'Nab. We remained with him until I fixed upon a lot of land, where there was a small clearance, and a house; but we had not been on this lot more than a month, when the former occupier made his appearance, and claimed the lot as his. He had verbally given it up, but as he held the location ticket, we were obliged to leave it, and accepted the invitation of our then next neighbor to remain with him until we fixed upon another lot. This person was then in the midst of his harvest, and we gave him what assistance we could, and were thus gaining a little knowledge of the customs of the country, and, at the same time, becoming better acquainted with the nature of the land. I was cautious in fixing upon another lot, and went through the greater part of the township before I did so. I at last selected the one upon which I am now sitting. This lot is what is here called a Brule, a French term, but completely adopted here, meaning a place that has been burnt. A Brule is the wildest place of the forest. I have retained the name, and, in compliment to my mother, have prefixed her maiden name. It is customary for the settlers to give their lot a name, and it behoved me to do the same.

It frequently happens that fires arise in the woods in this country; and seven years ago, six miles long by three broad, of this township, was under fire, which has consumed a good deal of the timber; but the most of it is only killed, and in the course of

a few years, a great part of the hardwood is thrown down, and the underbrush springing up. My Brule formed part of this burning, and last autumn, I mean the autumn of 1831, it was again under fire, so that now there is scarce a living tree upon the lot, and a deal of the timber consumed, and in many places of the rear there is scarcely a stump left; and I may have 20 or 30 acres under crop next spring, if I can procure a yoke of oxen and seed.

The soil is a red clayey loam, lying mostly upon limestone, but partly upon a yellowish clay. The rear of the lot is a succession of gentle swelling banks, running across the lot till they terminate near the river Dochart, about 100 or 150 acres lower, where the land becomes a strong bluish marly clay. The land falls in the same manner again towards the Grand River; and as the neighbouring lots suffered also in the burnings, and my house being placed in the rear of the lot, I can see from it nearly a mile around me in all directions.

I have hitherto spoken only of the lot I hold free; but upon settling on land here, two things are to be particularly considered, that is firewood and water. I have plenty of excellent water on this lot. About the centre of it there is a fine running creek, that neither freezes in winter nor gets dry in summer; but I had no growing firewood, and the common estimate is that a settler should retain for that purpose from 20 to 30 acres of growing wood. In these circumstances, it became necessary to obtain this; and as the chief held the lot in the rear of the one I have been speaking of in his own hands, he agreed to let me have it on the same terms as his other settlers—that is, after three years, to pay him a barrel and a half of flour per 100 acres; and as there is about 140 acres of this lot adjoining the other one, also burnt in the same manner; but there is a point of it which the fire did not reach, that is within 500 yards of my house, which in a year or two I will

have to resort to for firewood. The soil of this lot is somewhat like the other, and the finest part of it runs down to and overhangs the lake, commanding a fine view of the lake and of the opposite shores of Lower Canada. The lake opposite me is from one to two miles broad.

The fire of 1831 left the greater part of my free lot quite bare; but in the course of last summer there sprung up a weed called Indian kale, the same plant that is cultivated by you as a garden flower, with which it is completely covered, and interspersed with young trees, which have already attained the height of two to three feet. Accidents have never happened to any of the settlers from these fires, as they never encroach upon the clearances. Where fire had run, or where a clearance has been made, and then left in a state of nature for four or five years, as was the case with six or eight acres of the lot I settled on first, there sprung up in the greatest profusion currants, gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries, plums, and white clover, which it appears are all indigenous to this country.

I would have preferred placing my house upon the lot adjoining the lake, and close to the lake, where there is a fine flat of the finest soil covered entirely with hardwood, consisting of maple, beech, barwood, and oak, of about 50 acres in extent; but, in the meantime, I thought it more advisable to place it as nearly as possible in the midst of the greatest extent of my best and clearest land. In a few years this will become a valuable situation, as the summer after next it is expected a steamboat will ply daily from Bytown to about 20 miles above this township. We saw this vessel building when on our way up, and she was finished in time to make a few trips last year to the Chats Rapids, 10 miles below us. These rapids have been surveyed, and a canal of three or four miles will be cut next spring, to avoid them; so that, in the course of

another year or two, we will have a continued chain of steam-boats from Montreal to about 20 miles above us.

This township is as yet in its infancy, although it has been settled for about 10 years. The settlers are only between fifty and sixty, and being mostly from the Highlands, and without capital or experience as farmers, they have made but little progress. Settlers in a new township have many and great difficulties to contend with at first, but the worst of these are now over here, and we may expect to make henceforth rapid improvement. Within the last two or three years, more enterprising men have settled on the township. Two or three of the old settlers who have lots on the lake, have gained money by keeping taverns, where there is a very considerable trade from the number of lumbering parties on the Grand River and the Madawaska; and among the recent settlers are two Stirlingshire men, who keep a store, and are erecting extensive saw-mills at the mouth of the latter. These mills are nearly ready to commence operations, and, when ready, they commence the erection of a flour mill, a great want here at present, the settlers having to go to the neighboring township to get their flour made.

The most of the settlers who have been here a few years are in comfortable circumstances; for the last season or two, they have been able to procure the use of a yoke of oxen, by rearing them or otherwise, and have now from ten to thirty acres under crop. In addition to the yoke of oxen, they have in general from two to six milch cows, one or two couple of young steers, two or three young cows, half a score to a score of sheep, and a few of them have a horse or two, and pigs, and plenty of the finest poultry. During six months of the year, these animals cost them nothing, but are turned into the woods, where they feed luxuriantly, each settler's cattle generally keeping by themselves, and commonly take a circuit of

three or four miles round the clearance. The only inconvenience of this is the trouble of searching for the cows to be milked twice a day, or for the oxen, when they are wanted for work. The most docile cow has a bell put round her neck, and by the sound of this, or by their track they are traced, for they have generally to be searched for, seldom coming home of themselves; and every man's cattle are allowed to graze where they please, except where the land is fenced, and a settler fences only his cleared land. The crops cultivated here are principally wheat, Indian corn and potatoes, with a little beer, rye, oats, peas, and turnips, as well as pumpkins, which are generally grown among the Indian corn. Timothy hay is also cultivated, and brings from £.2 to £.4 per ton. Wheat fetches about 5s., Indian corn 4s., oats 2s. 6d., potatoes, 1s. 6d. per bushel; and those settlers who have any of these articles for sale find a ready market for them at these prices, principally to the lumberers, taken from their own doors.

Many of the settlers take only half a lot, that is 100 acres, and are entitled by their location ticket, as soon as they have done the settlement duties, namely, cleared 5 acres per 100, to claim a patent deed at their own expense, which cost about £.2., and this entitles them to vote for a member of Parliament. There is a general meeting of the township held annually, on the first Monday of January, when all matters relative to the internal government of the township are agreed upon, and where we elect assessors, tax-collector, town-wardens, path-masters, town-clerk, etc., and at which M'Nab votes only as an individual, and has no control over the settlers, except as a justice of the peace.

In our patent deeds, government retains the precious metals, and the white pine and oak; but the two latter they do not prohibit us from cutting, and, if they cut them, they pay us for them at the customary rates. Our taxes are small, being, I think, 3d. for a cow, 4d. for an ox, 1d. for a cleared

acre, and 1s. 6d. per 100 acres of the land we hold.

In clearing land here, and getting on with operations, they have chopping bees, logging bees, raising bees, etc. A man generally chops his own timber, that is, cuts it down into such lengths as a yoke of oxen can pull, and what from four to five men can pile up—(all underbrush and small timber, such as he and his family can manage, they pile up and burn); and when this is done, he fixes upon a day, and acquaints his neighbors around him, according to the extent of the land he has to log, five men being necessary to a yoke of oxen, and these are able to do about an acre a day; so that, if he has four or five to log, he requires as many yokes of cattle and men accordingly, and on these occasions they are usually very punctual in attendance. He entertains them well at these times, having killed a sheep, or a cow, or ox, or perhaps pork or venison, with always tea or grog. At a raising, again, they muster in the same manner, about a dozen of men being necessary to put up a house, with a yoke or two of oxen, to drive in the timber, after it is cut and ready. The person we resided with, and one of his sons, assisted me in cutting the timber for my house, which occupied us for about a week; and when this was done, I acquainted my nearest neighbors of the day I had fixed on to get it put up, the whole of whom attended, to the number of thirteen, and put it up the same day.

A log house makes a very comfortable dwelling, being even warmer than a stone-house, when properly finished. Mine is built of white pine, and covered with barwood and ash scoops, and is 30 feet by 18 over the walls. The trees selected for a house are generally about a foot in diameter, and as the trees, from their growing thickly together, are straight, and without branches to within a short way of their top, you can get a cut of 30 feet off such a tree of nearly the same diameter at both ends, and these they very

neatly dovetail at the corners, which makes a very strong building which lasts a great many years. A number of newly erected houses are covered with shingles, that is, the wood of the white pine cut exactly like the slates on your house, and look as well and are very durable. For this sort of assistance on the part of your neighbors, you just pay them back in the same way, by assisting them when they call upon you. I have been at several of these bees, and a great deal of work is generally got through with.

At the loggings, I was much struck with the docility and great usefulness of the oxen, which are generally yoked in pairs, and will scramble through among logs with a very heavy draught, with the greatest ease and patience, where you could scarce believe they could escape without broken legs, and where horses would be useless, and are equally, if not more, obedient to the call of their driver than the horse. They are equally useful in the sleigh, the plough, and the harrow. In the lower province they yoke them by the horns, but here they place the yoke over the back part of the neck and front of the shoulder. A yoke of good oxen, six years old, when they become fit for the work cost about £20. Bye the bye, the horses of this country astonish me. I saw some in Montreal equal to any I have ever seen in my life; even the carters about the wharfs drive horses that your gentlemen would be proud to see in their carriages.

The Grand River at this season is a most interesting scene. It is while the river is frozen that the principal part of the traffic between the different parts of the country takes place, and the sleighs are seen moving in all directions on the ice; those drawn by horses always at a trot and frequently at a gallop, even with a load; one of the horses having a string of small bells around his neck to announce their approach. This is the season, too when our land roads are best, and land travelling is now also excellent. The

climate of this country is not so terrific as is frequently supposed by you; we have, no doubt, very keen frost, perhaps keener than with you, and it is more constant and continued; but we have also fine thaws when the weather is mild and pleasant; and even during our keenest frosts, we have through the day generally fine clear sunshine, the sun being much more powerful at this season here than with you; and our day is about two hours longer in winter, and two hours shorter in summer, than yours; and it is principally in the night that the severity of the frost is felt. This is generally our severest month, and some of the folks here say, that during seven years, they have not seen such severe frost as we have had lately; yet, on these days, I went about what I had to do out of doors as usual, and have never put on any additional dress to that I wore at home, except deer-skin gloves, with woolen ones under them, for my hands, with moccasins, and a couple of pairs of stockings, for my feet.

But you will, no doubt, think it is a dreadful thing to live in this thinly-peopled country, and so far from neighbours! I thought so, too, before I experienced it, but now, I assure you, I find myself more at ease than ever I felt in a town, and we are scarce ever a day without seeing some of our neighbours, or without invitations to go to see some of them; but these we seldom accept, having always so much to do at home; and we are always welcome guests at the chief's (he is always called the Chief, or M'Nab—to call him Mr. M'Nab would be thought highly derogatory), and I am never down that way but I am invited to dine with him. Indeed, there is a spirit of hospitality here which is quite unknown at home, and in travelling through the country there is scarce a house you enter where you are not invited to partake of their bed and board, without money and without price. We have just now invitations from two of the settlers that I formerly alluded to, who are storekeepers,

one of whom is also an extensive lumber-merchant, and who at first worked as a lumberer himself—from the one, to a ball he is to give in a few days; and from the other, to take a drive in his sleigh on the river, and to visit some of the settlers on the opposite shore.

The wild animals of this part of the country are the bear, the wolf, the fox, the marten, the minx, the skunk, the musk-rat, the porcupine, and squirrel. The first of these seldom or never acts but on the defensive; the wolves are seldom seen, but sometimes heard at night, and rarely molest any of our domestic animals, as the woods are swarming with deer, upon which they principally prey. The lesser animals I have named now and then carry off the poultry; but the most of the settlers allow them to roost in the open places and breed in the fields, and they are of course quite exposed to attack. The chief told me that, in one season, he had seventy turkeys carried off, and he at length discovered that the culprit was a huge old wolf, that sheltered himself a little way from his house. He watched him one night, and put two balls through him. He pointed out to me where these were lodged in the wall of his house after passing through the body of the animal, and even after this it took several dogs to kill him.

Deer are so numerous that you seldom pass through the woods without seeing them, except at this time of the year, when the cold forces them into the swamps for shelter. Some of the settlers have killed from twenty to thirty of these animals this season. Their flesh is, I am told, much superior to that of the deer in Scotland. I never tasted venison at home, but here I think I never tasted anything finer, being as fat and juicy as veal or mutton. We have hares, which at this season become white, but only about half the size of yours; one of these I shot a few days ago, which weighed about 4 lbs., and made excellent soup. We have also

partridges, nearly approaching in size to your pheasants, of which a great many are killed. When you come upon them, they generally take to the tree, and are easily shot.

We can pass through the woods here at all times with perfect safety; and the settlers think no more of passing from one part of the township to the other in the night than they do in the day; and boys of six or seven will go in search of their cows for a good many miles round their clearance, where they are acquainted, without the least danger; the greatest hazard is in going into a part of the wood where one is not well acquainted, especially if the sun is not seen, for then you are just as apt to go in the wrong as in the right direction.

The whole surface of the land here is covered with wood, except the meadows formed by the beavers. These are, in extent, from a few acres up to 50 or more, and are spread here and there throughout the whole township, and furnish the settlers with excellent winter feeding for their stock. Some of these meadows are as lovely spots as I ever saw, their margins being generally fringed with the beautiful dark green foliage of the evergreen, balm of gilead, and the spruce fir, whose tops tower above the surrounding wood. The beavers are now entirely extirpated, the Indians considering them as their peculiar property, and always destroy the whole of them so soon as a township is surveyed. These meadows are every year losing their beauty, as the dams and canals of the beavers are being choked up with alder willows and other plants; but many of the stumps of the trees, cut down by these wonderful creatures to form their dams and embankments, are still to be seen; and it is worthy of remark, that in chopping down a tree we exactly follow their mode of doing it.

I subjoin a rough draught of the township, from which you will be able to form a pretty correct idea of our situation. I have not put into it a river called the Lochy,

and have laid down only so much of the Dochart as shows how it affects me. This stream is something like the Westburn, or perhaps a little larger, and at some time after may be turned to account as a mill power. Between each concession there is a road of 66 feet in breadth, and the same between every fifth lot. These roads are not yet cut, but each settler is bound to clear the half opposite his own lot. The township is laid down in 200 acre lots, and contains nearly 80,000 acres.

The sowing season commences about the middle of May; and those settlers who have not oxen of their own, and cannot obtain the use of them, just hoe and rake in their seeds in a very tedious and insufficient manner. Seeds are continued to be put in till the end of June and beginning of July, potatoes being the last and by this time the full crops of wheat and rye are becoming ready for the sickle. On our best land we will sometimes have a return of 30 bushels of wheat for each bushel sown, but generally not more than 20. Farm servants get from £24 to £30 a year, and their board. Women get £12. Sheep are a very profitable stock, and thrive well. Wool sells readily at 2s. 6d. per stone. My land, from its lying high and dry, is well adapted for this sort of stock; and I may have, in two or three years, 40 to 50 acres in grass, besides 20 or 30 for other crops, having at least this much land upon which there is not a living tree; and although, in many parts of this land, dead stumps and withered trees are standing, these would be no impediment to harrowing in the timothy and white clover, which would cut for hay, or be made pasture, as might be thought expedient; but if I am not able to overtake this, the land will of course again become every year wilder.

This is a very healthy part of Canada, sickness of any kind being very rare; and fever and ague, which are very common over about the great lakes are here quite unknown.

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But we have neither church nor school in this township; many of the young people are growing up without even learning to read; and, in return for the attention and kindness which have been shown to us by our neighbours, I have undertaken to give their children lessons in reading and writing, during an hour of the day, along with my own. I have about a dozen sometimes in attendance; and although some of them have nearly two miles to walk, they are seldom a day absent.

We have very few mechanics here; indeed I know of none, except two smiths, who have also land; one shoemaker, and a tailor employed by the storekeepers, who receives twelve dollars a month, and board, but this man is generally half the week drunk. In my opinion no man can do wrong in coming to this country who is industrious and sober, and who is not amply remunerated for his labour at home; for it is beyond all doubt that the Canadas have as great natural advantages as the United States and are running the same race in prosperity, and greatness.

I am, etc. etc.

Barwood=basswood

Kale=