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Wellington Advertiser
02 March 2007
Valuing Our History

Credit Valley Railway created hamlet of Orton

A good parlour game question for history buffs is to list the places named after
Wellington County politicians. There are four: Stirton, Drew, Higinbotham, and Orton.

All were named for members of parliament when post offices opened at those
locations. Orton is perhaps the best known of the four today. It was the only one to gain
police village status, and the only one to top 100 in population at any time in its
existence.

Orton straddles the town line between East Garafraxa and Erin. It is not unusual for
hamlets to be parts of adjoining townships, but for Orton the situation became more
complicated with the creation of Dufferin in the 1880s. That put it in two counties.

The key figure in the early history of Orton was William Mooney, who constructed the
first store in the area, a small facility reputedly only 10 by 12 feet in size. The venture
was successful, and Mooney soon expanded.

Through the 1870s the nearby hamlet of Mimosa was by far a bigger centre, attracting a
great deal of business with its handful of stores and shops, and a post office which
opened there in 1860.

Despite the competition form Mimosa, Mooney did quite well in his store, even though
there was no official name for his settlement. Some sources claim the spot was named
Little Chicago, but that moniker only seems to exist in 20th century historical accounts.
Nevertheless, it may well originate in Mooney's time as an ironic description of his
minuscule business centre.

The future business and transportation patterns of the area were evident in the surveys
of the Credit Valley Railway, done in 1872. The route of the new line traced a line from
Cataract, south of Orangeville, to Erin, Hillsburgh, Belwood (then known as Douglas),
Fergus, and terminating at Elora. The railway desired a station in the expanse between
Hillsburgh and Belwood, and selected a site near Mooney's store on the township line.

The underfunded CVR faced continual problems during its construction phase, but rails
eventually were spiked all the way to Elora in the last days of 1879. Service began in
January 1880, after the sheriff released the railway's cars, held in Toronto with
mechanics liens on them.

Though something of a cruel joke in Canada's business circles, the Credit Valley line
soon made a strong impression on the area east of Fergus, providing a market for

firewood and cheaper freight rates on the shipping of agricultural products than those possible with the older transportation facilities.

The line offered two daily trains each way, making possible, for the first time, a same-day trip to Toronto. Those trains also carried mail cars, which vastly improved postal service at the villages all along the line.

It was obvious that there should be an railway-served post office between Hillsburgh and Belwood. Thus Orton opened officially on Oct. 1, 1881. The name honoured Dr. George Orton, the Fergus physician and renegade Conservative MP for Centre Wellington. The Credit Valley opened a station, originally planned almost a decade earlier. At first it was merely a flag stop to serve the new post office. Later came an 800-foot siding to facilitate carload freight shipments.

Tom Turner, a farmer on the Garafraxa side of the townline road, secured the postmaster's position, perhaps through some string pulling by Dr. Orton, but he resigned within a year. Storekeeper Bill Mooney was the obvious choice. He would hold the position from 1882 until his death in July 1915. Mooney was something of magnate, though on a small scale. With the new station a stone's throw from his door, he took advantage of the railway to branch out. In co-operation with the railway he constructed cattle pens and began a sideline as a cattle drover, shipping livestock from Orton. He was the front man for several Orangeville investors in constructing a grain shed beside the siding, and later a full grain elevator. He was also one of the first to promote the commercial cultivation of potatoes. For that sideline he constructed another warehouse, weighing and bagging facility at the station. He handled a lot of spuds, and eventually branched into other root crops, particularly turnips, but never unseated nearby Hillsburgh as the potato capital of the area.

A major disadvantage for Mooney was the lack of banking facilities in Orton. That made transactions for cattle and grain difficult. After years of appeals, he persuaded the Union Bank to open a branch in the hamlet in 1912. He even erected a building for the office and leased it. The Royal Bank later absorbed the Union, and the branch continued under the new name until depression conditions and reduced business led to its closure in 1932.

As a business centre, Orton enjoyed its peak in the early years of the 20th century. The Canadian Pacific, which absorbed the Credit Valley line in 1884, constructed a new and larger station after 1900. Police Village status came in 1901. That was a limited form of local government, headed by three trustees, with jurisdiction over streets and local utilities. The trustees reported to the township council, and the police village budget and added a special tax rate for those within its boundaries.

The early years of the 20th century also saw a new Methodist Church, and thriving business at Orton's blacksmith shop, harness shop, two stores, and the Exchange Hotel.

Ben Mooney took over the Orton empire on his father's death, but he lacked his father's business sense. Perhaps more importantly, conditions changed in the 1920s, resulting in the slow decline of small business centres everywhere. Agricultural shipments nosedived with the introduction of trucks, though Orton's station did retain some farm business. In later years, after 1940, the major outgoing freight was waxed turnips, shipped by Jim Courtney.

In 1928 Ben Mooney bailed out. He sold the businesses, resigned as postmaster, and moved to Toronto. Brother John Mooney took over the store, and Tom Hayward was appointed postmaster.

In 1937 Hayward constructed a new building for the post office. It operated there until its closure in 1990. Beginning in 1912 three rural routes operated from Orton, but eventually they were all consolidated under the jurisdiction of a single driver. Mail carrier Barb White set something of a record, working out of the Orton office for more than 50 years.

One by one the businesses closed, while trucks and motor cars rendered the railway facilities obsolete. In 1932 a single mixed train replaced the two daily passenger trains each way.

All passenger service ended in 1957. Four years later the station was moved away and converted to a residence. The school house, built in 1892, shut its door forever in 1964. Next to go was St. John's Church, closing in 1969. The old Exchange Hotel had been the first victim of changing times, closing with the introduction of prohibition in 1915.

Police village status for Orton was revoked in 1967. By then the population had fallen to 58. Ironically, a new subdivision was then under construction on the edge of town.

The railway, which was the reason for the existence of Orton, saw less and less traffic through the hamlet, and the trains, on their way to and from Fergus, rarely stopped there. Official closure of the line, and the removal of the tracks, came in 1989.

The rail line is now the route of the Elora Cataract Trailway. The majority of hikers and cyclists have little idea what a beehive the hamlet of Orton was in its heyday.