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Valuing Our History

### Railroad station helped to sustain hamlet of Orton

Four hamlets in Wellington County were named for sitting Members of Parliament. For a period of time, the Post Office Department had a practice of using the name of a sitting member to identify new rural offices in or near their ridings.

The Wellington offices so named were Drew, Parker, Stirton, and Orton. Of those four, Orton was the last, dating to 1880. That office took advantage of the new Credit Valley Railway's Elora branch, which began service early that year.

The line was intended to tap a previously unserved rural area. There were stations at the existing towns of Hillsburg and Belwood (then known as Garafraxa), but railway officials thought a station between the two would generate significant business.

The Credit Valley located the station at the point where the line crossed the Erin-East Garafraxa boundary. There was already a business there, Mooney's general store. Though it had no official recognition, local people called the spot "Little Chicago."

The post office, though, selected the name Orton for the office it opened there, in honour of Dr. George T. Orton, the eccentric, whiskey-swilling Fergus physician who then sat as the Conservative MP for Centre Wellington.

At the time the railway was under construction, Mooney's store was an insignificant business. Local people relied on nearby post offices such as Craigsholme and Mimosa. But Mooney's store was on a fairly important road that provided access to the local farm community.

The Orton office opened on October 1, 1881, with a man named Tom Turner as postmaster. He resigned a year later, and storekeeper William Mooney took over at the beginning of 1883, moving the office to his store. He held the position until his death 32 years later. His son took over for another 13 years until he retired to Toronto in 1928.

The post office, in the years before rural delivery of mail, ensured a steady stream of business to the Mooney store. It was the railway, though, that boosted the hamlet.

Along the single siding at Orton there was soon a row of facilities to serve local agriculture: cattle pens, a loading ramp, and a grain warehouse that was twice enlarged into a full elevator.

Within a few years a hostelry, known as the Exchange Hotel, opened to the public. It was much used as a base by travelling salesmen and cattle buyers who came and went

by train. Mooney gained competition when a second store opened. A harness shop undertook repairs and new work, and sold farm implements shipped in by rail.

The growth of Orton's business sector came at the expense of several nearby smaller hamlets. The major victim was Mimosa, which had two stores and two hotels, plus a handful of artisan's shops, before 1880. A decade later only one store remained, which housed the post office.

Orton's peak years spanned the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1907 local residents petitioned for police village status. That permitted them to elect a committee of three to look after certain local affairs such as drainage, streets and sidewalks, and financed by a budget set by township council. In the case of Orton, money came from both East Garafraxa and Erin. Police village status minimized some of the jurisdictional problems: the main street was the dividing line between the two townships.

Undercapitalized and perpetually short of working capital, the Credit Valley became part of the Canadian Pacific network when the new transcontinental rail line acquired the majority of its bonds. From 1883 the line operated as a branch and feeder of Canadian Pacific's growing Ontario branch network.

By 1900, the Orton station had become a significant shipping point for cattle and grain. On some days a half dozen loaded cattle cars left the pens. The elevator, by then owned by a group of Orangeville grain merchants, also did a good business.

Activity there was sufficiently strong that the Union Bank, headquartered in Winnipeg, decided to open a sub-branch in Orton, staffed by members of its Hillsburg branch.

Located in a new two-storey building, constructed by Enoch Price of Marsville and adjoining Mooney's store, the branch was initially open two days each week, on days when the railway shipped cattle. Banking business soon exceeded the expectations of the bank's head office, resulting in daily opening of the branch.

Two years later, the post office made significant changes, closing the majority of small rural offices and instituting rural delivery in their place. That meant less traffic at the Orton store by existing customers, but a wider service area. The Orton office became a more important one as the base of three rural routes.

Orton was situated in what might be termed the "root crop belt" of Wellington County. A few farmers there contracted to grow sugar beets in the years immediately before and after 1900. The railway shipped the beets to the then-new sugar refinery in Bridgeport. The routing, though, was a circuitous one, resulting in high freight costs. After a couple of years farmers gave up on beets as too labour intensive and unprofitable.

More significant were the potato and turnip crops, which reached huge volumes by the 1920s. Those crops, too, normally left town by rail. Jim Courtney, a major dealer in turnips, set up a waxing plant in the old elevator building, which had closed when grain

volumes plummeted.

Trucks and automobiles threatened Orton's importance beginning in the mid-1920s. Cattle dealers called at farms and hauled cattle directly to the Toronto stock yards. Trucks ate into the moving of other agricultural products as well. Farmers, driving powered cars and trucks, could travel to stores in Fergus, Guelph, and Orangeville. Slowly, the importance of Orton declined.

Changes soon hit the hamlet. In 1932 the Royal Bank, which had merged with the Union Bank in 1925, closed the Orton bank branch. The Exchange Hotel was also closed by then, a victim of the prohibition years. A positive development that year was the arrival of electricity, as Ontario Hydro expanded its rural delivery network.

Freight volume on the Canadian Pacific line declined steadily. The post office, no longer seen as a profitable adjunct to the store, moved to its own small building, on railway property near the station, in 1937. Canadian Pacific ended passenger service on the Elora branch in 1957. After that, freight trains served the line on an as-needed basis until the mid 1980s, but cars loading or unloading at Orton were, by then, rare sights.

The Orton public school, opened in 1892, closed permanently in 1964 during the school consolidation period. Three years later, Orton gave up its police village status. By then the population had dropped to less than 60, half of what it had been at the start of the century.

Most controversial was the closing of the post office. In October 1989 postal officials announced that the Orton office would close in two weeks. The reason was that the land under the building was being sold by the railway, due to the closing of the CPR branch. Crews removed the track late that year, ending any hope of a rail revival. There was no place for the post office to relocate, because the Orton general store had closed as well.

An uproar by local residents resulted in a 90-day delay, moving the closing date up to January 31, 1990. The Orton store opened under new ownership a year later. The proprietors succeeded in having a franchise postal outlet opened in the store. That outlet served until it, too, closed on March 28, 2001.

A new subdivision and new residences have recently swelled Orton to its highest population figures ever, but as a business and shipping centre the hamlet's heyday is a part of our local history. It is a fate shared by too many hamlets in Wellington County.