

"The O'Neills and Holly Park"

Glancing through the files of the Bolton Enterprise in 1904 we found that, for a few weeks, we had a correspondent from the little hamlet of Holly Park, and since we had the pleasure a few years ago of visiting Holly Park House we thought we would follow up some of the history of this little spot in King Township -- the 16th sideroad between the 10th line and the 11th line.

"Holly Park" -- what a delightful name! We have been most lucky in talking with Joe O'Neill, a young man who is the fifth generation of his family to live at Holly Park -- in fact it was the O'Neill's who were first to settle there, and who brought the name "Holly Park" from Ireland with them. Joe O'Neill has done much research into the lives of his ancestors, and his grandfather, Frank O'Neill, is a constant mine of information and anecdotes.

There is no sign to tell the traveller he has arrived at Holly Park, and few farmers are left to remind us of the thriving little community once there.

However, Holly Park Post Office remains, and is really the centre of our story.

On May 25th, 1814, Michael O'Neill was born in the County of Limerick, Ireland, and he emigrated to Canada in 1841 with his wife, Margaret O'Halleran, also his brother, Pat, and his wife Catherine.

On their arrival in King Township Michael purchased the farm on Lot 15, Concession 10 West. At the time it was all bush, but, with his determination and much hard work, proved to be a very productive peice of land.

On the corner of the sideroad and the 11th line, Michael built his home. It was of logs, but quite distinctive. Each corner of the building was constructed in a different manner, and today it is believed the reason to be that Mike had four sons, and probably each one was detailed to build a corner of the house -- hence four different methods.

Michael had 75 acres, plus another 25 acres on the opposite side of the 11th line, south of the sideroad.

This little house was destined to have a long and useful life, for it was occupied until 1965, when Janet Van Ostren purchased it and removed it to near Mansfield where it will be rebuilt. She employed an architect who was careful in taking true dimensions so it could be reassembled exactly.

In so doing, the fireplace, long sealed up, was uncovered to reveal the crane, some old letters and an ancient copy of one of Eaton's first catalogues! We understand Mrs. Van Ostren has saved these pieces carefully.

There was a saw-mill at Holly Park, which also belonged to Michael, on the north-west corner of the 10th line and 16 sideroad, which now belongs to the Westbrook family.

Michael and Margaret had seven children, one of whom was Michael Joseph. This young man helped his father clear the land; he entered public life at an early age filling various positions of trust. He was elected Deputy-Reeve of the Township Council in 1911.

(con't.)

Michael Joseph was the first Post Master of Holly Park, about the year 1880, and conducted his business in the original log house for about 20 years. Then he moved to Bolton to manage the Queen's Hotel for around five years or so, then on to Toronto and later died there.

Patrick, Michael's brother, owned 125 acres on the 16th sideroad through to the 10th line, where he also built a log house, at the roadside. The pump still stands to mark the spot.

Here Pat and his wife Catherine raised their family, John, Michael Paddy and Bridget, Mary Ann, Janie and Helen. Of the children, Paddy and Bridget were the two who never married.

As the family grew in number and size, Patrick built a larger house, of clapboard, later brick, behind the log house on a little knoll. It still stands today.

He gave John and Michael each 50 acres, retaining 25 for himself, presumably with Paddy and Bridget to help him.

In 1861 John was married to Mary Ann Colgan and they lived in what is now the present Holly Park House, built for them on their 50 acres by John's father. John's first for his bride had been burned to the ground before they married but, undaunted by such tragedy, the present home was built on the charred logs, set on a stone foundation, and John and Mary Ann had many happy years in this charming house.

Mary Ann used to say -- "If God dropped a pin from Heaven it would fall on a stump"!! -- which says a lot for the land in those days.

Mary Ann was a diligent soul, picking apples all through the fall, drying them, and preserving them for luscious apple pies and puddings in the cold winter months. Some of Mary Anne's dishes and furniture are still among the family treasures.

John's brother Michael built a house on his 50 acres, directly behind John's house. He and his wife lived there for a number of years. When they moved away the house lay empty until Paddy and Bridget took over, later moving the house to Church Street in Schomberg, where it still stands. Joe O'Neill is the proud owner of both watches belonging to his great great uncle Paddy and great great aunt Bridget.

We must all experience a feeling of awe and some excitement at the sight of a house being moved from one location to another with all of today's best engineering skills. Imagine what it must have been like years ago!

When Patrick, the father, died, his home and 25 acres was sold to Rose, John's daughter.

Opposite Holly Park House was 105 acres with a log house, and barn. John purchased this, and the barn, now 109 years old, is being torn down to make way for a hydro line. The log house was quite unique in that it had closets, and glass around the front door.

(con't.)

After some years it was dismantled and the logs taken off to the saw-mill to make the kitchen addition to Holly Park House. The staircase from the log house also found added life at the "big house" -- it was placed in the addition as were the windows and doors.

When his Uncle Mike sold the farm, John became Post Master and the post office was moved to Holly Park House. Taxes were \$29.60 a year in those days; post cards were mailed free, unsealed letters went for 2¢ and sealed letters for 3¢.

The mail carrier arrived at Holly Park at 5 o'clock in the morning from Linton and then went on to Nobleton. He would then return at 1 a.m. to bring dailies and letters. Holly Park Post Office held mail for about 25 people from local farms. Letters were kept in a large closed-in cupboard with double doors and pigeon holes. The names are still to be seen on it and the cupboard is in Frank O'Neill's home today. It stood on a large desk which was made, at the request of Mary Anne, John's wife, by "Daddy" Simpson who lived at Bell's Lake.

They had some wonderfully happy parties and social gatherings at Holly Park House. The men, women and young people of the community danced to the "O'Neill Orchestra" which consisted of Frank O'Neill on base fiddle, Redmond on violin and Rose at the organ. The dancers would square dance right through the kitchen and on into the living room. The orchestra would play for town dances too, and many was the time the organ would be put on the sleigh and taken, by lantern-light, to the church down the road for midnight mass.

John and Mary Anne's children were Mary Helen, Lillian, Redmond, Rose and Francis (Frank). Redmond died at an early age leaving Frank as John's only son.

Frank married Mary Chambers and they moved into Holly Park House with his parents. As time went on Frank took over the Post Office duties until, about 1920 when mail routes began and Holly Park Post Office was closed.

In 1924 Frank and Mary with his father John, left Holly Park to live at the north-east corner of the 15th sideroad and 10th line, where Frank purchased the house and four acres from his sister Lillian. John's wife, Mary Anne had died at Holly Park House.

After nine years what should happen but Frank found Holly Park House back on his hands again, and after renting for a few more years it lay vacant until around 1940 when Miss Freda James moved in. While she lived there Canadian Homes and Gardens did a feature article on the house and Miss James, whose flair and knowledge of interior decorating is exceptional and to be greatly admired.

Frank's second son, Vincent, with his wife, Alice McKenna, moved into Holly Park House in 1946 until 1950, when it was sold -- and we can share the sentiment here with Joe O'Neill who would dearly love the home to be still in the family name.

However, through a series of owners, the house is now the pride and joy of Andrew and Judy Welsh, who are busily engaged in restoring the home to its own country splendour again.

(con't.)

Imagine Mrs. Welsh's delight when she found an old, old large bowl in the basement, tucked far back on a shelf. It is white with a reddish tinge to it and obviously was used by the O'Neill women through the years.

For those of you who believe the spirits of people live on in a house forever, sometimes quite strongly, let us tell you this -- many times through recent years the cries of a baby have been heard coming from the room on the north west side of the house, the room where the O'Neill babies were tended and nursed.

This intrigues us tremendously and we have no doubt of the truth of the story (our own home in England was haunted by a monk, quite a friendly little chap!)

Vincent O'Neill is not far away from Holly Park House -- he moved, in 1950, keeping the hundred acres opposite the house, and bought the farm on the 10th concession, lot 11, where he now resides.

The correspondent to the Enterprise at the beginning of this century mentioned several other residents of Holly Park Hamlet: J. A. Hunter who purchased a pair of pure bred pigs; Wm. Smith, who, with Frank O'Neill contemplated taking a course at O.A.C. Guelph; Mr. J. Cairns who was elected Road Commissioner for the section; John Egan who put a stone wall under the barn on Holly Park farm; Messrs. N. Scott, H. Kaake, A. Cherry and Miss H. K. Cairns now taking violin lessons from Prof. Joe Smith of this place and intend coming out as the tenth line quartette this fall; Mr. J. Watson is preparing to put a brick wall under his stable; and J. A. Hunter had his barn and house repaired.

To end this story about Holly Park Joe O'Neill found this poem written by John Colgan, father of Mary Anne, John O'Neill's wife. Having enjoyed a sumptuous repast at Holly Park House one evening, John Colgan couldn't resist putting pen to paper with these delightful words --

"The Holly Park Oyster Supper"

Oh, yes! I am fond of roast turkey,
And chicken and goose I like well,
But give me at supper or banquet,
Good oyster just fresh from the shell.

Just such as I ate at a supper,
One bright chilly eveing this fall,
Gotten up by the Holly Park Drummers,
And held in their large banquet hall.

They were cooked in the lacteal fluid,
Of a thorobred Jersey I'm told,
And a caterer old in the business
Made the tables a sight to behold.

(con't.)

And the moment we heard the bell ringing
To the table we quickly did glide,
Where we ate and we drank of the grandest
Till the inner man was satisfied.
And even the modest young ladies,
Dressed in silks and in satins so fine,
To the toast of the evening responded,
And gently sipped of their wine.

Then after supper was over
Some good parlor games we did play,
For Knights of the Grip are the fellows,
Who can pass a dull hour away.

Then all left for home in good humour,
But I've been informed that 'twas late
When some of our sporting young fellows,
Kissed their sweethearts good-bye at the gate.

Now three cheers for the Holly Park Drummers,
And success to their fast growing trade;
May prosperity ever surround them
Is the wish of the Holly Park Blade.

John Colgan wrote a book of poems and if they were all as enjoyable as this one they would certainly be worth reading. While Joe O'Neill is alive the hamlet of Holly Park will never die, and, with him, we shall watch with interest the Welsh's as they continue the happy and rewarding task of restoring Holly Park Post Office.



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