

# The Grand Dispatch

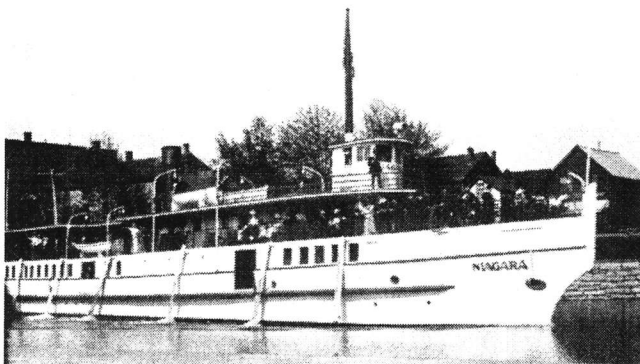
A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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## Cottagers' Corporation is formed

### We enter the Twentieth Century!

As this Dispatch is put together, one wonders what the first summer visitors at Port Maitland had in mind for our little spot in the sun. Make no mistake about it, Port Maitland was a place to be at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was no Sleepy Hollow, but neither was it Chicago! It boasted numerous passenger excursion boats travelling to and from places like Fort Erie Grove and Crystal Beach ON, Fredonia, Buffalo and Dunkirk NY and Erie PA. These were not small, twenty passenger motor boats. They were large ships able to accommodate from three hundred to nine hundred and eighty tourists per trip. Many of these ships had overnight accommodations and recreational facilities for their guests. Ships with names such as Arundell, Jessie L. McEdward, Starling, W M Alderson, Pariwinkle, Huntress, H G Barnhurst, Knobloch, Mascotte, Dixie, Pilgrim, Fairy, United Shores, Niagara, Olcott and the Darius Cole all plied this very lucrative route.



Excursion Steamer Niagara, tied up at Dunnville.

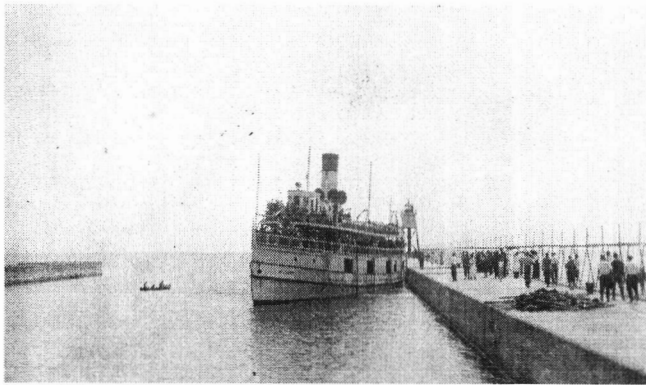
Photo; from "Remember When" loaned by Jim Ferris

Not only were there trips destined for foreign ports on Lake Erie, but there were also numerous smaller local tourist launches. According to the Dunnville Chronicle, "In August of 1900, a fellow by the name of Freeman Green had fixed up the "Lighter," as a passenger craft. He built a railing around it, covered it with canvas and seated it and is doing an excursion business, using his tug to tow it. On Monday night he took a party to Port Maitland, where dancing was indulged in at the pavilion until eleven o'clock. On Wednesday he took an excursion to Port Maitland under the auspices of the English Church. The boat left at three o'clock several hours were spent on shore, and they arrived home at eleven o'clock. The citizens' band accompanied both excursions."

Freeman Green, was not alone in the business of moving passengers and freight in and around our little tourist area. Many others such as Percy Siddall, ran passenger launches. Using the Silver Spray, Percy ferried passengers from Port Maitland to Dunnville. The Feeder Canal was still operating during this golden time and vessels carrying freight made their way to Lake Ontario via this inland waterway. The Ouse River was operated by Charles Ross, while John Green serviced tourists with his boat the Doris G.

There is no one alive today that can recall fishing as it was during this pristine period. Fish were caught by the tons, by both commercial and sport fishermen. There are stories (supposedly confirmed ones) where sports fishermen out fished any fisherman I have ever met at Beckley Beach. "One

afternoon last week Col. McIntyre, of Buffalo, caught 620 perch with a rod and line at Port Maitland. This is no fish story, but an actual fact.” So says the Dunnville Gazette in 1891. Sturgeons weighing in at 170 lbs. were not uncommon and catching of Maskinonge weighing 50 lbs. was even more common. One man claims to have caught 250 herring at Port Maitland in one hour without even using bait! These fish, or the fish stories were so fantastic that even the Buffalo Fishing Club (of professional gentlemen) set up fishing camps for weeks at a time at Port.



Cruise Ship Olcott, leaving from west pier at Port Maitland.

Photo by Bob McKee courtesy of: Dunnville Library

The Buffalo Yacht Club, which still flourishes just east of “Our very Canadian landmark lighthouse, at Point Abino” in present day Fort Erie made many visits to our waters. The club visited Port Maitland, applying every opportunity to show off their finest new sailing yachts. Port Maitland as we entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century might be generously described as the Monaco or Catalina Island of the Great Lakes. Yearly races took place from Buffalo to Port Maitland and return. It was during these lavish excursions while the crews were recuperating, that the one hundred and eleven plus rooms in the various hotels, boarding houses, and inns in Port Maitland were filled to capacity. Often it was necessary for the sailors and other tourist to head to Dunnville for accommodations. Keep in mind that most of these

boats already had some accommodations on board. You do the math! Port Maitland was a humming little place!

I have only briefly touched on the many interesting stories of splendour that have been associated with Port Maitland and thus Beckley Beach. History is also about progress, and ten years ago, we (I use “we” with a bit of editorial licence.) took a big step forward and ended seventy-five years of gentle, yet cramping ownership of our land by the company responsible for making it possible for us to settle here.

In 1915, the TH&B purchased our little resort area and removed most of its former inhabitants. Over time, with the support of my Grandfather, Wm. J. Warnick, (lot 39, 41 & 43) and others, Mr. Beckley was persuaded to allow limited summer use of his railways industrial land. At first tents were put up, then in time, as the tenants felt they needed more secure facilities, wooden bases were placed on the ground to protect against the cold and to hold the tents in places. Eventually, small cottages were permitted.

Today, some cottages have reached splendour never dreamed possible previous to 1990, when the Cottagers’ Corporation gained ownership.

### **The Beckley Beach Cottagers’ Corporation is formed**

Recently the Dunnville Heritage Association asked me to send them a short story about my research of Beckley Beach for their January 2000 newsletter. I included the following paragraph. “No one could own property at Beckley Beach. The TH&B, owned it all, and had intentions other than residential or cottage use for it. We were only temporary tenants, while the railway waited for a better offer. Until the early 1960’s, most cottages were well-maintained. With the coming of the

fertilizer and chemical factories and that awful smell and pollution that came with them, Beckley Beach deteriorated considerably. This became a sore spot with me and I needed to restore our reputation, if not publicly, then privately."

You will also remember in the second issue of The Grand Dispatch, I told you about the formation of the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Association and some of its many accomplishments. In this issue, I will bring you up to date on the formation and accomplishments of the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Corporation.



Jim and Sandra Gill's well manicured cottage; (Lot 21) September, 1999

William A. Warnick Collection

The year 2000, begins the second decade of ownership of our own property at Beckley Beach. The purchase of Beckley Beach did not come easily or quickly. Over seventy-five years a number of attempts had been made to convince the railway to sell the land to the cottagers. In 1978, after a twenty-year hibernation the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Association was reactivated under the longest serving president in the history of the Association, Joseph Warnick (lot 37). Mind you Joe was elected in July of 1958 and then the Association went dormant. I must find out from Uncle Joe, how he did that! At the first meeting Joe and his

executive ended their reign. Tom McNally (lot 63) would have the job of reinvigorating the Association and making an offer to the TH&B in August 1979. The answer came back on September 24, 1979. The railway was not interested in selling. This letter was followed with a further request by Tom, made directly to Mr. John Hill, the General Manager of the TH&B. The Association, wished to keep the fire burning and Tom requested the railway to give the Association first right of offer to purchase.

During the next ten years a number of requests to sell were made to the railway. In 1985, Reg Wheeler (lot 44A) had a lengthy discussion with Mr. Johnny Hill (prior to Mr. Hill's retirement as Superintendent of the railway). Mr. Hill indicated that "the railroad company was not interested in selling the land nor did he think it would happen in the near future." In the next five years much would happen to change the course of Beckley Beach. The Canadian Pacific Railway had appeared to have become the owners of the TH&B railway including Beckley Beach, and the latter would on the face of it disappear. The CPR, not wanting to get involved in its many real-estate holdings had a subsidiary called Marathon Realty Corporation, to take care of the day to day operations of their properties. In 1986, Diane Beaulieu, (lot 36A) Bev Zon, (lot 48B) and Bud Eckert (lot 53) were elected to lead the Association. The first two years they worked to bring all owners into the mind-set of forming a Corporation. The cottage owners all worked to write up a set of By-laws to govern this proposed Corporation.

The next two years were the most difficult, since CPR could not be pushed to speed-up the process. In an undated memo reporting on a meeting held October 27, 1987, between an official of the Canadian Pacific and Bud Eckert the president of the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Association at that time-there was hope. Quote: "The recommendation from the London office of the CPR

will be to sell the land with the acknowledgment that we are willing to buy the land. Upper management still must make a decision on the possible sale." It became clear from discussions with CPR, the Association would need to regroup and form a corporation. Plans were made, and a lawyer was hired to get the ball rolling. During the following two years many discussions took place and the Association was as ready as one could be. All that was necessary now was for the railway to make the next move.



Recently rebuilt cottage of Fathers Ron and Dave Côté (lot 39) April, 1999.

William A. Warnick collection

By January 1990, things were beginning to hum. An offer of \$550,000 had been made in the fall of 1989 and then rejected by Marathon Realty Corp. Surprise! An interesting fact had been uncovered! "The TH&B still exists. The legal owner of the land is still the TH&B!" It seems, not everything is as it seems.

Association president Eckert, was a busy executive during the year of 1990. During an earlier meeting with the Association members Bud, came up with an interesting method of determining the financial breaking point of the would be buyers. Starting at \$5,000, he asked those able and willing to pay this amount to raise their hands. He then progressively increased the level in \$5,000 increments, each time

asking the members to leave their hand up if the amount was within their means. Bud believes he reached \$20,000 before he was not able to get unanimous consent. Now he knew what he had to work with and when the offer came he knew it was covered. On March 19, 1990 an offer was on the table. The railway, after seventy-five years, was finally prepared to let it be known the land was for sale at \$740,000 and the Association had forty-five days in the middle of the winter season to take it or leave it. Bud, and the soon to be corporation was finally able to put together an offer and needed to make a \$25,000 down payment by July 13, 1990. Things had to move fast and arrangements were made to incorporate. The group was incorporated on April 23, 1990. With this, the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Corporation was born. The July 13<sup>th</sup> deadline was met.



Recently built cottage of Don and Elizabeth Blunt (lot 73) April, 1999.

William A. Warnick collection

October 29, 1990, would be the closing date and the new Beckley Beach Cottagers' Corporation would take possession of ninety acres of land formerly and presently, known as Beckley Beach, named in honour of Mr. John Newton Beckley.

In concluding my little story for the Dunnville Heritage Association I wrote. From a new sense of

pride and confidence coming out of ownership has emerged an empowerment to make improvements to our cottages. Beckley Beach has rebounded and I have every confidence it will again, someday be the place where it will be written; "This is the place to spend your summer."

### **Tenth Anniversary Held**

On Saturday, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2000 an anniversary celebration was held immediately following the annual general meeting. Invitations were sent out inviting former members and special guests. Door prizes and presentations were awarded. Photographs were taken, and many old friends were re-acquainted. Some have suggested that the turn out was not a numerous as they might have wished, but a good time was had and the first major anniversary celebration party (tenth anniversary) was a successful event.

### **An Error found in the Last Issue of The Grand Dispatch**

Some of you received an issue of the last Grand Dispatch in which (in the caption on the front page) I told you that His Majesty's Schooner Sauk" sank in a storm at Port Maitland 1927. This was partly a typo and partly an error of fact. Before sending out all the copies, I discovered the error and corrected it for the last half of the circulation. The Sauk was left at Port Maitland after the war of 1812, and in 1830 it and three other ships were ordered to be broken up. Watch for John Dockers book expected by February, 2001 for more complete information about the Naval Depot at the Mouth of the Grand River.

### **From Old Newspapers and Books Etc. Etc.**

**The Reform Press; 119 years ago (1881)** Port Maitland, Five hundred thousand feet of very fine

pine timber was towed down the Grand River within the past week. It is to be used for the new piers at Port Maitland. Mr. F. R. Lattimore has the contract.

**The Reform Press; 112 years ago (1888)** The Annual Excursion of the Live Oak Hose Co. will take place on Dunnville's Civic Holiday, Tuesday next August the 28<sup>th</sup>, to Dunkirk, NY on the magnificent steamer Mascotte. The boat will leave the wharf at Dunnville at 7:30 a.m. sharp Live Oak Hose Silver Cornet Band (who have been awarded prizes for playing in competition at Brantford, Berlin and St. Catharines Tournaments during the present season) and a first class String Orchestra will assist in entertaining the excursionists. The Dunkirk people have always extended every courtesy to our excursionist and done everything that lay in their power to make the visit to our American Cousins a pleasant one. The Steamer Mascotte is beautifully fitted up for comfort of passengers and illuminated by fifty Electric Lights. The boat will stop at Port Maitland both going and coming. Tickets to Dunkirk and return, only \$1.00. All should go.

**The Dunnville Chronicle; 67 years ago (1933)** Port Maitland, . . . About four o'clock Monday morning "The Poplars," (lot 33) well-known summer resort at Port Maitland run by Mrs. Dolly Gray, was destroyed, together with its contents. The cause of the fire was unknown at the time, as the house was untenanted at the time, one part having been vacant for two weeks and the other since September. Mrs. Gray is residing in Hamilton. The house is situated on the Sherbrooke side of the river, and the fact that the ferry is not running stopped the Port Maitland Fire Department from taking their equipment across. The members of the department however together with other residents crossed in boats and kept a strict watch on the adjoining property. The loss was about \$5,000 partly covered by insurance.

### Looking for someone!

Does anyone know where Kensil Stonehouse is? For a number of years he and his wife owned the cottage at lot 73. Kensil sold his cottage around 1991. He formerly lived at 18 Sunning Hill Ave. in Hamilton.

### Many Thanks

Many thanks to those who contributed information to this Dispatch. They are Tim Smith, Doreen Stallard, Tom McNally, Bud Eckert, Bev Zon, Sandra Gill, Ed Boyle, Joe Warnick, Files from the Dunnville Gazette, The Reform Press, and the staff at the Dunnville Chronicle.

### In Memoriam

**Curtis, Ruby Cora:** Died September 26, 2000, Ruby was married to Wilfred Curtis, who with their children George, Jack, Wilfred and Gordon came to Beckley Beach in 1933, first owning lot 34, then in 1947, they took over (lot 32) which her son Jack now owns.

**Prestney, Margaret (Marnie):** Died October 18, 2000, Margaret is married to Tom and have three children, Maribeth, Paul and Richie. The Prestney's have been at Beckley Beach since 1983. (lot 48).

### Do you know anyone who wants a Dispatch?

If you know anyone who wants to get the Dispatch, have them send me a book of stamps. I will mail them one Dispatch for every two stamps.

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