

The Grand Dispatch

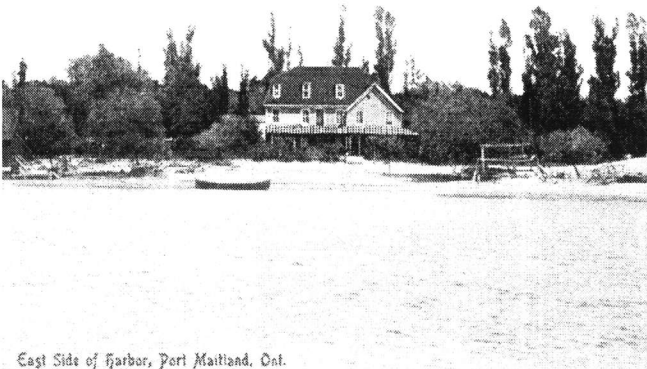
A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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The Grand Dispatch; A Labour of Love!

The Genesis of the Grand Dispatch for January 2001,

With this Grand Dispatch, we now begins our fourth year of publication. My wife Carole, suggested that the Dispatch now has a history and maybe it is time to write about it. Good idea. Wives do have good ideas!



East Side of Harbor, Port Maitland, Ont.

My first postcard of Port Maitland. I found it in Clarence NY about 1985.

William A. Warnick; Collection

In the mid 1980's I found a postcard of Port Maitland at a flea market in Clarence NY, and from that came the thirst for more Port Maitland and Dunnville cards as well as the genesis of my interest in gathering information and accounts of the place I called home while I was growing up. I did not like growing up at Port Maitland. Hamilton, the city where I was born always seemed to beckon me home. Eventually, I headed for the big city, then after putting some time in at St. Catharines, I once

again returned to Hamilton. As I grew older and hopefully a bit wiser, I soon discovered that some of my best times were spent at Port Maitland.



Photo from postcard produced by Bob McKee of Dunnville, depicting ice banks on bathing beach at Port Maitland.

Courtesy; Bob McKee; Dunnville Historical Assoc.

Winters were long and lonely!

The winters were lonely with virtually no other kids of my age to put in the time. Other than my Aunt Etta and Uncle Bill Reid (Lot 23) and for a few of those years, the Spray's (lot 27) our closest neighbours were at the locks at Rymal Road. I played with Aaron Moore until he moved to the Toronto area when I was about twelve. Port Maitland was a lonely place in the winter, but I could take walks through the woods and over the ice banks on the lake shore.

I learned to walk in the bush without making a sound and occasionally came what I thought was very close to the deer grazing in the fields off Siddall Road without them being aware of me until I was nearly on top of them. I played hooky from school more than once to go out on the fish tugs and never failed to leave my breakfast and lunch for the fish! To this day, I still get sea sick, but what the heck, nothing ventured, nothing upchucked! From early September until late May when those pesky cottagers began arriving, Port Maitland was mine to go where I wanted, and I did enjoy the freedom to go where I pleased, when I pleased.

Planned to write a book!

As I grew older, I felt the need to begin gathering together some of the history of Port Maitland. After all, there was nothing here and nothing of any importance ever happened here! Someone had to tell the story of basically nothing, and who better than a rank amateur writer. As I looked into our history, I soon discovered many things have happened here. Some of significance, others not so important.

When I retired in 1992, due to my health, I began in earnest to find more photos and postcards of the area. I learned that Janice Hickey (Lot 31) and Jack Curtis (Lot 32) were doing some research with the hopes of writing a book about Beckley Beach. For a time we worked together gathering facts and stories, but then found our objectives were different and the desired results not the same. Not having the necessary funds to write a book, I opted to write and publish *The Grand Dispatch*. This was likely a better arrangement as I am my own boss. I get to write what I want, when I want and how I want. I also get to take all the blame for my mistakes! Fortunately there have not been too many.

Selecting the name was a problem. I wanted something that did not box me into one spot, yet had some meaning which gave at least a clue to what I was writing about. I researched and found a number of names that the Grand River has once been called. None of them seemed to work. Then I decided on *The Grand Dispatch*, but how do you spell Dispatch? Is it Dispatch or Despatch? I looked it up in the dictionary and found little difference in usage and nothing in its origin that seemed to matter.

On May 6, 1850, a coasting vessel named *Despatch*, which was stationed at the Grand River Naval Depot rammed the steamer *Commerce* sinking it with the loss of twenty-five to fifty lives depending on what version of the story you read. This event was of significant importance to Port Maitland and is remembered through the burial and marker at Christ Church Port Maitland. I now have some regrets that I did not think to use the spelling of the ship for my historyletter.

Carole's idea of telling you about the *Dispatch* - the historyletter, was not only to tell why, but also how. The work and the delight is genuinely in the how, so how is what I should be telling. There really is a lot of work that goes into each issue. For instance, in the paragraph above, I tell you that between twenty-five and fifty lost their lives when the *Despatch* rammed the *Commerce*. Just to determine the number created much confusion and I still do not know the number. All issues start with getting the information. To this end I have interviewed and taped a number of the early cottagers at Beckley Beach. Here I have fallen short on the mark, in that there are some very obvious people at Beckley Beach that should be interviewed and have not been. Photos are the focal point. Without photos, I find it hard to recount a story. To that end the postcards have saved my bacon. The late Earl Siddall, more than anyone else, provided me with the bulk of the photos used in *The Dispatch*. Others like John Burtiak, of Brock University have also contributed many photos. At first these photos had to be re-photographed only to later be scanned into the computer. When I first began the *Dispatch*, it was written on my computer then put together at St. Joseph's Parish where Father Jim Valk and I split the cost of a scanner and agreed that the scanner would remain connected to his computer. This made things seem easy at first, but it meant that once I began to put *The Dispatch* together, I had to invade Father Jim for an evening or two. Once the photos were in, the files were so large that I could not copy them and work on them at home. By today's standards the computer was a dog! At the time, I thought it was fantastic! Finally I made the big purchase and bought myself a Pentium II with tons of hard-drive and memory, a laser printer and more importantly a good flatbed scanner. Wow, did that take a bite out of my retirement fund! For Christmas this year my family bought me a CD-rewriter giving me the

freedom to move very large files about. It also meant that I was able to provide the digital file to the Dunnville Historical Association at the Dunnville Public Library.

I still need to print, or should I say photo-copy the Dispatch in the same method as I have from the beginning. First, I print the completed copy on my laser printer on 8½ by 11 inch paper then after carefully putting them together in the correct sequence they are photo-copied on both sides onto 11 by 17 inch sheets. The originals usually have photographs which are very good quality. Sometimes they copy well, other times they don't! I am now looking for a good used laser printer that will print directly onto 11 by 17 paper. So if any of you business people know anyone who has an old laser printer that they no longer use and want to sell for a song, I will sing "How cheap I am" for them!

It was clear from my first few attempts that I needed someone who had not been listening to all the details for the past months to proofread my near-final version. This is where Connie Morley and Karen Holmes came to the rescue. Now I take a trip to St. Joseph's Motherhouse in Burlington with my near-final copy for a proof read. Connie and Karen co-ordinate a program there and are kind enough to take some of their lunch time to proof read my work.

The Dunnville Chronicle, The Dunnville Library History and Reading Room, Mills Memorial Library at McMaster University, the Special Collections at the Hamilton Library, as well as the Burlington Library, are my haunts. The Dunnville Chronicle have the micro-film for old Dunnville Gazette and the Chronicle. At Brock University I was pleased to have been able to review the actual hard copies of some 1800's Dunnville Reform Press. Courtesy of Brock I am presently working on micro-film for the Dunnville Gazette. Mills Memorial Library, at McMaster, as well as having excellent micro-film readers, have a archive with the Anglican Church records for the Diocese of Niagara, which are extremely useful as many Port Maitland families were baptised, confirmed, married and buried at Christ Church Port Maitland, or St. Paul's in Dunnville. Other sources of information have been the National Archives of Canada, the Ontario Archives in Toronto, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the

Erie County Museum in Buffalo, and of course the many web sites found on the internet. The internet has acquainted me with many cyber buddies: Dave Swayze, at Great Lake Shipwrecks and Robert Graham at Bowling Greens University in Ohio, to name only two.

Over the past three years I have produced what I call my "Chronology of Events Re. Port Maitland and Dunnville" in which I record most every written fact I find about the Port Maitland/Dunnville area that I feel may someday be of interest to the readers of the Dispatch or my monthly column in the Dunnville Chronicle. These items include fish stories, marriages, births, obituaries, stories about any ship, tug, barge, or fish boat. It includes items about the people in the area, church items, (mostly St. Michael's and Christ Church Port Maitland). At present there are over twenty-five hundred items recorded and I have not scratched the surface of the three Dunnville papers let alone the many other resources available.



Old Christ Church Port Maitland burned Aug 12th 1926

Photo Courtesy; John Burtiak

The story you read today is usually written three to four months in advance of being published. I will sometime circulate the draft to some of my friends in the know. A lesson learned the hard way! Hopefully someone will notice an error in fact and correct me on it. This gives me some time to double-check my sources and adjust accordingly. There will often be conflicting accounts of the same story. Here I need to tread lightly, as these events usually happened long before I was born so obviously I was not there. I have to trust my sources, but I am smart enough to know that one human does not always recall things the same way as others who had the same experience. Remembering the words of US

president Ronald Regan, "Trust, but verify!" The story will be written with a degree of careful dancing around the facts or by using quotes from newspapers with the suggestion that I cannot be sure of the details. Not a good text book history you say! You are right! If I were writing an educational text, I would have been fired a long time ago. I write with the hope of being accurate, but most of all because I want to relate the stories as others remember them.

My family has given up a room in our house for my computer and books. You need to have every history book of the area you can lay your hands on. They provide excellent reference and crosschecks. Mind you the danger of quoting someone else's work is that sometimes they are dead wrong and you are in peril of restating their errors. I have been known to do just that! But I am getting wiser.

It is a hobby, and hobbies cost money. Most hobbies remain in your den or on your recreation room walls. My hobby visits you in the form of The Grand Dispatch. Thanks to the generosity of my sponsors I am able to recover some of my out of pocket expenses. Postcards are expensive to buy but cheap to sell. Photo reproduction is also expensive. Unfortunately, not everyone is able or willing to loan their photos for me to scan. This means that I need to make some trips to places like Penetanguishene, Detroit, Bowling Green Ohio, or Buffalo. My research has afforded me many opportunities to be a tourist while running to and fro to locate photos or a stories. This is great, but as some of you know, I have considerable difficulty travelling due to my health. I just have to say to myself, "it's there, and now I have to go there to get it." It will take the next two or three days to recover, but I need to go!

Additional sponsorship became necessary this past year when it became evident that the Beckley Beach Cottagers Corporations mailing schedule and my desire to put out four Dispatches per year were no longer in agreement. Until then the Dispatch was able to piggy-back on the Corporations mailings, providing me with free postage to the Beckley Beach Cottagers. Going on my own meant considerable added expense. Along came the five new sponsors. Paul Dermody, had been with me since the beginning, helping to cover some of the cost. The most

expensive item up to then had been photography. It became necessary this past year to begin asking those who were getting the Dispatch mailed to them and who were not cottagers at Beckley Beach to send two postage stamps instead of one per issue, one for postage, the other to defer some of my expenses.

I now mail out an additional thirty copies to non-cottagers or former cottagers who enjoy reading about Beckley Beach and Port Maitland. My hope is to find some additional sponsors to permit me to produce a Beckley Beach three-ring binder for you to save your Dispatches in. If you know anyone willing to take on or share in the investment please let me know. In April 2000, I began writing a monthly column for the Dunnville Chronicle. Sometimes this column is a repeat of a Dispatch story which has been altered for a wider audience, other times it is a new story which may someday end up in the Dispatch.

People are the heart of the Dispatch. Those who have shared their experiences with me, sometimes have suggested that maybe this detail or that detail not be repeated. Often these are interesting tidbits but I don't write about them if asked not to. I am indebted to the people who trust me with a valuable photo of their mother or father and anxiously await its safe return. These are the people who make doing The Dispatch worthwhile. The late Earl Siddall, Carroll Kenney, Ed Boyle, John Burtiak, John Docker, my uncle Joe Warnick, and my greatest fan Pat Hayes, and many others who have reviewed my rough notes then offer a few finishing facts or corrections have added much to fullness of the stories.

When I began writing the Dispatch, it was my intention to keep my stories confined to Beckley Beach and the cottagers and residents there. As interesting as that would be, there is much more to Port Maitland than the stories of those of us who have inhabited it in the summer over the past sixty or so years. You will recall the August 2000, Dispatch about the Grand River Naval Depot. It was written by John Docker, and was one of the most interesting Dispatches I had the pleasure of putting together. John's book on the subject of the Grand River Depot is soon to be available and I can hardly wait for it. Port Maitland, though not a major

player in the war of 1812 did play an interesting part and left behind a sense of historic purpose. The Welland Canal and the Feeder which opens into the Grand was an important highway in the 1800's. As many as five hundred and seventy-five various types of vessels passed up and down the feeder each year carrying grain for Cleveland, lumber for building the city of Chicago, sand and gravel for building piers and roads throughout the Great Lakes, plaster of paris for Buffalo, and woollen products manufactured at Port Maitland, as well as cheese produced here and at Stromness and the townships around Dunnville was shipped throughout the United States, as was cord wood to heat homes and many other products left and arrived here daily during the navigational season. Tourists from most of the cities on or near Lake Erie and Ontario travelled here during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Dispatch has only briefly touched on these subjects. It has still to tell the stories of the tons of fish taken from our river and lake by both commercial and sport fishermen, of the many calm water tour boats and large passenger ships that visited here, and about the famous American artists from Buffalo that camped here for nearly twenty years with the hundreds of students that were taught by them. These stories need telling.



Milo Gillop's restaurant at the foot of west pier was a well-know tourist trap.

William A. Warnick; Collection

I have estimated that more than two hundred people have tragically lost their lives within a couple miles of the mouth of the Grand River. This may be a bit macabre, but there have been some interesting mishaps occur here.

At only four issues per year, it will take a few more decades to chronicle the events which have taken place on both side at the mouth of the River Ouse!

Let's Keep in touch!

Recently Bob Wheeler passed away and I sent many of you the obituary from the Hamilton Spectator via e-mail. It had not occurred to me to do this until Bob died. This meant that other occasions to do the same were missed. I will attempt to continue this in the future, but I need your help. First, I need your e-mail address. If you have e-mail and I do not have your address please drop me a note and I will add you to my address book. Secondly, many of you live in New York State or Toronto, or some other exotic locations where I do not have access to your newspaper. I cannot be looking for every obituary in North America! I do have a life beyond the Dispatch! Most papers now have a web-page with obituaries. If you notice someone that should be remembered, please go to your local papers web-page; cut and paste the article onto an e-mail and send it to me. It is even possible to send the page. I will forward it to others and add the deceased to the "In Memoriam" in the next Dispatch.

Book Club News and Historical Display

John Docker's book; "Grand River Naval Depot" will be published by the Dunnville District Heritage Association and will be sold for the first time on Heritage Day at the Dunnville Public Library, February 17, 2001. The price for the 68-page book with maps, and an appendix containing names of people stationed at the depot will be \$15.00. Please join the many local historians who will have displays set up depicting the settlement and growth of the Dunnville and Port Maitland area. I will have a pictorial display of Port Maitland and hope to see you there.

From Old Newspapers and Books Etc., Etc.

The Dunnville Gazette; 112 years ago (1889) Mariner Mr. John Miskin arrived home during the weak, after a very successful season on the lakes. His *avoirdupois* [weight] has somewhat increased.

The Reform Press; 111 years ago (1890) Dunnville. A Muskellunge was captured by David Smith, last week, weighing 44 pounds, and another by Martin Green weighing 35 pounds-caught below the dam-and shipped to other parts.

The Dunnville Chronicle; 101 years ago (1900) Stromness, The tug City Of Ladysmith owned by Ross Bros. met with an accident on Tuesday tearing away her shoe and rudder.

In Memoriam

Fagan, Fr. Omer Joseph: Died November 19, 2000, Father Fagan came to Beckley Beach about 1993 first owning lot 49. He then purchased lot 32A. After his wife Madga died in 1986, Omer entered the priesthood and was ordained in 1992. He has been described as a super annuated Teacher. Omer and Magda had no children.

Wheeler, Robert J.: Died November 25, 2000, Bob is the son of Reg and Grace Wheeler, lot 44A. Bob spent his summers at Beckley Beach as a child. He leaves his son Robert and his daughter Lori and granddaughter Madison.

Burrow, James: Died December 8, 2000, Jim was married to Marlene (nee Martin). Marlene and Jim purchased the lot 38A from Marlene's grandparent's Val and Edith Springstead in 1960. They have four children: Jay, Jillian, Sean, and Stacey.


Do you know anyone who wants a Dispatch?

If you know anyone who wants "The Grand Dispatch," send me a book of stamps. I will mail the Dispatch out for double the price of postage.

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