

The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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My Walk Down My Memory Lane!

The old house, I grew up in is just a memory!

As I write this Dispatch, I am also producing a multi-part history that has been ongoing since February in the Dunnville Chronicle. In it, I reminisce of buildings that were in a 1929 aerial photo of Port Maitland that are no longer there. My first article briefly touched on buildings on the east side of the Grand, of which only three remain. I then skipped across the river to chronicle buildings that are now gone. By September I intend to return to the east side and tell of the buildings that no longer share this community. One place I will tell you about is the old home where I grew up, that once stood on the former lot eleven. Today it would be the last one inside the fence just before entering Beckley Beach at lot seventeen.



A young John Percy Siddall in front of Willow Dale before verandah was built.

Photo Courtesy; Late Earl M. Siddall

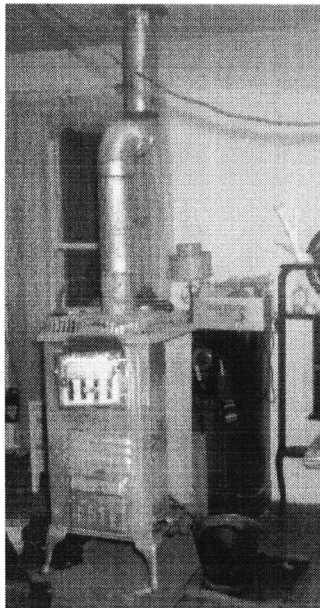
It is not known when it was built but I suspect it was around or slightly before 1880, and was likely built by Thomas Bessey. Thomas was my first cousin three times

removed. Of course he never knew that and frankly it is likely he wouldn't have cared even if he did! Thomas lived in Byng and was known locally as a skilled carpenter and for at least one lifesaving feat as a local hero. I believe the house was built for John and Henrietta Siddall as a boarding house, one of a number to dot the local landscape. Henrietta it seems was the business manager of the boarding house while John dabbled in some farming on the fields behind. The boarding house business was so good that an annex was added that has since been removed and now sits on the corner of the Downey and Niece Side Roads.

When we first moved in around 1954, the house had been duplexed. We lived in the front half while a family by the name of Meehan lived in the back. We were not there long when the Meehan's moved to Toronto and shortly thereafter Dad (William Maurice) purchased it from Canada Coal for about three thousand dollars. As it was built as a boarding house the design was much like a hotel with the upstairs hall running through the middle of the top floor from front to back. Six bedrooms led off this hallway, three on either side. To remodel into a one family home Dad had to remove a wall dividing this long hallway upstairs and remove the wall built over a door between two very large rooms on the first floor. As far as I know it had never been a one family home other than to John and Henrietta Siddall who lived in it, while running it as a boarding house.

At the front of the house there was a winding staircase with a great railing you could slide down, but you had better be careful where it made the bend or you would find yourself rolling the rest of the way down the steps. Another less exciting set of stairs led down the back hall to the kitchen and out the side door.

On the first floor there were three very large rooms and a large kitchen. We never quite figured out which room was the living room as there were two of them. The dining room faced the back of the house as did the large kitchen. When Dad bought it around 1956, there was no indoor plumbing. We made visits to the little house out back, you know the one with the crescent moon or star just over the door! A well had been dug at the side of the house that provided sour marshy water for dishes and to bathe in. The little ones took their baths in the large kitchen sink. My mother (Irene) would heat water on the stove and add it to the ice cold-water from a hand pump, or a bit later after Dad added some modest plumbing, she would flip a switch hooked to an electric pump. The adults could only sponge bath.



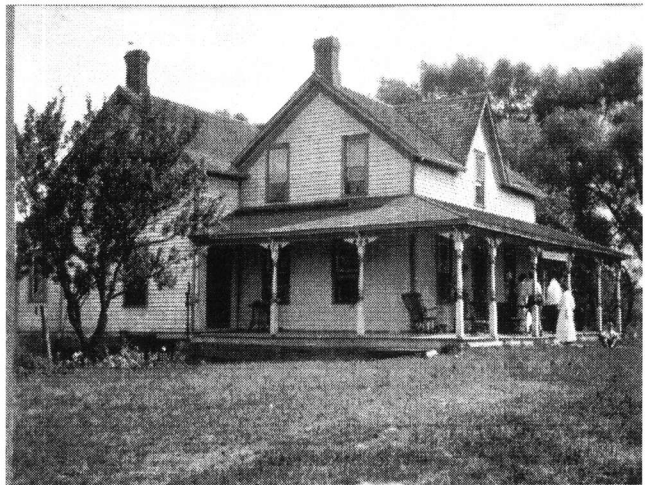
Québec Heater in Dining Room.

Winters were cold and drafty at first while summers were generally comfortable. The old house was not insulated and I don't think weather stripping had yet been invented! To help deal with the summer heat, Mrs. Siddall had planted numerous willow trees and lilac bushes around the property that provided cooling shade. In 1904, John Siddall built a beautiful covered verandah around three sides of the house. Later, someone else screened it in and put windows around the north side. In summer Dad put up

two large beds in the screened in portion and my sisters would share one while I and sometimes my younger brothers used the other. It was like tenting -only it wasn't!

In winter we heated with Québec heaters burning soft coal purchased from the coal docks just across the feeder canal. Mornings were cold until someone could get the fires started. We learned at an early age how to stock a coal fire and make those little Québec heaters pump out the heat! At first they were placed directly under a hole in the ceiling designed to take the pipe to the upper room and into the chimney. Dad moved one of them to the

opposite side of the room and extended the pipe horizontally just below the ceiling. This provided more heat, but looked terrible and could be very dirty. The pipe extended up through the bedrooms above and many a close call was had when we set our clothes or cold socks too close to the pipes to warm them, only to find them smelling, holey and burnt.



Willow Dale in better days with verandah on three sides.

Photo Courtesy; Late Earl M. Siddall

Dad began a substantial renovation project that took a number of years and every dollar he had. On September 13 1958, the day my sister Maurene married Jerry Ollen-Bittle we flushed our first toilet. Dad and I had worked around the clock from Thursday night until Saturday morning, which was only hours before the nuptials in order to get our two, "yes two" new washrooms working. Dad had the first bath and I was close behind. The next job to finish, was to remove the old sink as there was a reception about to take place in our former kitchen and bathing room. I remember when some friends of my parents who were still using the little house out back visited with their children. A few years later one of those children, then in high school remarked to my sister, "You are the people with all those bathrooms!" I think it was the only time in our lives we thought, "Wow are we rich!"

Dad had a thing about flag poles!

Dad had a thing about flag poles, something that my neighbours might suggest has continued with me and my thirty-four foot flag pole in my back yard. In front of the old house Dad placed a flag pole of similar height

and fastened the largest Canadian flag he could find. Depending on your perspective the Canadian flag then was the Canadian Ensign or the Union Jack. I think with Dad it was whatever one he could put his hands on. From time to time the pulley at the top would break making it necessary to take the pole down. Dad became a bit bored with putting up flags so one Christmas he strung lights around the pole and put a flasher on the line. That was the end of the flags for a number of years as the pole became a marker for miles around. It could be seen from the Long Bridge in Dunnville and as you drove the Feeder Canal road at the halfway bridge at Mumby Road. During Canada's centennial year after we finally had a flag of our own -the Maple Leaf. Dad chose to fly the Centennial flag instead of our proud new standard. He was pleased with his choice until as a prank my cousin's husband Jim Patterson, from Staten Island New York, (in cahoots with my mother) stole it and took it back home to show off to his Yankee friends. Dad was incensed but never found the culprit. However, he went out and purchased another Centennial flag and flew it for the next few years. A few years later Jim proudly returned it, but by then Dad was gone. A good thing too!



Flag Raising Party in 1969, with replacement Centennial flag and our new Maple Leaf being hoisted.

William A. Warnick; Collection

Dad's flag pole fetish continued until his death. After he tore the old house down and moved to Warnick Road, (named after him) he raised two flag poles cut from Joe Casina's bush and had a flag raising party. This is yet

another story and maybe one best kept in the family! A couple things I will tell you about the flag raising party are: 1) members of the Welland Police Pipe band marched from Rock Point Provincial Park to the new home escorting those two fine poles they were accompanied by a number of outriders on horseback. 2) Dad made an enemy with a visiting cottager next door who came from England and was extraordinarily disturbed that there was no pole for the Union Jack!

Our old house had a high peak in front that provided an ideal spot to put a flood light. Dad found some 150 and 200 watt flood lights and for years lit up the front yard and half the river with his stationary beacon in the sky. The light was of particular value when the river was frozen and an ice rink was created by shovelling off a large area, then flooding it over to create a smoother surface than Mother Nature provided. We spent hours on the river in the evenings thanks to that light, time that otherwise would have been wasted doing homework or chores around the house!

Mom calls it quits!

Growing up at Port Maitland was not just about the big old house and the huge yard that went with it. We had good times there as well as bad. My father could be a bit difficult at times which could make life interesting. Mom and Dad had a typical marriage with the normal ups and downs that went with thirty-three years of living together. Mom only called it quits once which in itself was a miracle of sorts. What makes the story humorous was why she took leave of the marriage. My mother could make anything grow in the sandy dry soil of Port, except roses. Mom had the most beautiful gladiolus, dahlias, snapdragons, peonies, and many others plants and flowers whose names I cannot recall. She even figured out how to make use of the septic tank by planting her tulip garden directly over the weeping tiles. This provided all the water they needed while still allowing for good drainage. In spring she had the first tulips and daffodils of the season as the bed enjoyed the heat put off by the many baths needed in a family of the last five remaining kids still at home. Her horticultural friends would give her new varieties of plants to try and often she had to purchase others, sometimes at considerable expense. For a few years, I would purchase four or five goslings to have as pets. Once

they were large enough to be let wander freely they had the reign of the place, which included Mom's garden. This particular year Mom acquired a half dozen seedlings of some special flower she wanted to try. With loving care and attention she prepared the soil. You have seen those yard ornaments of the lady bending over her garden weeding and all you can see is her better half. Think of that as I tell you this story. There Mom is out in her garden planting her special new variety of flower that she had long wanted to try. She is bent over as mentioned and planting one seedling at a time. With each planting she moves forward without turning around and plants the next one. Finally she reaches the end of the row, stands up, stretches and turns to admire her work. There is nothing there! The goslings were following her and as quickly as she moved forward they ate her newly-sown plant. To add insult to injury one of them quickly grabbed her last remaining plant from between her feet and took off! That was all she could take! It was not the first time those goslings had been in the garden but it was damned well going to be the last time or Mom was gone!

A quick phone call to her garden and bingo buddy, Ethel Siddall, and Mom was moved out! It took Dad more than three weeks before he agreed to do something about those geese. I don't know what he did because they remained free to go as they pleased much to the chagrin of both Mom and cottagers alike.

Some cottagers loved to feed them while others took a different view. I never had much problem with either view. Where I took issue was when one of the feeding cottagers complained to my father that the geese were leaving behind (good choice of word) what the cottagers provided to the other end. Dad would make me go around with a shovel and pail to remove the droppings. My logic was "what goes in must come out, so stop putting it in and they will stop putting it out!"

Our experience with pets extended beyond our often mean-spirited geese. We had ducks, chickens, pigeons, pheasants, rabbits, crows, hawks, various birds and other wild animals, cats, and of course dogs, sometimes big bad-tempered dogs! Every animal had a name! I do not recall many of them, but Devil, Satan, Rags, Junior, Prince, Tiny and Chris (who was a pup won in a pool hall by Jerry Ollen-Bittle and given to my brother David as a present on Christmas Day) are some of the names that

come to mind for our dogs. Mrs. Moore, a religious woman who lived down the road, was not impressed with the name Devil or Satan. I wonder why!



Dogs, Rags and Stubby with Mom and my sister Margo in front of old house. Circa 1954/55.

William A. Warnick; Collection

During the late 50s and early 60s a family by the name of Purdy owned lot seventeen which is now owned by Dave and Maxine Mulhern. The Purdy's came from Buffalo and Bob was one of those men who loved to hunt and fish, and he loved dogs. Whenever the Purdy's were in Port, Devil, a large ugly and cowed Chesapeake Bay Retriever, with a bad temper (as result of the bullying by a former owner) and powerful jaws lived in the Purdy cottage. Everywhere that Bob went, Devil went along. However, as Devil was usually dirty and often wet, he sometimes had to ride in the trunk. One Sunday morning Bob came over and said he could not find Devil and wondered if he was at home. He drove up and down the road visiting most cottagers looking for the old mutt but couldn't find him. My suspicions are that even if one of those cottagers knew where Devil was they were not about to tell! Time came to go home, but Mr. Purdy stalled as long as he could, still looking for Devil. Alberta, (Mrs. Purdy) finally convinced him it was time to pack up, so out to the car he went, opened the trunk and out burst Devil as happy as cricket under a log! The day had been scorching hot and Devil should have been cooked, but not that old mutt, he was in the trunk all the time enjoying his ride around the beach never making a sound for fear of being heard.

Uncle Joe Cooked my Goose!

My geese never seemed to do too well making it to

spring. I had taught them how to fly long before the movie came out about the fellow teaching those Canada Geese the tricks of aviation. My birds kept flying up river and the hunters would bag them, (I am sure thinking they were the largest snow geese they had ever seen!) One year a fellow in Port sold them for five bucks, but that is another story which likely will never go onto paper!

Then there was Uncle Joe, the only person I have ever met who ran over a goose with a car and broke its neck! Just like Uncle Joe, on the television show the Soprano's might do, he even helped in the search for the missing goose until it was found laying on the driveway where it had stuck its neck out at Uncle Joe's front tire only to find out that can be deadly. Since Uncle Joe was the last one to drive in the driveway he took the rap for the fowl deed!

At the back of the house was a grave yard dedicated to the memory of our many pets. Each pet had a flagstone marker with the required markings: Junior 1954 - 1960, or Stubby 1959 - 1962, Stubby was a duck with no feet. They were frozen off when she decided to spend the winter in the Feeder Canal. I don't know what her name was as a duckling, but she was renamed accordingly. This wonderful cemetery remained behind the old home for many years, until ERCO purchased the land, fenced it and bulldozed the sand hills. I still bury my pets at Port. I won't tell you where, but it is in a nice location and they are each lined up one beside the other placed in sturdy plastic containers without the benefit of markers. Someday when our grandchildren find another use for that particular spot they will once again bulldoze and find Spoofo, MacDuff, O'Shaungnessy and a few others not yet interred.

Dispatch Book Covers

The Grand Dispatch has matured and is taking another step towards respectability. I have always hoped you would save each issue. This is why I go to the effort to three hole punch them. With this in mind, last January I put out an appeal in The Dispatch for someone to step forward and provide a three ring binder with the appropriate cover. Through the generosity of "Computer Trade In Post" owned by Bruce and Janet Dawson who have been longtime summer residents at lot 37 in Beckley Beach, these covers are now available at no charge to the cottagers. Anyone else in a position to pick them up from

me may have one free of charge. Others will receive the binder insert in this Dispatch and you may slip it into a binder of your choice. Thank you Bruce and Janet.

"Computer Trade In Post" sells and services new and used computer equipment. It is a great place to buy a brand new up-to-date system with all the bells and whistles or to get into the cyber-world for the first time with significantly less dollars by purchasing a formerly driven computer! You will find "Computer Trading In Post" at 218 Locke St. Hamilton. - Phone 905-521-2983, E-mail comp@compinpost.com

Upcoming Events

In the immediate horizon there are two events you may find of interest. The first one is "The Tall Ships Challenge," an event that can be seen throughout the Great Lakes. A number of sailing vessels, replicas of old schooners, brigs and sloops that plied the seas in the nineteenth century are visiting many ports on the Great Lakes including Port Colborne on July 5-8. One of the ships is the Tecumseth, a replica of a schooner stationed at the Grand River Naval Depot at Port Maitland. You will remember John Docker wrote about the original ship in the Grand Dispatch in June, 2000.

The second event is still a bit up in the air. I am attempting to put together a history display at the Port Maitland Sailing Club on Saturday August 4th. I have invited some local historians and the Buffalo Canoe Club to display some of their history on this occasion. As The Dispatch must be put to bed at least a week before it is printed and mailed, I will include an insert with this issue if I have something to report. Look for it and please visit the Sailing Club if the event goes off. It is free!

Mike Walker will write our next Grand Dispatch

Mike Walker, owner of Mohawk Marina will write the next Dispatch. Mike is something of a local legend for his knowledge of Mohawk Island. We often refer to Mohawk Island as Gull Island, but Mike will dissuade us from that habit. He is going to tell us about one of the

builders of many of the locks within the former Welland Canal and other famous canals including the Erie Barge Canal.

The Dunnville Chronicle; 94 years ago (1907) Port Maitland, The high winds of the past few weeks have carried away the greater part of the east pier at Port Maitland.

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

In Memoriam

The Canadian Vessels Register; 142 years ago (1859) The scow ROYAL OAK register is built in 1859, at Port Maitland. Built by John Robinson, she is owned by William Hutchison of Moulton and was registered May 4, 1867. She is 96 feet in length with a breadth of 25 feet. She draws 6 feet.

I am pleased to say that no one associated with Beckley Beach has passed on since our last Dispatch.

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

The National Archives of Canada Document; 132 years ago (1869) Reports the sinking of a portion of the East-pier at Port Maitland which now lays two or three feet below the water surface - Recommended repairs - Estimated cost \$4,000.

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.

Mailing Address

The Reform Press; 120 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.

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The Dunnville Chronicle; 95 years ago (1906) Port Maitland/Stromness Station, Ten cars of square pine timber were shipped here from Peterboro, for the Port Maitland pier. Fifteen more will come next week.

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Dear Bill,

Thanks for the virus warning. We are fine here so far.

Many thanks for the obituary for Lynne Wheeler. I just copied down the information and we hope to be in Hamilton on Saturday morning. She was such an inspiration while she was well with her beautiful children and the love and joy she had in them. I only saw her once after her accident at the beach and to be truthful, after listening to her courage and strength, I went into the cottage and cried. I guess we can be thankful that she is now at peace but what a loss.

Third, our thanks go out to you for your latest article. How I enjoyed it - I well remember your house and I had actually heard some of the stories you mentioned. Bud, whose history, does not go back that far also said how much he enjoyed this issue along with all the others.

Thank you so much for taking all the time it must take to do the research and writing.

Sincerely, Diane Eckert via e-mail July 10, 2001