

PIONEER CHURCHES IN HAMILTON TOWNSHIP

*Given by Catherine Milne at the Ecumenical Church Service,
St. Paul's United Church, Cold Springs,
on the occasion of the Celebration of the Bicentennial of Hamilton Township,
Sept. 22, 1996*

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

Christianity came to Canada with Jacques Cartier and mass was first celebrated in 1534 at Gaspé in Quebec. Among other purposes Cartier's voyages were motivated by the hope of spreading the Catholic faith among the native peoples of the New World. The first knowledge we have that this was carried out in our area was the establishment in 1668 of a Jesuit mission at the Iroquois settlement at Ganaraské, now the location of nearby Port Hope.

After Britain took over from France the old province of Quebec was divided into Lower and Upper Canada. The ruling and monied class of the latter was mainly allied with the Church of England. Appointed in 1791, the first Lieutenant Governor of the new province, John Graves Simcoe, was convinced privileged government positions and education should be limited to the upper classes only. Besides that, every third or fourth lot in Hamilton Township was reserved for the use of the Crown or the Anglican Church.

These policies did not go down well with the United Empire Loyalists, who were mostly of the Methodist persuasion and besides that, the reserved lots interfered with continuity of clearing and settlement. One of the first men to run afoul of government officials was the Rev. Charles McCarty, whose descendants later settled in Hamilton Township. McCarty was a Methodist, who emigrated with his family from the United States to Kingston in 1788, five years after the American Revolution ended. The British-appointed Anglican authorities, still nervous, feared that he was preaching American Republicanism. McCarthy was denied U.E.L. status, imprisoned and later disappeared, supposedly deported and murdered. There is still controversy over what really happened to McCarthy but he was considered by many to be the first Methodist martyr in Upper Canada.

Two hundred years ago there were no churches in Hamilton Township but the pioneers brought with them a wealth of Christian and cultural traditions. They also

brought their loyalties to the lands of their birth, their religious prejudices and their hopes for better lives for their children. One of the hardest things for these people to bear was the terrible loneliness, cut off from friends and family left behind and the ever-present spectre of illness and death with no near neighbours to depend on for fellowship and assistance. They desperately needed the comfort of religion in their precarious and hard working lives. The famous Methodist saddlebag preachers who held meetings in the settlers' log homes met these needs.

The *Smith's Creek Circuit* was the first to be established by the Methodists in 1805 and served a very large area from Port Hope to Colborne and north to Rice Lake. One of these men, the Rev. Anson Green, wrote in his journal that in 1824 he had preached in Baltimore, the first recorded mention of Baltimore village's name.

In 1796 many loyalists left the Kingston area to take up grants of land in the newly surveyed Hamilton Township, mainly in the first four concessions. Among these early settlers were the sons of the Rev. Charles McCarty, the martyr, his widow with her new husband, John MacDougall, and her brother, the Rev. David Lent. He gave his name to *Lent's Cemetery* near Precious Corners, once the location of a Methodist church. John McCarty, a son of the Rev. Charles, was clearing land in Baltimore around 1805 and was involved in 1820 in the establishment of the first Methodist chapel in the Township, at Hull's Corners near the foot of Creighton Heights. Seven years later a group of Mississaugas from Rice Lake were converted to Christianity at that chapel. John McCarty's brother, Callaghan, came to the Precious Corners area in 1811 and his log house was one of the frequent stopping places for the circuit riders. Twenty years later a Bible Christian church was built nearby on a reserved lot purchased by an English emigrant, Joseph Precious. Only the tiny *Precious Corners Cemetery*, now maintained by the Township, marks this location.

In 1820 *St. Peter's Anglican Church* was the first church to be built in Cobourg. Early Anglican settlers in the township walked miles to worship at this church. In the late 1820s when log schoolhouses were built they were used for services on Sundays by both itinerant Methodist and Anglican preachers.

The establishment of the different denominations of the Christian church usually depended on the affluence and religious persuasion of the first settler to locate in a particular area, who often donated the land. It would be the late 1840s before the settlers in the northern part of the Township could afford to build the first modest churches. The Methodists in Baltimore were donated a plateau overlooking the village by Austin

Carpenter, wealthy hotel and mill owner and the first reeve of Hamilton Township. *Baltimore Wesleyan Methodist Church* was built there in 1849. A Presbyterian church was built around the same time near the eastern Township border.

William Hore, a mill owner from Cornwall, was the first settler in Camborne. He was involved in the founding of the Bible Christian church there. David Sidey, a Scotsman, the first settler and largest landowner in Cold Springs, was one of the founders of the *Cold Springs Congregational Church*. Another Scotsman, Allen McIntosh, a hotelkeeper, was involved in the establishment of the first frame Presbyterian church in Cold Springs. It was replaced in 1875 by the beautiful brick building we are worshipping in today, *St. Paul's United Church*.

There were many members of the gentry who settled in Gore's Landing. They were attracted by the scenery, and hunting and fishing that reminded them of their sporting days in the old country. Thomas Gore, an Irish surveyor and wealthy landowner, was the founder of the village and also of *St. George's Anglican Church*. When she first came to Rice Lake, authoress Catharine Parr Traill held her family church in the Valley of the Big Stone, located near their home, Wolf Tower, off Tower Manor Road. When she moved to present Traill Rd. in the Gore's Landing area she attended church at St. George's and was present at the first service held there January 1st, 1848.

The Rice Lake Plains were not settled until the late 1840s because the area was thought to be too dry and infertile by the wealthy, influential landowners who never occupied their grants. They didn't realize it had some of the best farmland in the Township. The first bona fide settlers there were mostly from the "Old Country" with experience in farming and trades. They established *Plainville Bible Christian Church* and *Plainville Wesleyan Methodist Church* on the plains. Hamilton Township was settled primarily by emigrants like those with similar backgrounds. It was they who established the churches, served on the school boards and municipal councils.

By the 1860s there were nearly a dozen congregations of various Methodist denominations scattered throughout the Township. These were all amalgamated into *The Methodist Church of Canada* by the late 1880s and in 1925 union with the Presbyterians and Congregationalists formed *The United Church of Canada*.

Bewdley was settled in the 1830s and the school served as their church for some years, the worshippers often travelling there by boat on Rice Lake. *St. Anne's Anglican Church* was not established in the village until after 1900.

Bewdley claims Joseph Scriven, author of the beloved hymn, "*What A Friend We Have In Jesus*", as one of their own. Having emigrated from Ireland and become a member of the Plymouth Brethren, he worked for some time as a tutor for the Pengelleys on the north shore of Rice Lake. In his youth he was engaged twice but both women died, the first by drowning, the second of a lung disease, which left him deeply depressed. In his later years he preached in the market places in Port Hope and in Bewdley. An eccentric figure with a long, white, beard, he was often mocked by small boys and pelted with mud. He published other hymns but remained very poor and dependent on the bounty of friends. In 1886 at the age of 67, Scriven drowned during the night in a mill pond at Cold Creek near Bewdley. There have been different theories for his death, whether by suicide, accident or even murder. Accident seems the most likely, as he was ill and almost blind at the time.

The Thompson and Drope families and one of the incumbents at *St. George's* in Gore's Landing founded *St. John's Anglican Church* in Harwood in 1876. These two families were among the first settlers in the village.

The only Catholic church in the Township, *Sacred Heart of Jesus*, was built in 1884 after years of fund raising by hard-working parishioners. They were mostly Irish mill workers who came to work at the huge sawmills built in Harwood in the late 1860s. Before the church was built, masses were held in settlers' homes, in the school and various hotels. Some devout parishioners even walked the fourteen miles to Cobourg, while fasting, to attend mass.

These churches are our legacy, established by the dedication and sacrifices of our forefathers, those hardy pioneers. Their times were full of hardship and fraught with many dangers. An English emigrant, Mary Isaac, founder of *Gore's Landing Methodist Church*, had many tragedies in her life but expressed their simple faith when she said "Always the Lord will be with me and see me through".

Although many of the old places of worship in our Township are gone, the church is still alive and well, preaching the faith and providing fellowship and an oasis of peace so necessary in the frightening and fast-paced world of today.