

Gleanings from memories by paths of Erin - The last mile – by Harry Smith

Florence Baker (nee -Crawford) was a resident of Erin Village during the end of the 19th century and on into the middle of the 20th century. She wrote her memoirs entitled “Gleanings from memories by paths of Erin” during the Second World War and sent them to Miss Ada Currie who once lived in Erin Township along 24 Highway before Ospringe. Miss Currie is one of the persons responsible for the development of the archives at the Wellington County Museum just to the west of Fergus.

Thanks to the efforts and thoughtfulness of Gary Scull, Gordon Spragge and my daughter Naomi, I am very fortunate indeed to have been entrusted with the original manuscript written by Mrs. Baker. Her stories are charming and beautifully written and graced with poetic lyrics throughout.

I'm told that some of the names may be misspelled and that some accounts may not be quite accurate but that does not take away from the sincerity with which they were written. It's obvious that Mrs. Baker loved this community with all her heart. This summer I have chosen to break up her journal into nine parts and include them in my column. I hope that you enjoy reading them as much as I have.

The dialogue starts with a letter written to Miss Currie –

Dear Miss Currie,

Your thank you letter received, and the sweet doily of Mrs. D. McMillan. She was a beautiful lady. I also hope Mrs. Hodgekinson has good news of her soldier son by now. I am glad you liked my feeble effort of history. I was a shut-in all winter with bronchial trouble, so I tried to write as true as I could of the various good kind folk of Erin. I made one error about the Mrs. McLaren carrying maple syrup. I intended to write maple sugar, which was true, and perhaps you will alter it if you should read it, between pages 30 to 40 I think it is. And I am sorry if I was wrong about the builder of the stone mill, that pearl of beauty in Erin. I am sending you a column about the McMillan clan. I get the weekly Scotsman paper; it was in one lately. You may give it if you wish to Mary McMillan. She too will be interested in it. In closing, may you not work too hard.

From Florence Baker

‘I am dreaming, just day dreaming of a place so cool and sweet,
Where my mind is ever leaning and my eyes just love to greet,
Of a dear old fashioned village, snuggled neath a rugged hill,
Where my weary mind just longs to rest in that treasured place, so still.’

I read an article written by G. M. Adam not long ago about the last mile. He said “Important as the first mile of life is, it is the last mile that counts to they who make it.” And my mind spanned the years to the early part of the past century, as I tho't of those wonderful pioneers, our

ancestors undertaking that long, hard Journey from Britain's shore's leaving kind homes to come to a land they had no real vision of. If they had, would they have been so willing to take that first mile, that parted them forever in most cases, from their loved ones? Then miles on miles in sailing ships across the big sea, often taking months and landing in a forest girt country.

Then on and on, ever westward, they came to the plot of Earth assigned to each settlement from Lands End to John O. Groats County Down Cork and Derry. And the Isles all sent their quota down those first terrible years to make a new world to live in. Many were tradesmen, like weavers, shipping and shops and knew nothing of rocks and virgin forests. Can we, who forget to honour them often, realize one half what they endured before the last mile was ended. I often think an hour or two in each year should be spared in our schools, churches and clubs, to keep alive the burning bush, that lit the trail of those first brave pioneers, that blazed a path to our comfort of to-day.

We so often think that we, who have everything we need, have a hard time. Dear friends, just turn back the leaves of memories book beginning with your little Village, and learn once more what they sacrificed, and never knew one comfort, only love. In four walls of log they raised large healthy families before the last mile was counted in. Let us cherish their memories by true stories to be kept for some new generation, to read and enjoy of their ancestors. Let the last mile count.

'The old doorstep was paintless, yet 'twas so clean and neat;
I often wonder if there was mud, to soil up their feet.'

The doorstep was the nicest place to sit on a summer night, as we listened to the whippoorwill singing over a region near the limekiln. Not a sign of light, but the stars and growing moon. We were happy neighbors, and as we were always regaled by some older persons telling tales of the pioneers they belonged to. Our young minds were very eager to drink in every word. That seemed a wonderful entertainment, to learn our Village was just a dense mass of mostly cedar trees, so thick, as one man said he thought it was night in the daytime.

There was a sawmill owned by the Trout Brothers where Erin stands today, in 1824 (1829). The father of these Trout brothers had a farm in north Erin as early as 1821. Food and lumber were the real necessities in those early Pioneer days. And the clever young settlers soon had the proper site chosen for mills, which are still used by better buildings three or four generations later on. True, there are not so many mills of all types, but the necessary ones are in the same spot chosen then.

'Loved Credit, with thy winding stream,
Your banks hold secrets if could tell
Where are the mills that hummed from morn till eve?
Mute relic now, a Cairn or stack of stone.
Gone, like thy power to science - grain, log and weave.
Have left thy side, a barren waste alone'...

Next week Florence tells of the mills of Erin and the ladies responsible for keeping Erin and the surrounding community clothed.

"Harry Smith, a former resident of the Town of Erin, is a columnist for the Erin Advocate. Some of his weekly articles relating to the Town of Erin are reproduced here."