

History comes alive

From a fireplace in the valley to royalty on the hill

By HENRY M. GAWMAN
Special to the News Advertiser
PICKERING - A stone fireplace stands in the woods, near the west branch of Duffins Creek. This tribute to the stonemason's skill, is six feet wide, four feet through, and has a stone chimney extending 12 feet above the earth. Ten minutes to the east is Valley Farm Rd. At the top of the rise to the west stands the Jesuit Retreat known as Manresa.

Because there is a fireplace, with rusty flashing, there must have been some form of habitation. That much is obvious. I can only speculate how the weather-beaten unit came to be there. A letter I received about the structure proves to be an interesting tale.

The letter was from John Black, son of Morley

Black, whose gas station at the corner of Liverpool and Kingston Roads was a familiar sight in old Pickering. John explained that the fireplace stands where there had once been a cabin. The cabin was built for Victor Ross, vice-president, Imperial Oil Canada. The executive had owned land in the valley, and property above, then known as Clarendon Wood.

Turning for a moment to other testimony, a 1934 article in Canadian Homes and Gardens, by Mary Agnes Tease, describes the setting as: "A fairy-like place, with log-based steps descending to the valley. Flowers and ferns were everywhere, and rustic bridges spanned little, winding streams."

Mr. Ross, by excavating, and diverting water from the creek, created a small lake. He gave work to many local men. Mary Agnes Tease describes a replica of a Hudson's Bay fort as being part of the setting. Though she writes: "Everything was in complete harmony with the surroundings," a local resident remembers seeing two Chinese junks wrecked on its shores.

On the death of Victor Ross in 1932, his son, Forbes, inherited Clarendon Wood. After a time the property came into the possession of Brian Newkirk, member of the Toronto Stock Exchange. In 1949, property and buildings were purchased by the Jesuit Fathers of Upper Canada, and became the Manresa Retreat.

The neglected cabin became notorious. When young people were not having parties there, it knew more dangerous occupants. Led to the scene by a local citizen, police found four escaped convicts, guns and all, hiding inside. The cabin was destroyed by fire before 1960.

Leaving the valley, let's direct our attention to the property above. We have a description of the scene in 1934: "A hill, a wood, a stream, a spacious house; flower gardens, fertile fields, and you have Clarendon Wood."

The name derives from the Earls of Clarendon. Were it not for the enterprise of English Lords and Ladies, this area would not have known the mark of royalty. In 1912, the land with its original stone farmhouse was purchased by Lord and Lady Hyde,

Lord Somers-cocks, and Lord Somers. Lord Hyde was 35 years old.

That the titled new owners intended to stay was evident. Their plans included the building of a mansion, carriage house, riding stable and servants' quarters. They obviously intended to live as they had in England, riding to hounds in woods nearby, and afterwards dressing for dinner, perhaps by candlelight. A butler may have greeted arriving guests. The ears of wild animals in the valley must have pricked up at the sound "of revelry by night" in the mansion of the Lords.

This didn't happen overnight. The building of the house was a long-term project, not being ready for occupancy until summer, 1914. In the meantime they apparently lived in the century-old stone farmhouse on the property. Nor was the construction without its problems, according to Mary Agnes Tease.

She imagines that the work must have been "difficult" and "interesting" as the architect, familiar with the rigors of the Canadian climate, contested with the Lords, "who desired to follow English methods in every particular." Progress was monitored by the owners, and other distinguished visitors, such as the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, and the Princess Patricia.

The people of Pickering had never known the likes of the goings on at the top of Liverpool Rd. Lords and Ladies passed before the eyes of plain citizens. The nobility were here, and may have remained beyond surmise, except for an accident of history.

World War I broke out, and duty called them home. The family had lived only 10 weeks in their new home. Without delay, they departed for England, never to return.

The property was left in the care of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Warren. In 1922 it was sold to Mr. Victor Ross.

So the thread of history leads from the fireplace in the valley to the Jesuit Fathers, to Brian Newkirk, to Victor Ross and his son, to Lord and Lady Hyde and family. Lord Hyde, upon the

death of his father in 1914, became the Sixth Earl of Clarendon.

An obituary in the Globe and Mail, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 1955 tells of the death at age 78 of the Earl, who once farmed in Pickering. He was then Lord Chamberlain to King George the sixth, and former governor-general of South Africa.

The mansion remains, now wearing a coat of white stucco. Despite many alterations, the original style and character of the place is still apparent.

The Jesuit Father now call Clarendon Wood, Manresa. The name comes from the place in Spain where St. Ignatius Loyola, patron of the retreat movement, first went into solitude. He and six companions formed the Jesuit Order 400 years ago.

When someone kindles a fire in its old hearth, the fireplace comes alive again. As the smoke ascends, wistful ghosts on the high ground may drift over the valley to blend their vaporous forms with the fires of yesterday.

(This article is based on information given by John Black, Bill McPherson, Alma Quilty, (long-time secretary at Manresa) and Mary Agnes Tease, in Canadian Homes and Gardens, 1934, (courtesy of Father O'Brien).

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the fires
of
yesterday

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