

Canadian-German Folklore

MORE PIONEER HAMLETS OF YORK

Published by



Volume Number 9 - 1985

Highswander

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MORE PIONEER HAMLETS OF YORK

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The Pennsylvania-German Folklore
Society of Ontario

ISBN 0 - 920038 - 06 - 9 cloth bound
ISBN 0 - 920038 - 07 - 7 soft bound

Publication supported by a grant from the
Ministry of Citizenship and Culture
of Ontario

Editor's Preface

This, the ninth book to be published by the *Pennsylvania-German Folklore Society of Ontario*, within the context of the Society's objective of preserving for posterity, *Canadian-German Folklore* is a companion to Volume VI — 1977: *Pioneer Hamlets of York*.

The painstaking and self-sacrificing efforts put forward by those who have written these articles about former days of former places, many no longer identifiable, within the political geography of a portion of what was formerly York County, as it exists to-day, is very much appreciated.

Some of these records are of communities in their own right. Other articles are of businesses and people. The variety is one which should attract the curiosity and interest of many and hopefully provide much of interest to each one who scans these pages.

The index provided should again serve as a ready reference guide for those who may be pursuing genealogical and social history in the area covered by these articles.

Eldon D. Weber,
Editor.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ALTONA

Given at Annual Dinner at Victoria Square

by

J. Nighswander

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honour and a privilege for my wife and I to be here this evening and share with you a little bit of the history of the hamlet of Altona.

In case not everyone here is aware where to find Altona, it is located two miles east and a little south of Stouffville, on the Pickering Uxbridge townline.

Altona has been at the geographical centre of all of my life so far. I was born and lived for the first 25 years of my life in the home of my parents at Lot 31, Concession IX, Pickering. The house, built in 1851 by Wm. Feaster, is situated at the southern limits of Altona.

This farm was purchased in 1838 by my great great grandfather, Martin Nighswander. His father, Abraham, came into Ontario around 1807, and lived with his second wife Susannah Hoover on the farm now occupied by the Markham Fair grounds. It is thought they lie buried on that property.

In 1948, when my wife and I were married, we lived on what was called the Johnson farm at Lot 31, Concession IX, within a mile of Altona. In 1970, when I began a second career, we moved to Lot 34, Concession IX, still within one mile of Altona.

In the cemetery at the old Mennonite Church he buried my great great grandfather Martin, my great grandfather Martin Jr., my grandfather Enos, and my father David. All of them and their wives lived out their lives within a mile of Altona!

So you see, Altona and the Nighswanders are quite synonymous since 1838.

When did Altona get its name, and why were most of the early settlers Mennonites from Pennsylvania?

Since I am speaking to a group of people who are quite aware of the great migration of the early 1800's into this part of Ontario, which included many Pennsylvania Dutch settlers, I will not go into detail of how they changed this part of the country from virgin forest into a productive agricultural area.

There is little doubt the name Altona came from the city of Altona in Germany. The Dutch Mennonite congregation in that city enjoyed great freedom of worship under Danish rule from 1610

on for many years, and produced some prolific writers. I can well remember my grandfather, Abraham Lehman, who read from a book of sermons written by a resident of Altona, Germany. So, although I know of no records to document my assertion, it is quite likely the early Mennonite settlers named the hamlet after its counterpart in Germany.

All of you are also quite aware, I am sure, of Christian Reesor and his son Peter who set out from Pennsylvania in 1801, and purchased land at Lot 15, Concession X Markham Township.

What you may not be as aware of is that Peter in 1812 obtained a crown grant of land at Lot 12, Concession IX in Pickering Township. Later a Crown grant in 1854 of Lot 27, Concession IX Pickering, was settled by Peter Reesor's son Peter Jr. who married Susannah Nighwander in 1848. Lot 27 is one half mile east of the main intersection in Altona, and Peter's descendants lived there until 1970.

Also Peter Reesor Sr.'s brother Abraham came to Altona in 1850 with his wife and seven children and built a house and a grist and saw mill. This mill was located on sideline 31 just south of the main intersection, and continued to serve the area farmers until it burned down on March 10, 1944. I can well remember spending many happy hours as a boy playing checkers in the mill office with a boyhood friend, Keith Howsam, whose father was the last owner operator of the mill.

It is interesting to note that Abraham Reesor, died of typhoid fever only five years after he built the mill. His wife, Christina, left with seven children, remarried to Joseph Monkhouse, of another pioneer Altona family, of whom I shall speak a little later. Christina had only a life lease on the mill, so its ownership reverted to Abraham Reesor Jr. on her death, even though it was operated by Mr. Monkhouse while Christina lived.

Church and school seem to have been central in the lives of the Pennsylvania pioneers who founded and populated Altona in the early years. Let me tell you, then, about the school and church buildings of the Altona community, and something of the people who built and used these structures.

THE SCHOOLS

The first school of Altona was a log building built in, it is thought, 1825 on the south east corner of the main intersection, just north of where the old Mennonite Church stands since 1852. It was almost certainly of log construction with chinked walls and

unplaned plank floors. It was likely devoid of gloves, maps, books or any other teaching aid other than the "hickory stick" and slates. Most teaching was by recitation. One historian says the teaching profession was not seen as a respectable job, and most men teachers were persons who were incapable, for one reason or another, of hard physical work. Some were dreamers, some even alcoholics.

A new school was built in 1854 on the west side of sideline 31, on the other side of the road and a little south of the first school building. The present schoolhouse, now used as a community centre, was built on the same site in 1917. It is still in excellent condition.

It may be of interest to note the dividing line between the Altona and Glasgow school sections was the townline road, only a few hundred feet north of the Altona school.

This situation caused some problems through the years, with children from the north side of the Township line having to either attend the Glasgow school 1 ¼ miles up the road, or pay non resident fees to the Altona school section. I recall quite vividly the controversy caused in 1959 when the Altona school became overcrowded and all children in the Glasgow section were required to go to their own school. I was one of the school trustees at that time.

THE CHURCHES

Until 1825 the Mennonites of the district gathered, it seems, in the homes of the members for their worship services.

When the congregation grew too large they began using the old log schoolhouse on the S.E. corner. The first recorded minister was a man by the name of Daniel Kreider.

According to an old minute book which I have in my possession, a meeting of the members of the "Society of Mennonists" was held on February 9 of 1850 for the purpose of selecting trustees for a piece of ground on which to locate a burying ground and build a meeting house.

Jacob Burkholder chaired this meeting, and the trustees appointed were Abraham Stouffer (founder of Stouffville), Samuel Hoover, and Martin Nighswander. Later meetings, of which there is a record in the old minute book, were held in the schoolhouse on February 6, 1851 and January 24, 1852.

On January 19, 1853 the trustee meeting was held in the new meetinghouse, which indicates the church was built in 1852. It is said by an area historian the masonry work was done by a Wm.

Feaster, who while building the church caught a cold which later caused his death. Mr. Feaster was the father of Rachel, wife of Harmon Yake, another Altona pioneer.

Continuous services, although not every Sunday, were held in this church until 1974.

The building is still in good repair, although unused except for commemorative services held on October 5, 1980 and October 3, 1982. As one of the trustees for this building and the adjoining cemetery, I am interested in any counsel from persons such as those of you who are here tonight as to the future of this building.

The oldest grave in the cemetery is that of Elizabeth, wife of Abraham Stouffer. It is dated 1835.

In 1875 Abraham Reesor (Jr.) gave land to the people of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, and of the Christian Church, so they could build a place of worship. Noah Detwiler was the first pastor.

This church is located a thousand feet or so east of the main intersection on the south side of the townline. The last service held in this church was in June, 1980. It is now used for a prospering Christian Day School.

For many years the two groups used the building on alternate Sundays, with almost all members of both congregations attending the Union Sunday school and each other's worship services.

In the early and middle 1950's up to 185 persons were enrolled in the Sunday school programme, and it was the largest SS in Pickering Township, with attendance of over 200 people on some occasions.

In 1957, the two groups united and affiliated with the United Missionary Church. Later in 1969, due to an amalgamation of the denominations in the U.S., the name changed to the Missionary Church.

There is no cemetery on the site occupied by this church building.

OTHER BUILDINGS

Another building of interest which is still a part of Altona is the old Altona Inn. The east frame section was built in the early 1850's, with a later two storey brick addition added in 1875. It was an impressive and popular entertainment place in the latter part of the 19th Century. A gilded sign hung over the gilded barroom in the new section. Above the barroom was a dining room/ballroom. A

second dining room was in the other half. In addition, there were guest rooms and a residence for the proprietor.

With prohibition in 1910, the hotel business declined, and the building was used for other purposes. A general store was operated by O. M. ^(M)Nadill from 1921 to 1953.

It is now used as an apartment building and is still in good condition.

Any history of Altona should mention the Monkhouse store, which became quite famous in the general area.

In 1849 Joseph Monkhouse arrived in Toronto from Cumberland, England. In 1850 he came to Altona, and joined his brother Thomas, who had begun to keep a general store. The first store soon became inadequate, so Thomas built a large and impressive three storey building in about 1865 just south of the Mennonite Church. The Honourable George Brown delivered a political speech on the occasion of the opening of this store. A local historian notes the speech was incredibly dry.

The main floor of the building was a general store with the typical potbellied stoves and merchandise on shelves on the walls.

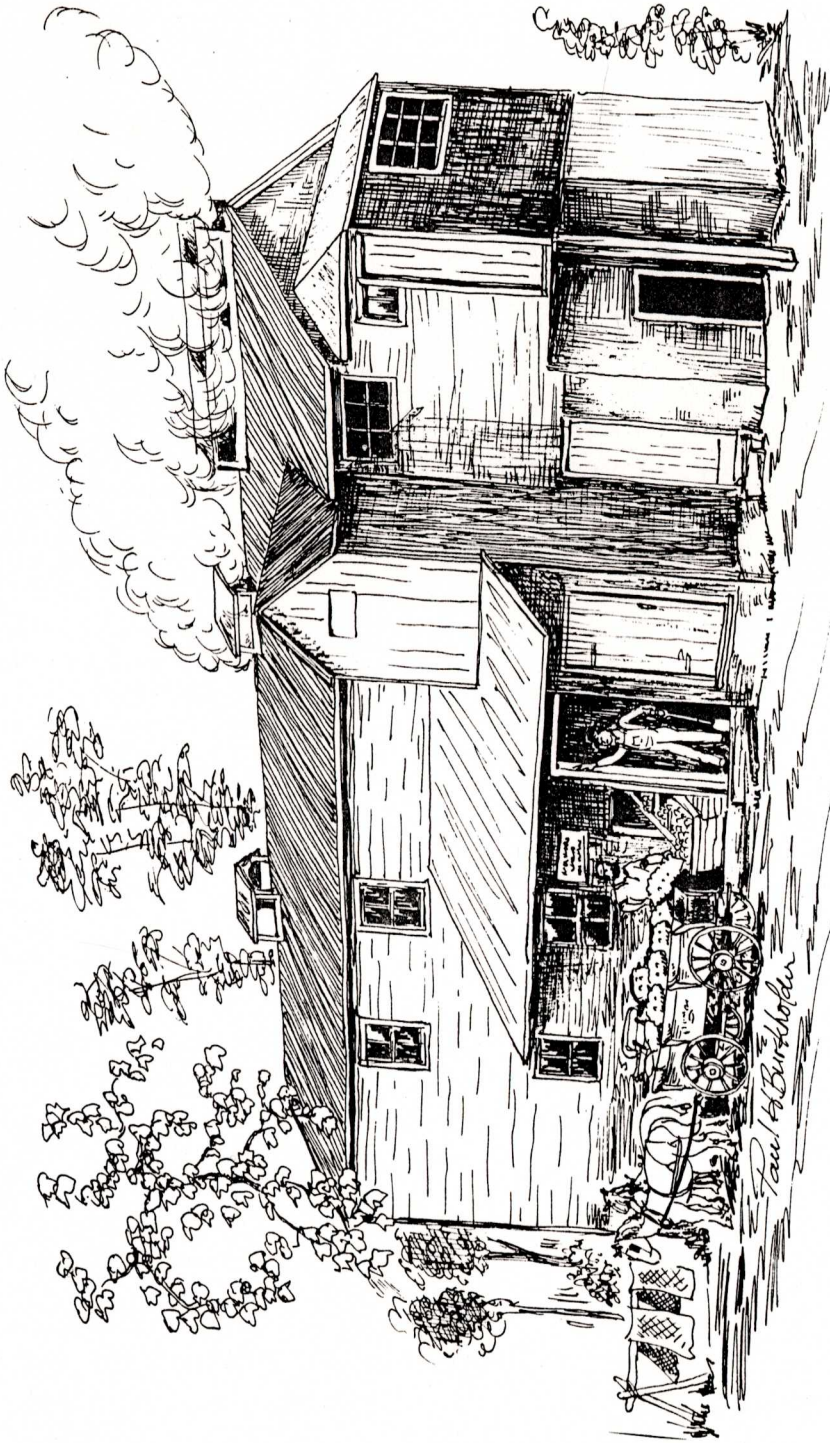
The main attraction, however, was the "China Hall" on the 2nd floor, which carried a large inventory of dry goods and delfware. Handsome dinner and tea sets, toilet sets and a bewildering variety of fancy china, much of it imported from Europe, made this store an attraction to buyers from a wide area. The family lived on the third floor.

Joseph Monkhouse was a well respected and admired man. He served for 10 years on the Pickering Township Council and as reeve from 1884 - 87, and was Warden in 1887. This was the Joseph who married Christina Reesor, whom I mentioned earlier as the widow of Abraham Reesor. He also purchased the farm at Lot 32, Concession IX, later known as the Wm. Reesor farm, and farmed there for 12 years from 1874 to 1886. Joseph returned to the store in 1886 on the death of his brother Thomas. Joseph died in 1903.

His son Willis operated the store until 1937.

I can well remember as a boy looking with awe and wonder at the beautiful chinaware which still occupied some of the shelves.

Another well known building was the Nighswander mill, which began in the mid eighties as a woollen mill, then later became a grist mill, and still later, an apple butter mill. It was located on the south half of Lot 31, Concession IX, and was torn down only a few years ago. It was operated in the later years by my uncle Peter Nighswander and by my cousin Harvey.



Nighwander Cider Mill, on lot 31, Con. IX, Pickering Township. Built as a woollen mill, later became a grist mill and still later was converted to a cider and apple butter mill.

FAMILIES IN ALTONA

I do not have time or space to mention all of the pioneer families of this community. Many of the descendants of these families are still familiar names in the Pickering-Markham area.

One should mention James Jones Sr. and his wife, who in the earlier 1800's purchased Lot 1, Concession I, Uxbridge, just west of the main intersection. His son Abijah Sr., was an active and generous member of the community. I can well remember his sons Abijah, Jr. and Ralph, and daughter Mary who lived on the Jones homestead into the 1940's.

No history of Altona would be complete without mention of the Lewis family, members of which still live in the area.

Thomas Ambrose Lewis came to Lot 2, Concession II, Uxbridge, in 1844. After a move to York County he returned to Lot 4, Concession I, Uxbridge Township. He was twice married and had 10 children. One of his sons, Thomas H., farmed on Lot 1, Concession II, Uxbridge. His sons, Stanley and Bertram operated a beef ring for many years. I can distinctly remember doing some of my first car driving going to the Lewises early in the morning for our share of fresh beef. Fred, son of Bertram, operated a store and farm machinery agency in Altona from 1946 to 1972. Robert and Harold, sons of Stanley, still live in the area and are well known and highly respected.

The Barkey family has also been prominent in Altona. Daniel Barkey, with his wife Barbara Pike moved to Lot 28, Concession 9, Pickering in the early 1850's. They replaced the log house on the property in 1857 with a very beautiful stone home which is still in excellent condition.

Charles Barkey, grandson of Daniel, now lives in the Dublin Apartments in Markham.

And then there are the Yakes, the Hodgsons, the Millards, the Widemans, the Hoovers, the Stovers, the Byers, and the Groves and others whom I cannot mention for lack of time and space.

I have intentionally included in some detail several families who were not of Pennsylvania Dutch extraction. They are a part of the history of the community, and there was mutual respect for each other in spite of the variety of backgrounds of the people who lived in and around Altona.

All of the members of all of the families I have mentioned lived and loved, laughed and wept. They worked incredibly hard to develop the land, to raise their children, and to be responsible citizens.

In most cases they left us a heritage of stability, of integrity and of faith in God.

In conclusion, this brief history of Altona must mention the expropriation of land in 1972 by the Government of Canada for the new Toronto International Airport.

Even though the airport has not been built, the resulting demographic and sociological changes have almost completely altered the character of the Altona community.

But that is another story.