1837 -- AND ALL THAT

Durham Region's place in the Rebellion of Upper Canada

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1987 is an important anniversary year for us as Canadians. It's the sesqui-centennial -- the 150th anniversary -- of events which shook the twin colonies of Canada in 1837...AND they were events which had firm roots in our Durham Region. They helped drastically and positively to shape the democracy we were yet to become.

We were part of York East in those days -- part also of the "Home District" which included Simcoe County -- and we contributed forces to each side in the rebellion that was developing here during that fateful summer and fall.

One of our Regional settlers was a key leader in the rebel cause and we knew him, or knew of his large family, respectably well. There weren't that many of us, after all, fewer than 4,000 in Pickering Township, where they lived, and only about 9,500 in Toronto.

Peter Matthews began clearing unbroken forest for a homestead in Pickering in 1799 -- on lots 17 and 18 of Concesssion 6 northeast of Brougham (Bentley's Corners then). He was 13 and had arrived that year from Pennsylvania with his United Empire Loyalist father Captain Thomas Matthews and family. Later, Peter too became a commissioned officer (a captain in some records, a colonel in others). He fought against the Americans in 1812.

Still in his 'teens, he married Hannah Major of Majorville, an important milltown on Concession 5 that was named after the Major family and was to change its name because of the Rebellion.

Peter and Hannah Matthews were widely respected Baptists who raised 15 children on that land which eventually became theirs. Then Peter, importuned by some of his neighbours, and accompanied by his brother David, led the raid to destroy the Don Valley bridge.

And, relatively nearby, Samuel Lount was a blacksmith in Holland Landing (Gwillimbury Township). He too had come from Pennsylvania and was deeply religious, a Unitarian, renowned for his kindnesses to destitute settlers. With his wife Elizabeth, they had eight children. He manufactured and repaired farm implements...principally.

But Sam Lount made the pike heads and provided them as arms for the force of farmers, mill keepers, merchants, craftsmen and other settlers which he helped to recruit and lead on the fateful march to Montgomery's Tavern.

These men weren't alone.

Robert A. Miller in his history of Brougham, published in 1973, notes that many of the younger generation of Pickering Township had attended various of the meetings organized by rebel leader William Lyon Mackenzie in that year of 1837. Quite frequently they met in Thomson's Tavern at Thomson's Corners, on Concession five by the Brock Road (across from where the mushroom farm is today.)

The Barclays, Matthewses and Wixsons (or Wixons) were there. George Barclay, son of the first postmaster of Brougham, was later arrested for treason and sent to England in chains for a two-year visit to Newgate Prison. The old Barclay frame house still stands beside Brock Road, just south of Concession 7. Writer Anne Wanstall who lived there in the 1960s maintained that the large bell in the tower above the wood shed was rung to rally rebel forces for the march on Toronto in 1837.

Lillian M. Gauslin, who published her story of Claremont, in "From Paths to Planes" in 1974, identifies others: Townsend, Randall, Asa, Joel and Joshua Wixson, Solomon and Thomas Sly, Ira Anderson, James Brown and Thomas Tracy. All were subsequently arrested.

Joseph Gould, the founder of Uxbridge, and a Quaker, was sympathetic to the reformers or patriots as they became known. He attended their meetings and understood well the grievances of his pioneer community and he helped lead them at the end. A core of dissatisfaction existed because land promised to men who had served during the War of 1812 had not been provided. Instead these veterans had seen much of the best of it go to government favourites from Toronto and other communities outside the region.

But Gould tried initially to dissuade the Reformer rebels from marching on Toronto. He went to the governor and moderate Reform Party leader Robert Baldwin urging them to meet Mackenzie in an effort to resolve the differences peacefully.

As events developed toward that fateful December in 1837 there was substantial support forthcoming from the Region for the established authorities also. James White and a group of men from Mrs. Matthews's home town, Majorville, marched to Yonge Street to help the government -- and they won the day. Their town was renamed: Whitevale.

The Reform movement and subsequently the Reform Party had developed in Upper Canada gradually. They followed in a way from the stirrings in England which had led to the great Reform Act of 1832, but hereabouts it was no great philosophical exercise. Our situation had built up over some 50 years on a proliferation of grievances harboured by increasing numbers of the sporadically growing population.

Central to this developing atmosphere of grievance was the system of government established by the Constitutional Act of 1791. It gave the British-appointed governor virtually unlimited powers of control and patronage. Under the Act he chose the members both of the Executive Council, which served as the administrative body of the colony and headed up government departments, and the Legislative Council, which initiated legislation.

The colony's elected General Assembly, chosen by male property owners, might pass legislation, but its bills could be rejected by the Legislative Council, the governor or the British Colonial Office -- which was what frequently happened to bills intended to improve the lot of the rural communities.

The government of the day, commonly known as The Family Compact, was selective, exclusive, conservative and, perhaps most significantly, focussed primarily on Toronto. As its name indicates, the Compact was substantially inbred -- members of a privileged group of families largely identified with the established Church of England -- and supported fiercely by the Loyal Orange Order. Compact members held virtually all key government offices and received land grants that were among the best in the colony.

The Reformers, patriots or rebels, and their supporters, were largely outsiders, geographically and otherwise -- farmers, settlers, non-conformist church groups, disgruntled immigrants (including United Empire Loyalists), small merchants and trades people in a growing number of hamlets, villages and mill towns sprinkled across our Durham region and southern Ontario.

The two sides were shaping up.

Settlers like the Matthewses who had paid taxes for years while they sweated to carve communities for themselves out of the "primeval" bush, found very little of that money returned to them through improved roads or other vital services; the management of regional affairs was assigned to Toronto "Compact" favourites.

All the Lake Ontario land, for example, from eight to 13 kilometres inland from the shore was owned by landlords who lived in Toronto or Niagara. It was left largely undeveloped. There were virtually no roads to the lake. Principal access to or from the major market in Toronto was either by horse trails or by water via Duffins Creek, Petticoat (Petite Cote) Creek, the Rouge river and their various tributaries. What roads existed were virtually impassable for wagons or stage coaches during much of the year because of their execrable condition.

The agrarian uprising in Upper Canada has frequently been termed the Mackenzie Rebellion after its leader William Lyon Mackenzie (grandfather of our late Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King). He was a fiery Scots immigrant, a small man with a large, red-wigged head, stern-set jaws and great oratorical skills. Trained as a draper and bookseller he had practiced his calling both in the British Isles and in Europe before coming to Canada.

Here Mackenzie established himself eventually as a publisher/ editor and proved also to be a respectably good political poet

Mackenzie's paper, the Colonial Advocate, became the principal scourge of the Family Compact, consequently, he developed many powerful enemies in government circles. But he acquired also a growing number of friends in Toronto and elsewhere. He was elected to the General Assembly, expelled for "gross, scandalous and malicious libel", then re-elected and expelled again. In 1834 he was elected the first mayor of Toronto.

In 1835 the Reform Party, which Mackenzie now lead, achieved a majority in the General Assembly. Matthews and Lounts too had won election.

A famous "Seventh Report on Grievances" was prepared by a Grievances Committee with Lyon Mackenzie as Chairman. He presented it to the Assembly and subsequently took it to London. He made sure it was known there to the Colonial Office and that it was widely distributed in the United Kingdom and the other British provinces. But nothing seemed to have constructive or lasting effect. Abuses continued without appreciable interruption.

Then in 1836 Sir Francis Bond Head arrived as the new Governor. There was hope...initially. He appointed Robert Baldwin and two other highly regarded Reformers to the Executive Council.

But Sir Francis proceeded to ignore their reform advice. Baldwin and the others resigned and subsequently the parliament was prorogued.

Things went from bad to worse? Not entirely and not directly.

Patriotism, loyalty to the Crown, and (precursor to our 1960s and '70s) threats of separatism were raised. There were "loyalist" defections from the Reform ranks. Then another election.

This time the Methodists, previously Reform supporters under the renowned educator Rev. Egerton Ryerson, rallied to Bond Head's campaign in support of the British connection. And the Tories were swept to power in the Assembly on what was fundamentally a false issue.

Mackenzie and his Reformers were defeated. He returned to publishing, but this time others -- in Newmarket, Holland Landing, Stouffville, Uxbridge, Whitby, and elsewhere -- joined him to denounce the government in print and otherwise. And Mackenzie took to the speakers circuit. Some 200 meetings are reported to have been held during the summer and autumn of 1837 in support of the Reform movement, and Mackenzie was present at most of them.

There was hesitation, but insurrection was definitely afoot. Weapons were acquired and cached. Secret drills after nightfall supplemented what firearms practice could be openly acquired at turkey or pigeon shoots, and there were suprising numbers of them that year.

Then the date was set -- December 7. The siege of Toronto was planned to start with an advance from Montgomery's Tavern, a large building on the west side of Yonge street north of present-day Eglinton Avenue.

Militarily, the Rebellion of Upper Canada in 1837 was a comedy of errors.

Things stumbled virtually from the first step. Despite Sir Francis's unexpected help for our local rebels in sending most of his British troops to Montreal to aid in suppressing the already active rebellion in Lower Canada, we were never organized to take advantage of it.

The Montgomery's Tavern episode was a fiasco. The place had been leased or sold to a Tory the week before and no one had remembered to tell Mackenzie. Aside from that, various of his forces had misunderstood what day they were to foregather, some arrived early, others were late. John Linfoot, the new tavern keeper had not been told of his needs to provision for a gathering army so that when they got there, although there was plenty of cheap whisky, there was very little food.

Now things went from bad to worse. Col. (or Capt.) Peter Matthews and his band lost their way. He never did get to the Don Valley bridge. James White and his government supporters did, but they found nothing much to protect it from, so they went home.

There were what amounted to a few scurries elsewhere. Toronto's legal fraternity, ensconsed with their muskets behind the massive iron fence at Osgoode Hall law courts, managed to hold off a rebel attack on the city from that quarter.

Samuel Lount led a rag-tag collection of several hundred rebels down Yonge Street in a night raid attempt to join with others then storm Fort York to get guns and ammunition. They were met by Sheriff William Jarvis ensconced with a mere platoon of militiamen behind a picket fence near what is today the Maple Leaf Gardens at the outsksirts of the city. No one, in the dark, could see who was who, so after a brief volley of shots from each side, both sides ran away.

Then the "rebellion" collapsed. The regular troops were returned from Montreal. The "Compact" remained compact. Law and order, peace and stability were sustained and in far-off London the Colonial Office was relieved.

Well, not quite.

Historically the Canadian rebellions -- Upper and Lower -- had made a point. After all they were only about 25 years removed from the War of 1812 and just 60 from the American Revolution of 1776.

London decided to have a much closer look at things. They sent John George Lambton, First Earl of Durham, over here to make his famous Report (and we named our Region after him).

He may have had a bit of a bias toward the situation, since he had played a leading role in the passage of the British Reform Act of 1832. He stayed here only about five months, but he knew myopic fools when he met them and he sized up the realities as few others had.

The eventual result was the Act of Union in 1841. Upper and Lower Canada became one colony divided into Canada West and Canada East and representative government got its start.

Initially, however, things were tough in Durham Region and hereabouts. Peter Matthews and Samuel Lount were captured. Both confessed to high treason and, despite a petition for clemency with 8,000 names on it, they were hanged. Matthews's land was confiscated. Mrs. Matthews and her children left for the United States and never returned. However, David Matthews, who had escaped, was later pardoned and he was eventually able to recover the farm.

Some 420 men of the Home District were arrested and imprisoned on charges of insurrection or treason in the course of the year following the rebellion. This figure is substantially more than for any of the other seven Districts involved.

The most severe sentences to residents of our Region among them were to John Marr and Randall Wixon of Brock condemned to the Van Dieman's Land penal colony in Australia (Marr escaped to the United States before his intended deportation) and Joel Wixon of Brock, banished from the Colony. A large group, including Joseph Gould, Bartholomew Plant, Robert Taylor and Philip Wideman of Uxbridge, were found guilty of treason, but pardoned and freed upon giving security to keep the peace.

There is a final ironic (if macabre) twist of fate to this story: the petition for clemency signed (Mr. Gallup please note) by more than 10 per cent of the total population of the colony, on behalf of Matthews and Lount was noted and granted in London. That good news arrived here six weeks after the hangings.

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