

The Williamstown Fair

By Rod Fraser



THIS PAST AUGUST was the 205th [Williamstown Fair](#): the longest continuously running farm fair in Ontario. It started in 1812, when Sir John Johnson donated 12 acres of land in Glengarry County to

the board of the Williamstown Fair. Sir John was a Loyalist officer in the American Revolution, having organized the King's Royal Regiment of New York to fight with the British against the American colonial army.

His father, William Johnson, was a large landowner in the Mohawk Valley of New York, and when the war was lost, the family's land was confiscated. Their future in the American Republic was finished.

Along with other United Empire Loyalists, Sir John Johnson found his way to the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, where he was awarded 2,400 acres of land, forming part of what is Williamstown today (named after his father mentioned earlier).

THE FAIR HAS been a success since its inception. Just north of the Raisin River, in the village of Williamstown, the fair grounds are situated among a number of old growth pine trees that tower over the grounds and provide much needed shade for those in attendance.

It has the obligatory midway, concession stands and a building that shows the contestants and winners for what you would expect in a farm fair: pies, preserves, crotchet work, quilts and other beautiful crafts are displayed, many with ribbons to show their competitive standing.

There are two large areas used for the showing of horses, nicely fenced off with posts and white railings. Here the riders and horses show their skill, as they engage in barrel racing, jumping and other activities.

Cattle and sheep are shown and judged in a separate area of the fair. On Sunday afternoon, I watched a sheep being sheared and it sure didn't take long. The sheep was six pounds lighter and substantially skinnier after its haircut. The shearer mentioned that the wool from one sheep would be sufficient for a wool blanket on a king-size bed.

I live in an urban area, distant from the Scottish culture of times past, so I enjoyed watching the highland dancers compete and the piper's pipe.

There was a full pipe and drum band providing entertainment on the day that I attended (some years ago) and other pipers took turns to accompany the highland dancers as they showed their skill on the Pine Stage.

The highlight of the pipe band's performance was its march through the doors of Meeting Place Hall to the centre of the room. The building is a post and beam construction, quite large and it has a tin roof that reverberated to the sound of the pipes and drums. They



marched in playing *Scotland the Brave*, continued with a few rousing tunes, and then left playing *I'm Dreaming of Home*. The crowd loved it.

CENTRE STAGE HAD a variety of other entertainers over the Saturday and Sunday the year I attended (Friday was the official opening day). There was a country and western band that was quite good and another band that consisted of three young musicians who played popular music. I liked them as well. I didn't stay late, but a dance band played for those who did, starting at 8 pm Saturday night.

The audience watched and listened to the bands in an area protected from the sun and rain by two large tents, open at the sides. Green plastic chairs and wooden benches provided the seating. The dance floor was just in front of the seating area, close to the band.

On Sunday at 10 am, an ecumenical service was held at centre stage and I was there to see it. A nearby concession stand (staffed by the Williams-town Volunteer Fire Brigade) offered coffee with a ham and egg breakfast at 8 am and I was there for that as well.

At the time I attended the fair, the minister of St. Andrew's United Church conducted the service and I believe it was their church choir that helped the crowd with the hymns.

There were a surprising large number of people in attendance. The minister remembered in her prayers a number of soldiers from a local Highland regiment who were serving with the Canadian army in Afghanistan at the time.

This regiment has an interesting history. During the Second World War, it was one of many Canadian regiments that landed in Normandy on D-day and they were the first to enter Caen in the push north-west from the beaches.

AFTER THE SERVICE was over, I watched a few contests that replicated the full Highland games hosted a week earlier in the nearby village of Maxville. This included the stone throw, the hammer toss, the sheaf throw and the tossing of the caber.

One event is worth a mention. The men's caber is a 20 foot log, 105 lbs. in weight. The contestant approaches the uprighted log, grasps it at the bottom, lifts and balances it against his shoulder, then when he is steady, he advances three or four feet and tosses the caber so that it turns end over end.

If the contestant is strong and skilled, one end over end is usually the best that can be done. The women's caber is shorter and only 60 lbs., but it proved to be too much for the contestants.



NEAR THE ENTRANCE to the fairgrounds is the *Nor'Wester and Loyalist Museum*, a two story brick building with a number of large windows. The *Loyalist Museum* displays the history of the early settlers on the main floor and the *Nor'Wester Museum* (on the top floor) tells the history of the fur trade and North West Company from the time of its beginning in 1779 (twenty years after the English conquest of

Quebec) to its merger with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821.

Although some of us may be familiar with this history, I doubt many know the contribution of Glengarry County to this story. A good number of the clerks and trading post managers came from the Scots of Glengarry. Provided they were strong, ambitious and literate, young men could hope to rise to partner and become wealthy men.

Of the three most famous fur traders and explorers in Canada, two of them, David Thompson and Simon Fraser, returned to Glengarry in retirement. David Thompson retired to Williamstown and Simon Fraser to St. Andrews. The third such explorer, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, never lived in Williamstown, but he did have family there. He donated the church bell for what was then St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

David Thompson is the most interesting of the three. He traveled 85,000 kilometres to map the Canadian West and mapped the Columbia River to its source. For a poor boy who had few advantages, save a solid elementary education, he taught himself everything he needed to know, including surveying, and his maps were so accurate that they were used by the Canadian government until the 1920s.

He married a Métis woman and they had 13 children in their years together. When he retired, they all returned to Williamstown. David Thompson never drank or smoked and refused to sell alcohol to Native peoples. He didn't permit the drunkenness and debauchery that often accompanied its sale.

I will finish with some history pertinent to my great grandmother, Mary Frances Slack. The building that houses the *Nor'Wester and Loyalist Museum* was originally built as a school in 1863, and it was here that my great grandmother received her high school education (and a few academic prizes). Although no one knows for certain, it might have been a chance visit to the Williamstown Fair in the late nineteenth century where her future husband first met her and charmed her.

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