

Education Kept Pace With Expanding Township

By EVELYN MOORE PRICE

Educational facilities kept pace with the expanding settlement of Westmeath township. At one time the municipality was so large that it was divided into 15 school sections. S.S. No. 15, Westmeath was combined with S.S. No. 11 Ross and referred to as a Union Section or Town Line School, situated as it was on the town line between these adjoining townships.

The history of Westmeath village indicates that their first house of learning was built on a lot above what was referred to as Old Orchard. It was donated by the first settler, George Washington Tucker. The first teacher was Miss Rachel Stone from Prescott. Her luggage consisted of a small studded trunk with her initials—R.S. on it (This has been donated to the Champlain Trail Museum and displayed since 1978). Miss Stone later married George Tex Tucker.

As the pioneer settlement grew, the need for a larger school became apparent and in 1844 it was erected at the Gore Line corner. By 1849 the first Municipal and Common School Act of Upper Canada was passed and Westmeath was united with the townships of Pembroke and Stafford for one year.

Before the Public School Act was passed in 1850, the township was settled in groups, each settlement having its own small school. An arrangement was made whereby one of the

settlers taught for part of the year and each family contributed to the small salary.

After the Act was passed, the townships of Westmeath, Pembroke and Stafford, passed a by-law appointing Rev. Andrew Melville, Presbyterian minister, as superintendent of common schools at a salary of seven pounds, 10 shillings annually. In August, 1852, Westmeath twp. was divided into eight sections and later divisions brought this number up to 15 school sections.

The first record of an annual school meeting of householders and freeholders in S.S. No. 2 Westmeath, was held in January 1854.

Caleb S. Bellows was chairman and John McNeely was secretary.

The River Road School, below Westmeath village, was S.S. No. 13 Westmeath and the first school was built in 1882. The ratepayers financed the erection of this building as there was not, at that time, a grant given toward the cost of such a project.

Some of the original ratepayers, were Captain Walter Findlay, owner of a farm near Spotswood, Ferry Martin Hennessy, James Spotswood, John Vizena, Samuel Vizena, Alex Laderoute, Henry Leplaine, James Deschamp, Louis Primeau, Alex Primeau, Jules Primeau, Napoleon Leclair, Eli Marcotte, Samuel Huntington and Ben Wilson.

The latter was the man who hewed most of the timbers for the building of the school. The first trustees were Martin Hennessy, James Spotswood and Samuel Vizena. The first Inspector to visit the school was R.J. Scott.

The first school was located a mile in from the main road, in the middle of the woods, and centrally placed there to accommodate the children where trails were cut through the forest from each home to the school.

There was a fire in the woods of this section which made travelling for the children hazardous. Due to the damage caused, many of the trees were killed. It was not a surprising occurrence for the students to see their trails blocked by fallen pines after a windstorm. Their parents had to come forth with saws and axes to clear these pines from the pathways.

The first teacher in the school was Miss Emily Vizena, who later married Andrew Lawless.

She received a salary of \$150 per year and paid \$35 per year for board. Some of her students were James Hennessy, son of Martin Hennessy, who became head of the J.R. Booth Lumber Company. John Malloy, Dan Malloy and Connelly Malloy were three of the first students and also followed the lumbering industry in later years.

Gradually, the number of families diminished in the section, and when the school was in the original location for

a quarter of a century, the ratepayers decided it would be good policy to move the structure to accommodate the students. Most of the residents lived near the back line, so they dismantled the building, and re-constructed it at the corner of the lots of Arthur Hennessy and Wulfred Lamothe. It remained there for 10 years then it was moved close to River Road about four miles from Westmeath.

All this work was done at the ratepayers expense. The school was well equipped for a rural school and had equipment to teach Fifth Class also. At one period the log school was clapboarded and painted red. Years later it was painted brown and cream. With the declining enrolment, the school was finally closed but its days of usefulness were not over. It now is a log cottage belonging to Mrs. Ira Weedmark who lives below Moore's Beach each summer.

Teachers who instilled knowledge into the students of this school include the names of Mrs. M.A. Shauhaw, Malvina Cahill, Frances Groves, Mary Walsh, Marguerite o'Donnell, Emily Griffin, Gladys Anderson, Margaret Cunningham, Inex M. Pappin, Margaret Cochrane, Hazel J. Smith, Laura M. Wilkie, Harold S. Casselman, Mrs. Lyla Hennessy, Frances Poupore, (Mrs. C.E. Hennessy), May Vizena. The three inspectors were R.J. Scott I.D. Breuls and Norman Campbell.