

## HISTORICAL NOTES ON YONGE STREET.\*

BY MISS L. TEEFY.

In 1793 Governor Simcoe decided to fix the capital of the infant Province of Upper Canada at Toronto, which he named York, after a son of George III. Newark, or Niagara, was therefore abandoned for the safer locality, far removed from the American frontier. His earliest attention was turned to the necessity of good highways into the new capital, so that the few scattered settlers would find a more feasible way of bringing their produce to the market to be established there.

The most important of these was Yonge Street, running north from York to the Landing on the Holland River, a distance of thirty miles. It was so-called by Governor Simcoe in honor of his friend, Sir George Yonge, who was Secretary of War in the Imperial Government during the early part of Governor Simcoe's administration. In 1794 Wm. Berczy brought over a colony of sixty German families from the Pulteney settlement in New York State. Lands were given them in Markham Township, north of York. "In effecting this first lodgment of a considerable body of colonists in a region entirely new," says the Rev. Dr. Scadding, in "Toronto of Old," "Mr. Berczy necessarily cut out by the aid of his party and such other help as he could obtain, some kind of track through the forest." It was along the line of this track Governor Simcoe determined to build Yonge Street.

Augustus Jones was deputed to make the first survey of the road. On December 24th, 1795, he writes D. W. Smith, acting Surveyor-General of the Province: "His Excellency was pleased to direct me, previous to my surveying the township of York, to proceed on Yonge Street, to survey and open a cart-road from the harbor at York to Lake Simcoe, which I am now busy at (*i.e.*, I am busy at the preparations for this work). Mr. Pearse is to be with me in a few days' time with a detachment of about thirty of the Queen's Rangers, who are to assist me in opening the road."

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The survey was finished on the 16th of February, 1796, and the report handed to His Excellency the Governor at York, on the 20th of the same month. Another surveyor whose name is associated with the early survey of the street and surrounding townships is John Stegman. He had been an officer in a Hessian regiment, fighting for the British during the American Revolution, and at its close, like a great many others, came over to Canada to seek his fortune. In 1801 he was directed to report on the condition of the road by the Surveyor-General. A few extracts from his report may be interesting, as it proves, even at this early date, there were a few who did not hesitate to trifle with public funds. "Agreeable to your instructions," Mr. Stegman writes, June 10th, 1801: "I have the honor to report on Yonge Street as follows: That portion of the road from the town of York to the three mile post on the Poplar Plains is cut, and that as yet the greater part of the said distance is not passable for any carriage whatever, on account of the logs which lie on the street. On Lot No. 33, West-Side, Vaughan, clearing complied with, no house and nothing done to the street. No. 93 King, four acres cut and nothing done to the street." This was its state in 1801. Mr. Stegman closes by saying in his slightly broken English: "Sir,—I am sorry to be under the necessity to add at the conclusion of this report that the most ancient inhabitants of Yonge Street have been the most neglectful in clearing the street, and I have reason to believe that some trifle with the requisition of Government in respect of clearing the street." Berczy's settlement came in 1794, so that the most "ancient inhabitants" were of only some seven years' standing.

Mr. Stegman was a passenger on board the *Speedy*, which was lost in 1804, off the Newcastle shore, with all on board. Several of his grandchildren are living, one of whom is Mrs. O'Brien, of Richmond Hill.

To quote from "Toronto of Old" again: "Old settlers round Newmarket used to narrate how, in their first journey from York to the Landing, they lowered their waggons down the steps by ropes passed round the stems of saplings, and then hauled them up the ascent on the other side in a similar way." One can scarcely imagine, in these days of easy transportation, the hardships the early settlers must have undergone. One of the five settlers between York and a little north of what is now Thornhill, in 1797, was Nicholas Cober, who came in March of that year, unloaded his goods and chattels, and for the first night his only shelter was the friendly branches of a beech tree.

The Quaker colony emigrated from Pennsylvania in 1799, and settled in the northern part of Yonge Street. The old "Gazetteer" speaks of them with great praise, and justly so, as through their industry and thrift the farms of this settlement are to this day amongst the most beautiful on Yonge Street. There had been some delay in getting patents for their lands. A deputation waited on the Governor in 1801 to make their complaints. Governor Hunter evidently was a man not to be trifled with. After calling the heads of the various departments together to meet the deputation, he said: "These gentlemen complain," pointing to the Quakers, "that they cannot get their patents." Each official seemed to have some excuse or other, a regret that such was not done. Dr. Scadding says: "At last the onus of the blame seemed to settle on the head of the secretary and registrar, Mr. Jarvis, who could only say that 'Really the pressure of business in his office was so great that he had been absolutely unable, up to the present moment, to get ready the particular patents referred to.' 'Sir,' was the Governor's immediate rejoinder, 'if they are not forthcoming every one of them and placed in the hands of these gentlemen here in my presence at noon on Thursday next (it was now Tuesday), by George! I'll un-Jarvis you!'" It is needless to say that the deputation carried back to the settlement their patents and the impression of the vigor and severity of the then new Governor.

One great object of making this long road, was to open up the northern country along its route, and to shorten the distance between the commercial centres on Lake Ontario and the North-west. D. W. Smith, in his "Gazetteer" published in 1799, refers to it thus: "This communication affords many advantages. Merchandise from Montreal to Michilimackinac may be sent this way at ten or fifteen pounds less expense per ton than by the route of the Grand or Ottawa rivers, and the merchandise from New York to be sent up the North and Mohawk rivers for the North-west trade, finding its way into Lake Ontario at Oswego, the advantage will certainly be felt of transporting goods from Oswego to York, and from thence across Yonge Street, and down the waters of Lake Simcoe into Lake Erie." Another object was to avoid the Detroit and St. Clair rivers in case of seizures by the Americans, with whom we were not on the most peaceful terms.

This remained the chief route to points on the northern lakes up to the opening of the Northern Railway in the early part of the fifties. In a report of the Chief Engineer to the directors of the Ontario,



Simcoe and Huron Railroad Union Co. in 1852, it says: "The trade of this district (meaning Bradford, on the line of said railroad), and north of it, now chiefly reaches Toronto over Yonge Street, which is a well graded and macadamized road, extending from Toronto to Holland Landing."

"I am informed by persons well acquainted with the subject, that the travel in public conveyances between these two places (Toronto and Bradford) is equal to seventy-five persons each way daily, and by private conveyances as many more; and that equal to one hundred waggons, loaded with merchandise, produce, lumber, etc., often pass the toll-gate north of Toronto in one hour.

"The street, for its entire length, presents at all times a busy scene, more like a village street than a country road. Within the distance of forty-two miles there are seventy-two taverns, and the constant throng of vehicles of all kinds indicated that they are required for the accommodation of the immense traffic. The effect of the operation of the railway when constructed, will be, at the outset, to quadruple the travel, and increase the traffic to a vast extent." As would naturally be supposed, the opening of this railroad (afterwards called the Northern) was the death-knell to the old stage-coach and the traffic on Yonge Street, which held it for over fifty years.

We see by this report how vastly important it had become commercially.

In 1800, as shown in plans, it only extended in York as far as Lot Street (the early name of Queen Street), which was the northern limit of the town. The traffic had to pass into the town by a thoroughfare, called Toronto Street; this was closed a few years afterwards, and Yonge Street was opened to the bay.

From Lot Street to the northern extremity of York at certain seasons of the year it was impassable, and waggons coming into town from the north had to turn off to the east and go down what is now Parliament Street.

Subscriptions were taken up in 1801 for the improvements and alterations made on the street. The names of a few of the subscribers, with amounts given, may be of some interest; Hon. J. Elmsley, \$80.00; Hon. Peter Russell, \$20.00; Alexander Macdonnell, Esq., the work of one yoke of oxen for four days, and several other names. Another large subscription was raised again in 1802, and the North-west Co. contributed as much as £8,000 for the purpose, from one time to another.

"On January 15th, 1830, a petition was laid before the Legislative Assembly, signed by Seneca Ketchum, James Hogg and seventy-two inhabitants of Yonge Street, praying to be incorporated as a turnpike company, with power to raise money by loan upon the security of their tolls, and that His Majesty would provide the loan."

"On January 30th of the same year Messrs. Ketchum, Cawthra and MacKenzie were appointed a committee upon the petition of Seneca Ketchum and others, requiring a turnpike gate to be erected on Yonge Street and a company incorporated for its improvement."

The committee, in its report to the Assembly, said: "Perhaps the greatest thoroughfare leading from York is Yonge Street: we recommend—'It might be worth while, at some period not far distant, as an experiment to allow a sum sufficient to macadamize four miles of that road to be expended, and afterwards to place a toll-bar, with moderate rates of toll for two years, within a mile of York, the tolls to be let by auction, and the proceeds applied to keep the road in repair under the direction of the freeholders on or near the line of road. If found not advantageous, it might be done away with at the expiration of the Act.'"

The wheels of improvement moved slowly in those days.

Yonge Street was not without its romances and its tragedies in the early days. Sometimes the beginning of a romance ended in a tragedy. In a field off this street, and now in the heart of the city, was fought a duel, the principals concerned in it being members of two of the old families, whose names have been familiar about York and Toronto. It is thus gracefully alluded to in "Toronto of Old": "The merest accident at a dance, a look, a jest, a few words of unconsidered talk, of youthful chaff, were every now and then sufficient to force persons who previously, perhaps, had been bosom friends, companions from childhood, along with others sometimes in no wise concerned in the quarrel at first, to put on an unnatural show of thirst for each other's blood."

The story of the murder of Captain Kinnear and his housekeeper, about a mile and a half above Richmond Hill, in 1843, has been so well told in Dent's "History of the County of York," that I will only refer to it casually here. There are a few still living in the village who remember the Captain, and the excitement the tragedy created at the time.

It has been so often told that Gallows Hill received its name from the fact that the body of a man was seen hanging from a tree stretched across the ravine. This has been well sifted, and is thought

to be the outcome of a highly imaginative brain in some individual returning from York to his home, perhaps after a day's jollification, when the evening shadows cast dark lines across his path, and the loneliness of the surrounding woods was conducive to ghastly visions. It is most commonly believed to have received its name from a tree having fallen across the ravine, and bearing a resemblance to that horrible instrument, a gallows.

Near here the engagement took place between the Government troops and Mackenzie's men in 1837. The tale of the rebellion and its results are so familiar, and so much better described than I could possibly do, that I will not dwell on it.

All know Yonge Street has always had a large share of political excitement. It was on October 15th, 1839, a celebrated meeting of Reformers was held at Davis' Temperance Hotel, Yonge Street, about ten miles north of Toronto, and now a private residence, to consider Lord Durham's report. It was a meeting of the Reformers of the Home District, amongst the chief of whom were Dr. Baldwin and his son, the Hon. Robert Baldwin, Mr. Hincks (afterwards Sir Francis Hincks), and many other leading politicians. A large number of the opposition party, headed by Mr. Sheriff Jarvis, came out from Toronto for the sole purpose of dispersing the meeting. The latter were armed with clubs and stones. Dr. Baldwin was struck, and one young farmer was killed by a flying stone. The Reformers, who were completely unarmed, had to run across the fields, and seek refuge where they could. This gathering was derisively called the "Durham Races."

Richmond Hill was so named in 1819, in honor of the Duke of Richmond, at that time Governor-General, he and his suite having stopped to dine in the village on his way to Penetanguishene. At the time there was a large gathering of the inhabitants from the surrounding country to assist at the raising of the Presbyterian Church, which was finished in 1821. This building was torn down a few years ago, and a fine brick edifice erected to take its place.

Thornhill received its name from Mr. Thorne, who had mills there about sixty years ago. An old gentleman in this vicinity remembers when this place was simply alive with business. He says: "It was a great pleasure to see the handsome teams of horses starting off to Toronto from the mills with at least twenty barrels of flour on each waggon."

Sir John Franklin and his party passed up Yonge Street on their



way to the far North on one of his Arctic explorations. They were entertained by the Hon. Peter Robinson at Newmarket.

An old landmark is the Bond's Lake Inn. This old-time hostelry was built before 1830 by one, MacAdam, who lived there for some time, and then it passed into the hands of a man named Beach. In 1839, Thomas Steel moved there and kept it for fourteen years. A son of the latter keeps what is commonly known as the Popular House, a mile and a half south of Thornhill. Of Bond's Lake Inn, Dr. Scadding says: "The wayside stopping place in the vale where Yonge Street skirts the lake used to be in an especial degree of the Old Country cast in its appliances, its fare, its parlors, and other rooms." Interest in this old inn has been revived since the advent of the electric railway on Yonge Street.

There is no record of the gaieties at this place, but most naturally we suppose the Governor and his attendants, when on their way up and down Yonge Street, would find this comfortable old inn a most inviting stopping place.

Amongst the social events in the earlier days was a ball given by Mr. and Mrs. John Barwick, in the winter of '38-'39, at Thornhill, about half a mile north of the English church. The house has since been burned down, and a modern structure built in its place. It was attended by the *élite* of Toronto, and by many from Newmarket and intervening points. There being no musical bands of any account, except the military bands, Mr. Barwick secured the band of the 32nd Regiment, then quartered in Toronto.

Sleighing parties to Shepherd's Golden Lion were indulged in by the fashionable society of Toronto, and dancing kept up to the "wee sma' hours." The old mud stable and driving-house of this old place are now being torn down.

One of the most interesting portions of the history of Yonge Street is that connected with the Royalist refugees of France. One, whose name was most prominent in the annals of Brittany, was the Count de Puisaye, a younger son of a noble family, an officer in the famous Swiss Guard, the choice of the nobles of La Perche for their representative at the States-General. He took the place of La Rouarie, who died from fever, in organizing the nobles of Brittany in defence of the Royalist cause. He was in communication with the British Government, and requested the aid of a British force to help in the restoration of Royalty. The nobles were always suspicious of him on account of the part he

played in the Constituent Assembly in rendering assistance to the Girondists. They did not work in perfect accord with him at Quiberon, the expedition was a failure, and his influence weakened in Brittany. The failure was all attributed to de Puisaye; it was reported and the charge believed, that he had acted in complicity with the British Government, and sold the cause of France. The Rt. Hon. Mr. Windham, in his letter to the Hon. Peter Russell, refers to this when he says: "The suspicions attempted to be fixed upon him (de Puisaye) by his own countrymen, and by which they seem to have succeeded best in poisoning against him the mind of his sovereign, have been that he was sold to the British Government, and in favor of English interests, betrayed those of his own country! It will be sufficient to say that no such sacrifice of the interests of his country was ever made, for one plain reason, that none was ever required."

In 1797, he made a proposal to the British Government to form a Royalist settlement in Upper Canada. After some correspondence between the Imperial Government and the Governors here, this was effected. Grants of land were assigned them on Yonge Street, in what is now Oak Ridges. Of the struggles of this colony we have little record, but the story of its settlement relates to a most interesting epoch of our history, inasmuch as it was a link connecting us with the chain of events which were shaking the governments of the Old World to their foundations at the close of the eighteenth century, and would form a most interesting and useful paper in itself. Only one of the descendants of this colony of the old French *régime* retained until his death four or five years ago the land left him by his father—a name familiar to Torontonians, Mr. Quetton St. George.

Richmond Hill.