

## PORT RYERSE; ITS HARBOUR AND FORMER TRADE.

BY GEORGE J. RYERSE.

(An Address, July 6, 1922.)

Some years ago I wrote an article for the Norfolk Historical Society on Port Ryerse, and I have it in mind to write another to supplement that.\* It is well known that the first settler at Fort Ryerse was my grandfather, Lieut.-Col. Samuel Ryerse. At the outbreak of the Revolution he was living quietly in a gentlemanly way in New Jersey, and it was well known among his neighbours, who were largely sympathetic with the Revolution, that he sympathized with the British interests. They would not give him any peace there at all. My father told me that they finally took him and put him in a log cave of some kind. He watched his opportunity and when the guard at the door got sleepy, went out and struck him a heavy blow, and got out and went back to the community that he had come from. He raised a company, was made captain, and started in the service of the British Government. He spent seven years fighting for the British side as did also his brother, Col. Joseph Ryerson, father of Egerton Ryerson. Joseph was a boy sixteen years old; he was rather frail, and was refused admission to the army at first, but he was very anxious to go, and finally they accepted him. He served seven years also. His health improved and he came out in great deal better health and lived until he was ninety-four years old, and died in 1854 at Vittoria.

When the war was over, my grandfather had no peace with his neighbours and so he went to New Brunswick, where other Loyalists had gone. His property was confiscated. He did not like it there. Some of his friends on Long Island induced him to go back there, but when he arrived he found that he was a Tory, and Tories were not wanted in that part of the country then. They gave him no peace whatever, so he communicated with Governor Simcoe, and in the year 1794 met the Governor at the Niagara River, who told him that if he would come to Canada he would do well by him, give him a large grant of land, and when he was under the British flag supporting British interests, he would be contented and satisfied. My grandfather went back home and brought his family over to the Niagara River. They secured a boat and started out, landing at Port Ryerse. My father said that he went up on the hill right at the foot of the graveyard adjoining the present Anglican church, and sat down

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\*The second article here referred to was subsequently written and appeared in the *Simcoe Reformer* of July 27 and Aug. 3, 1922, from which reprints were made from the type, and issued in pamphlet form.

under the trees that were there—I think they were walnut trees, and I think one of those trees was there until ten years ago, when it was bought by a man who wanted walnut lumber. When my grandfather saw the country, he said, "Here is where I wish to live and die." And a few feet from that point you will find his grave, where he and his wife are buried. The first house was built there about where Harry Brook's house is. After a little while he made considerable improvements, hiring some men and building a good log house, and there he lived for some time. The fireplace had to be built with sticks and clay, and one day it took fire, and the house burned down.

I have no record of what he did in connection with the next house. He lived there and did his work until 1812, when he died. His wife lived quite a few years after. He had done his work well. He was a very useful man. He was practically the first judge in this district. He was honoured very much by Simcoe, who gave him command of a regiment. Of course, they were always the warmest of friends. Simcoe did what he could for him while he was here as Governor. My grandfather made application for the land on which the village of Port Ryerse stands, lots 2 and 3, and he was told that if he took No. 2, he would have to build a saw-mill and grist-mill. He did this, but McArthur's raiders, when they came through burned those mills. The dam then was just where it is now. There were no more mills built on that property until 1849, when my father put up a grist-mill, a very good one, and also a plaster mill as well. Previous to that my father had a saw-mill and cut up a lot of lumber. That saw-mill was taken away, and the other buildings were put in its place. Those mills stood until 1860, and then they were set on fire. Unfortunately my father had no insurance, and was not able to put up another.

In the late 'sixties, another very fine mill was put up by Edward Harris and John Potts, and leased to John Shaw of Normandale. That stood there until 1890, and then it went down by fire also; so all three went the same way, by being burned down. That is the story of the three grist-mills at Ryerse.

As early as 1835, steamers came to Port Ryerse for a supply of wood. In those days coal was not used as fuel on the steamers, and they had to get a supply of wood to run their engines. Before that year, steamers would come to Ryerse occasionally to get a supply of wood and it was thought then that there might be quite a trade across the lake sooner or later, and my father put up a large white house on the hill. It was put up for a dry hotel, but it was never used for that purpose. It was never used for anything more than a private dwelling. My uncle, Major Edward P. Ryerse, was the one who developed the harbour. I do not know in what year he built the first dock there, but I can remember what it looked like. It was built on piles, and was quite a long affair. The creek had a fair amount of water. A boat with only a moderate draught could go up quite a way and take on part of its load, and then go out to the end of the pier. There was a car which ran from the warehouse to the end of the pier, and that would be loaded with flour and taken out to finish the loading of the boat. I can remember how trade was about 1856 or 1857, after the signing of the old Reciprocity Treaty. There was quite a large trade done then at

Ryerse. I can remember seeing a great deal of going and coming at that time and for a number of years afterwards. Ryerse was the chief outward shipping point, and later it was also the place where most of the goods came in for Norfolk County. About 1851 Mr. James Hooker came there. He was a very fine man, and it was thought that with his guidance and help the place would go right ahead. He leased my father's mill, but about 1856 he died, and hopes of advancing Ryerse's trade fell off. About 1861 to 1863, there were a number of vessels built at Port Ryerse. The first one was by the firm of Foster and W. H. Ryerse. A little later my brother Louis built one, and later on a large three-master was built. There was no particular trouble in launching these three schooners, but the larger one required a good deal of work before they got her out in deep water.

About 1867 there was a company formed called the Port Ryerse Tram or Railway and Harbour Company. It was intended to build a tram road to Simcoe, but it was never built. The Harbour was improved, stock was issued, the place was dredged out, the dock was improved, a great deal of money spent and trade boomed for a time. About 1870, seven million feet of lumber went through Port Ryerse. I can remember that year very well, when everywhere the streets were filled with stuff of various kinds. All about the Harbour was filled with lumber. The side of the hill back of the store was filled with spars, and lumber was piled up on the road toward Vittoria and toward Simcoe. Port Ryerse was doing a very large trade then. It was also a great shipping point for grain. There were warehouses on the east side of the harbour to hold the grain and it was said that on one day there were 150 teams there at one time to unload grain. It was the chief shipping point for the grain of the community. Lumber as well as grain came from a long distance. It was expected that Port Ryerse would go ahead, but it has never grown a very great deal. When the railways went through, that stopped the whole thing. It was not very long before trade dropped off, and it has been going back from that time to this, until now it is not much more than a summer resort. The last industry was the mill industry, and when that was gone, it was the finish of the whole thing. I have known of the loss of sixty buildings in the village, chiefly by removal, but there were losses by fire as well. Of course now the population is very small to what it was. In the year 1876, the number of scholars on the roll in that section was ninety-four. I am told that to-day there are only eleven children of school age in the section. The section when it was first formed, extended from Stickney's farm, taking in the farm of Alexander Bowlby, near Port Dover, making it a very large section. The first school house built was about two hundred yards north of where the present school house is. That was used for some years, and I am inclined to think that as our section was No. 1, it was about the first school house built in Woodhouse. The next one was three or four hundred yards from the present, on the road to Port Dover. It is there I went to school all the days of the formative period of my life, from nine to fourteen. We had a most excellent teacher, Mr. Peter Nichol. He afterwards spent forty-four years in the ministry, and now he is retired and living in Simcoe. Previous to

the building of these schools the elder children of our family got their education as best they could. Part of them went to school to Mr. Chadwick, in a building the site of which we passed to-day, and in our possession we have the copy book of the oldest one of the family when he was about twelve years old. Later in life the children went to Simcoe.

The first store in Port Ryerse was opened in the year 1835. It was kept by my father, in partnership with a man by the name of Grey. My brother William kept store there for sixty-six years. He was given the Post Office in 1844, and kept that until shortly before his death.

As to the future of Ryerse, the only thing that they can depend upon is being a summer resort. The day of any industrial development has gone by, I presume. However, it is liked very well as a summer resort, and time will likely bring success in this line and find it more popular as the years go by.